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The gold rush for Business excellence awards: A discursive practice approach

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ABSTRACT

There has been a proliferation of Business excellence awards (BEAs) in recent times, and the number of businesses entering and winning such awards is on the increase. Embedded in contemporary organising, business excellence awards have evolved to become a useful means to improving recognition in the marketplace, which in turn could facilitate the growth of a firm's customer base and drive it to achieve sustainable competitive advantage over their market rivals. In spite of its current relevance in contemporary organising, scholarly work examining this phenomenon remains scattered with the dominant narrative focusing on the intensive, even obsession with award entry preparation. This study examines how firms compete with each other for BEAs, and how they utilise them as symbolic tokens to achieve competitiveness. Drawing on the practice turn in contemporary social theory as a lens, the study explores how the material, meaning, and competence elements of BEAs, in context, interact and combine to give form and shape to BEAs as a practice in contemporary organizing. Adopting an explorative qualitative research design, the research contribution is developed in the context of a UK regional and national BEAs. Data for the inquiry comes from forty-five (45) semi-structured interviews with managers and owners of firms who won or were nominated for an award at one of the BEAs studied. This was supplemented with publicly available data on the BEAs, and the websites and social media pages of the firms studied. The study presents three main findings. First, emphasising the actions and situated practices that cohere to drive the competition for BEAs, the study identifies the internal and external influences that fuel firms desire to compete for these BEAs, suggesting that the significance of BEAs in achieving market competitiveness and other important organisational

outcomes makes it an imperative ritual which firms cannot afford to ignore or boycott. Second, shedding light on why firms are keen on competing for BEAs, even if they cannot justify the value in terms of their balance sheets, the thesis unpacks the motivations and mentalities driving firms to compete for BEAs year in year out. Lastly, offering insight into why firms prioritise a particular BEA or award category, the thesis delineates the choices firms make when it comes to BEAs and identifies the potential value firms frequently capture from BEAs. The contribution of this study is also three-fold. First, the study in adopting the practice turn in contemporary social theory as a lens provides an alternative interpretation of how firms in their everyday organizing come to make sense of BEAs, and how the practice of BEAs in itself has evolved over time to shape the creation and capture of value for competitiveness. Second, it extends our understanding as to why many firms are keen to expend significant amount of their time and limited resources into preparing, entering, and competing for BEAs. Finally, in studying and theorising BEAs in the form of strategizing, the thesis extends our understanding of how firms could potentially turn their business excellence award fortunes into market competitiveness.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother, Mrs Agnes Afra Betchie, my siblings, Kwasi Betchie and Mabel Akyema, and my cousins Ernest Onwona, Charles Boadu and Alexander Amponsah for their support and love. Again I dedicate this work to Rev. Louis .M. Hiabge for his role as a father in my life and lastly to my friends; Adofo Francis, Osie Owusu Elias, Addy Nortey and Oware Benjamin. This PhD would have been impossible without you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

DECLARATION

I certify that the content in this dissertation is written by me and is entirely my own work, except for specific quotations from published and unpublishes sources. Such quotations are referenced and acknowledged. I understand that work that is paraphrased without recognition is treated as plagiarism in accordance with the University Regulations. Moreover, all tables and figures are clearly referenced and are drawn on from my own work.

Signature: S.Asante

Date: 09/01/2023

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Competing for and winning business excellence awards (BEAs) has become a dominant goal in today's corporate agenda. Often referred to as strategic third-party honours, BEAs dominate the contemporary conversation on how companies can differentiate themselves in competitive and crowded industries (Lasrado et al., 2018; Safari et al., 2020). As a platform to reward excellence, many firms, as observed, are devoting a greater amount of their time, effort, and financial resources in pursuance of these industrial honours to seize the spotlight. However, even though there has been an increase in the number of BEAs, only a few awards have maintained their lustre and become a symbol of credibility and widespread acceptance. While there is ongoing discussion over whether or not BEAs actually provide any value, the number of businesses expressing interest in submitting applications for business awards is growing (Angell and Corbett, 2009). Arguably, the ever-increasing popularity of competitive awards suggests the extensive and entrenched desire for recognition among firms. The overarching presumption is that companies that strive for such third-party recognition have an innate desire to differentiate themselves (Edelheim, Lee, Lee, and Caldicott, 2011; Frey, 2006) and seek approval from relevant institutions that have sufficient credibility to bestow this recognition (Bourdieu, 1992).

Notably, many organisations have successfully leveraged their BEA nominations/success to garner significant visibility and legitimacy. Prior research indicates that obtaining business awards from an external body can improve a firm's public image (Wang et al., 2004). Existing evidence also suggests that customer retention and loyalty are two further positive benefits of entering BEAs (Griffin and Herres, 2002). Scholars suggest that participating in these

competitions is a public statement to customers that a firm is performing at the top of its game (Jahanshahi et al., 2011). Jones et al. (2014) also added that BEAs reinforce customers' intent to keep using a firm's products or service mix. Similarly, customers' desire to leverage awardwinning premium brands to promote a richer sense of self to friends, family and social cliques makes BEAs an essential commodity for contemporary firms.

As a symbol of quality and excellence, the role of BEAs as a signalling mechanism (Spence, 1973) is also increasing. Notably, it is claimed that most businesses with an online presence build their reputation by listing their awards on their websites, banners, business fliers, and other marketing spaces (Kobal, 2014). Accordingly, scholars suggest that, compared to factors that enhance firms' credibility, business awards are more effective in building customer trust (Swaffin-Smith and Jebb, 2000). Equally, it is argued that BEAs define cue-based trust, which is an important marketing approach for smaller retailers offering services through online platforms (Holland, 1998).

Although generally organised with a hint of glamour, BEAs exist for diverse reasons (Tait and Walker, 2000). Apart from firms competing among themselves for honours and bringing corporate rivals under one roof, BEAs are also argued to satisfy the needs of the organising bodies as well (Gubler et al., 2016). There is evidence that some awarding bodies utilise their programmes for industry engagement and education purposes (Lindbeck, 1985; Hartley and Downe, 2007; Milakovich, 2004). Again, the publicity from these competitions is suggested to have consequences for participants, industries, and awarding bodies (Edelheim et al., 2011; Frey and Gallus, 2015).

Irrespective of the potential implications of BEAs on firms, there has been developing scepticism regarding the value of BEAs to firms. Some scholars posit that talent loss is a

significant risk when participating in such awards (Groysberg, 2010). Analogous to this suggestion, Allen (2014) argued that employees who receive awards at BEA events are most often headhunted by attendees (corporate representatives). He suggests that the award honours certify their credentials, making them a rare hiring potential for firms' corporate rivals. In addition to some of the views expressed by the authors cited above, Wright and Jeffries-Watts (2017) explained that time consumption is the main disadvantage of entering and competing in BEAs. According to him, preparing for the competition and monitoring or controlling the firm's progress all year round consumes a significant amount of time which could be better spent on other core, in-need areas of the business. Other scholars suggest these events are becoming increasingly saturated with large numbers of other companies (Mana, 2012). Hence, some of the benefits discussed above will prove more difficult to stream from the events. Another potential problem with awards is the use of vague criteria in selecting winners. Scholars argue that when a winner is announced, and the criteria or systems of assessment are not known, the award may be no better than winning the lottery (Bazeley et al., 1996).

Evidently, the exponential growth of BEAs has piqued the interest of many management scholars who, through different perspectives, have tried to understand the surge of the phenomenon and the processes by which firms create and capture value from participating in these competitions (see for example Asante et al., 2022; Markham et al., 2002; Schlenker and Crocker, 2003). Notwithstanding these efforts, there is still a lack of clarity on the difference between internal and external business awards, and scholars have yet to fully delineate how BEAs differ from internal organisational awards (Gallus and Frey, 2017; Neckermann et al., 2010). Notably, scholarly work on this phenomenon remains dispersed, and the dominant

narratives focus on internal organisation awards, such as employee recognition programs, and the impact these programmes may have on employee behaviour, motivation, and performance (Frey and Neckermann, 2008; Markham et al., 2002). Additionally, scholars have yet to explain their nuanced impact on participating firms' competitiveness and, thus, why many organisations are keen to put their hats in the ring to compete for these BEAs (Frey and Neckermann, 2008; Wang et al., 2004). Again, little has been said regarding how firms approach BEAs and the categories they choose to compete for. Lastly, studies on BEAs are more conceptual than empirical (Carnegie et al., 2003) and thus rather normative in nature, inclined towards descriptions by business consultants of success stories without explicit links to theoretical perspectives at a higher level of abstraction. In answering the current calls for an integrated approach to examining the phenomenon and developing a theoretical

understanding of this novelty, this study has endeavoured to explore BEAs through the lens of discursive practice theory, as it affords the opportunity to examine the surge of BEAs as a more or less intentional action and embodied material practice that is also rooted in language.

Emphasizing the dynamic aspect of social practice (Shove, 2016), this study has focused on the bundles and complexities of networks through which practices are formed, developed, and revived. Suggesting that the bond between the elements of social practice (materiality, intelligibility and means) has strong implications for their durability, BEAs were found to be the product of a nexus of situated practices and activities that cohere to give shape and form to BEAs as a strategic organizing practice in contemporary organizing. Interestingly, these key interactions underpinning BEAs do not necessarily depend on geographical or social proximity. Hence, it is nevertheless possible to explain firms' behaviour towards BEA

competitions as actions defined and influenced by these webs of elements in their thoughts, feelings, or interactions within and around language in a given situation. The study maintains that these could significantly help extend our understanding of the texture of an organization's social fabric, its actions, and the routes through which the phenomenon is formed and sustained.

Given the paucity of research on BEAs, an exploratory qualitative research approach was adopted for the study (Ward et al., 2018). This approach was appropriate in this study as the boundaries between the surge in BEAs and its empirical context is not clearly defined and is not evident (Eisenhardt et al., 2007). As suggested by Gerring (2017), explorative research is conducted when little is known about a phenomenon or problem that has not been clearly defined. Emphasising the actions and situated practices of firms that compete for BEAs, the explorative qualitative design presented a valuable understanding of and insight into their subjective experiences of BEAs and how they make meanings of such experiences (Crick, 2021). These meanings were imperative in developing a conceptual understanding of the underlying motives behind the surge in BEA competitions and the resulting entries from firms. In this respect, the study did not intend to provide definite and final solutions to the research questions but rather aimed to provide an in-depth exploration of the question from respondents' perspectives (Creswell, 2009).

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The current study was inspired by a critical observation of how firms use various advertising spaces to showcase their BEA's fortunes, coupled with the prevalent radio and television advertising mantra (award-winning company, product, or service, etc.) overly adopted by the media to lend credibility to the things they advertise. Driven by this motivation, the present study examines and critically explores why so many contemporary firms are keen to enter and compete for BEAs using discursive practice as a theoretical lens. It is therefore aimed at going into more depth than previous studies on BEAs and clearly identifying the various mentalities, means, and outcomes driving the sudden increase in the number of firms entering and competing for these accolades. In meeting these objectives, the study conceptualises BEAs as a practice that exists as a pattern that may be formed by different bundles of unique 'doing and sayings' (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). In this regard, the rise in the number of BEAs could be interpreted as a pattern of 'doing and sayings' that involve interdependencies between various elements, such as bodily activities, mental activities, things and their uses, background knowledge in the form of understanding, expertise, and the motivations behind social actions. Thus, firms competing for BEAs are identified as carriers of the phenomenon. This is a radical shift from the traditional approaches to the study of social practice, which regards understandings, expertise, meanings, and objectives as personal qualities. Thus, following Shove et al. (2012), such issues are treated not as an effect of an individual but as elements constituting social practices in which individuals participate. By implication, the significance, purpose, and expertise of competing in awards are not simply contained within the heads or bodies of those in charge of firms BEAs decisions; rather, these characteristics constitute the competitions as a social practice, of which actors in charge of firms are merely carriers of it.

Much effort has been devoted to modelling the research objectives to reinforce the interconnectedness between materiality, competence, and meanings as the three fundamental elements underpinning the surge in BEAs as a social practice (Shove et al. 2012). The following research questions guide this work:

Mainly, how are business awards labelled and identified within the discourse of certification and accreditation in contemporary organizing?

Secondly, how do firms come to select the category/type of business awards they enter and compete for?

Finally, what are the real or perceived values organizations capture from entering or winning a business award?

The objectives of the research are threefold:

1. It aims to explore how business awards are labelled and identified within the discourse of certification and accreditation in contemporary organizing.

2. It investigates how firms come to select the category/type of business awards they enter and compete for.

3. It identifies the real or perceived value organizations capture from entering or winning a business award.

The research contribution was developed in the context of regional and national BEAs in the UK, where 45% of BEA organisers have reported an increase in the number of applications for

awards over the last three years (Boost Marketing Consult, 2022; Economist, 2017). Appropriate to the explorative qualitative research design adopted in this study, a purposive sampling strategy was utilised to recruit participants for the study. This technique presented the opportunity to deliberately select respondents based on their qualities and their insight into the subject (Pacho, 2015). In total, 45 top managers were recruited from two case study BEA programmes in the UK with the overall aim to capture the experiences of these carefully selected participants whose inputs and efforts have steered their organisations to various degrees of success in BEAs (nominations or wins). In that regard, semi-structured interviews were deployed as a data collection tool to allow a deeper understanding of the insights these participants may contribute to this study. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed within 24 hours of data collection.

In the search for rich and valuable insights from the bulk data, the evolved grounded theory technique was adopted to analyse the data in a manner whereby the study could select snippets of relevant data irrespective of how fragmented they might be (Saunders et al., 2009; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). To achieve this goal, the data were carefully manually coded in three distinctive processes. The first process involved breaking down the bulk data into manageable and conceptualised fragments on a line-by-line basis (Charmaz 2006). Following the initial or open coding, the fragmented data were then put together on a higher conceptual level. At this stage, meaningful connections between the open codes were developed and used to form greater levels of conceptualisation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). At the final stage, the study developed cohesive themes from the second analytic stage to find answers to the research questions (Strauss and Corbin, 2008; 1990).

1.3 Main research findings

Guided by the three research questions above, the study was able to uncover some interesting findings that correspondingly fall under the three broad theoretical themes set within the research questions. The study identified that the rapidly growing number of firms competing for business excellence awards is a by-product of psychological influences, ambitions for bigger market shares, competitive dominance behaviours, and blind biases towards these competitions. The findings suggest that the highly competitive nature of 21st-century business markets and the currently saturated marketplaces make business excellence award

Competition an important avenue for many of these firms to capture relevant attention as a force to be reckoned with in an industry. With the spotlight on these competitions, most of these firms appear to enter these competitions to seize the occasion and show the world their quality, which in turn, attracts more customers and helps them secure a bigger market share in the end. Accordingly, it was noted that another driving force behind the increase in business excellence awards is a result of developed biases toward these competitions from businesses' prior involvement in these competitions. It was identified that repetitive entries lead firms to become attached to award competitions, and it then becomes a chain that is difficult to break. Again, with the hopes of finally achieving an award that had been nearly won previously, firms feel encouraged to compete again and again to have a taste of being a winner. Further, it was evident that some firms' repeat their entry for business excellence award to justify past costs accrued from unsuccessful entries. Lastly, it was evinced that feedback from award boards/judges and the recognition itself is a motivator for them to try again. Therefore, as a source of motivation and boost to organisational esteem, business excellence awards competitions have become a regular favourite for many firms.

Further, it was identified that decision-making is an important step in a firm's pursuit of recognition via BEAs. It was evident that the source of an award was critical to how firms portray their award fortunes to the world. Thus, selecting a credible and prestigious award programme could elevate the potential signalling qualities firms could enjoy from these competitions. Again, it was established that firms strategically select their awards and categories to align with public opinion. The study suggests that public perception of the source of an award strongly influences the path firms take with their business excellence awards decisions. Lastly, it was identified that firms draw insight from their past experience in this endeavour to make future entries smooth and efficient. The study suggests that accumulated experience from past competitions becomes a necessary reference point that firms draw on to identify gaps and strengths that assist them in making subsequent entries

stronger.

With regard to the analysis of the potential outcomes of winning awards, the findings of the study suggest that firms benefit from associated unique possibilities of winning business awards ranging from improvement in credibility, publicity, image repair and in painting a positive future outlook to the public. Again, it is further evinced from the current study that firms use business awards as a legitimate strategy to solidify their reputation as a trustworthy brand that delivers. As identified in the study, winning a business excellence award provides a credible third-party endorsement for firms; hence, depending on how prestigious the award is, it could give a stamp of approval for the firm as a socially responsible entity. Accordingly, the findings from the study suggest customers and vendor partners will feel better about their business relationship with award-winning companies due to the legitimacy gained by winning the award. The study also identified business excellence awards as an effective

impression management tool that firms employ to improve the perception clients and other social actors have about them. For instance, small-scale businesses use industry awards as a signal to the world that they have "arrived" and to help to cement their credibility. This suggests award-winning businesses are consistently seen as more reputable and honest, even if consumers are not consciously aware of this perception.

1.4 Contribution of the study

The thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in three main areas. Firstly, it uncovers the signalling potentials of business excellence awards, indicating that the display of these award tokens is a deliberate action which firms directly or indirectly take to declare their intentions, to show their prestige, and to make their brands attractive. Secondly, the study highlights the relevance of business excellence awards as a credible response to doubts and mistrust surrounding a firm and its activities. Again, the study shows how business excellence awards have become a relevant symbol that influences thoughts and perceptions about the quality and expertise of a firm. Also, the findings offer a new conceptual link for understanding the surge of the phenomenon as a routinised social activity consisting of forms of bodily activities (materiality), forms of mental activities (competence), and motivational knowledge. In relation to practice, the study encourages firms to link their business excellence awards objectives to public interests. It is argued that competitive categories or awards are not always relevant in the eye of the public, but sometimes, the markets also look at the contributions their preferred brand has made to society and the environment. Hence, incorporating these community-championing categories into the already established competitive ones will

produce stronger publicity for firms. Again, the study encourages firms to use their award journeys as a learning curve to improve their operations and practice. Lastly, the study encourages firms to capitalise on business excellence award competitions to forge strong ties with key industry players. This, the study suggests, could open numerous streams of benefits to firms.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis comprises seven chapters, starting with an introduction (Chapter 1), followed by a literature review (Chapter 2), the research design and methods (Chapter 3), three analysis chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), and a conclusion (Chapter 7). The overall structure and description of the key components of each chapter are summarised in Table 6

Table 1.0 Summary of the Thesis Outline

Chapter	Title	Content
1	Introduction	Outlines the background and relevance of the study, the research objectives and aims, and ultimately, the structure of the dissertation
2	Literature review	A review of theories, models, and previous studies, and gaps in the existing literature
3	Methodology	Research methodology, methods, overview of the empirical research domain and contexts, and data analysis
4	Issues and findings (1)	Research question 1: Explores how business awards are labelled and identified within the discourse of certification and accreditation in contemporary organising
5	Issues and findings (2)	Research question 2: Explores how firms come to select the category/type of business excellence awards they enter and compete for
6	Issues and findings (3)	Explores the real or perceived values organisations capture from entering or winning business excellence awards
7	Discussions and conclusions	Discuss the main themes of the study, their theoretical and practical implications, and directions for potential future research

Chapter 1 is the introduction of the thesis. It maps out the study's objective and the research's justification and provides an overview and structure of the thesis. The foundation of the thesis is the literature that informed the research.

Chapter 2 is the literature review. It is dedicated to reviewing the three bodies of knowledge developed to form an integrative framework in this study: the first section takes into account the drivers known to be fuelling the increasing surge of firms competing for business excellence awards; four key points, specifically, firms' past investment and experience in awards, managerial attitudes to awards, competitive environment, and product market diversity are discussed. Based on signalling theory, impression management theory, and legitimacy theory, the next theme presented is the alternative theoretical rationale and prior empirical evidence, which explains the motives of firms that enter business excellence awards. The final analytical themes discuss the potential outcomes of firms winning awards. Drawing on the 'practice turn' in contemporary social theory, the competition for business excellence awards is then conceptualised as a 'practice' that constitutes three elements combined to form the practice, after which a summary of the critically reviewed literature is presented.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the research design and methods applied to the present study. It begins with a discussion of the context and settings within which the study is situated. This initial discussion sheds light on the nature of UK business excellence and why it was an appropriate site to choose for the study's empirical enquiry. It further describes the conditions that make business excellence award competitions exciting in the UK, contributing to its vibrant award industry. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the adopted methodological approach and design that guided the empirical inquiry. It spells out

the procedure and methods for gathering and analysing data. These include the strategy for recruiting participants for the interviews, the selected criteria potential participants had to meet to be part of the study, the logic for the adopted procedure in analysing the data, and details on how data was analysed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 identifies the motivations that drive firms to compete for business excellence awards. This chapter discloses the psychological and emotional motivations behind firms' business excellence award entries. It further points out the influence of showmanship and the need of power for market dominance which entices firms to enter into these competitions to achieve such goals. Again, the chapter uncovers the biases resulting from familiarity with the process of BEAs and the aim of entering more awards with the hope of winning to justify past investments. Putting these elements together, the chapter shows the importance of the material element of the practice (award logos, citations, labels), which was primarily behind most of the motivations discovered by the studies. The finding indicates that the symbolic relevance of these elements remains a strong influence on the sudden increase in the number of firms throwing their hats into the ring to challenge corporate rivals.

Chapter 5 looks comprehensively at the influences that inform firms' choices regarding the kind of awards and categories they enter and compete for. It uncovers the role of due diligence in separating credible award programmes from the much less credible ones most of these firms are exposed to. The role of socio-environmental influences in shaping these decisions is also explicated in this chapter. Similar findings also highlight the complexities of choices in making these decisions and show how emotions play out in firms' BEA decisions.

Chapter 6 is an additional finding on the potential values firms capture from these competitions. Focusing on the competitive capture of value through symbolic modes of

representation, the chapter highlights the potential benefits firms capture from competing in BEAs, including creating an attractive brand and getting social praise through business excellence awards. Again the chapter uncovers the use of firms' performance in business excellence awards in creating a new niche and positive brand perception. Lastly, the use of business excellence awards as a means to boost firms' morale and enhance corporate profiles is discussed.

Finally, **Chapter 7**, the 'Conclusion', offers a summary and a reminder of what the study aimed to achieve and why and discusses how the aims were addressed. It provides a conclusion of the research and the implications for theory and management. Ultimately, limitations are indicated, and suggestions for further research opportunities are also provided.

Chapter TWO

Literature review

Business excellence awards: Entry, outcomes, and implication for competitiveness

This chapter offers a critical review of the existing literature on business excellence awards, emphasising why many firms enter and compete for these awards and their implications for competitiveness. First, it presents the methods employed to gather the scholarly articles underpinning the literature review. Following this is an overview of the structure of business awards and the processes that characterise such competitions. Third, the antecedents of business excellence awards entry and their consequences for firms competing for these awards are delineated. Fourth, some disparate and often competing perspectives, including strategic signalling, legitimacy capturing, and impression management, that have been employed to explain the motives underlying firms' entry into business excellence awards and how they leverage them to shore up their competitiveness are presented. In the penultimate section, the recent turn to discursive practices in social theory is employed as a lens to explore business awards in contemporary organizing. The chapter finally concludes with a summary of the issues addressed in the literature review.

2.1 Literature search

In unpacking the complex nature of business excellence awards, a literature search was conducted to uncover and explore relevant articles and trending issues in this area of study. To achieve this, different search terms that reflect the central concepts of the phenomenon were developed as a guide to gain a representative sample of work. Examples of the search strings include 'Awards*' AND 'business prize*', 'publicity*' AND 'business excellence'*', 'prestigious*'AND 'award entry'*', 'credibility*' AND 'award winner'*', 'nomination*' AND 'business recognition*'. It is important to note that many of the keywords were also combined in the literature search phase to broaden the scope of the search. The following databases were then searched for peer-reviewed English-language papers: Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, JSTOR, and Elsevier, which are often used in the field of management as academic publication searching sources. As a starting point, the review was limited to publications between January 1980 and January 2021. Due to the sparse and sporadic evidence of relevant papers published prior to 1980, this era was deemed to be appropriate. Equally, the exponential rise of business awards appeared to occur within the chosen time frame, informing the decision to exclude 'grey' literature from the selected papers (Bonato, 2018). Preliminary engagement with conference papers and industry periodicals on business awards was exceptionally useful in narrowing the research scope and defining the inclusion-exclusion criteria to identify relevant academic publications for the critical literature review (Bronson and Davis, 2012). The list of inclusion-exclusion criteria is summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2 – The Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria for the Comprehensive Literature Review

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication date	Published not earlier than 1970	Studies published before 1970 were deemed irrelevant
Language	Research papers published in English/foreign language papers with verified English translation	Research papers published in a language other than English
Peer-reviewed	Preference is given to peer-reviewed articles	Grey literature (anonymous websites, unverified sources, and commentaries)
Methodological design/description of the methodology	Empirical and theoretical research papers published in reputable journals	Editorials were excluded from the systematic literature review
Research setting/focus	External business awards and their implications for firms' competitiveness	Non-business and nonmanagerial research papers. (Natural sciences)

As shown in Table 2, this thesis applied a comprehensive list of inclusion criteria to identify a sufficient number of research papers. The insistence on verifiable publications enhanced the quality of the review and ensured the research integrity (Silva, Healey, Harris and Broeck, 2014).

The third step of the critical literature review included the actual screening process of the publications obtained from the academic databases. Articles' title, abstract and, in a few instances (when neither the title nor the abstract proved to be sufficiently convincing to identify a given research paper's suitability), both the introduction and the conclusion chapters of such articles were thoroughly assessed to decide whether to include or exclude them from the review in light

of the inclusion-exclusion criteria presented in Table 2. In general, shortlisted articles were evaluated according to the study's main research topic, the focus on external awards, and the theoretical/practical contributions of the study (Silva, Healey, Harris and Broeck, 2014). After the coding process, it was identified that there is a lack of clarity between internal and external business awards, with the dominant narrative focusing on the latter. Although these studies are essential to the comprehensive understanding of business excellence awards, the principal aim was to explore the reason for the recent increase in business excellence awards, unpack the role of external awards in firm competitiveness, and explore the theoretical perspectives of business awards.

A total of 973 abstracts were screened and classified into three research categories: firms' keenness to participate in business awards, the driving motivations behind the increasing number of firms competing in business awards, and the potential outcomes for participating firms. The step-by-step analysis of the pertinent research papers resulted in a total of 238 articles and other reliable publications for review. The final 238 selected articles were used to conduct a critical analysis for the study.

2.2 An overview of business excellence award competitions and event structures

The number of business excellence awards has increased exponentially in popularity in recent years, and the number of organisations participating and winning them continues to increase, indicating a greater interest in awarding or winning them (James and English, 2009; Surlemont and Johnson, 2005). Notably, most businesses have effectively utilised their business excellence award nominations and success to achieve a significant level of publicity and

credibility. Additionally, Harrison (2008) suggested that organisations with a history of winning prominent business excellence awards enjoy preferential advantages in consumer markets.

As posited by Suchman (1995), winning an award establishes a legitimate third-party endorsement for businesses; hence, depending on the stature of the award, it may serve as a seal of approval for the business as a socially responsible organisation. Interestingly, firms use business awards as a legitimacy-seeking strategy to solidify their reputation as a trustworthy brand that delivers. Studies suggest that customers and vendor partners feel better about their business relationships with award-winning companies due to the legitimacy gained by winning the award (Jann and Przepiorka, 2017). Diouf and Boiral (2017) further proposed that business awards are an effective impression-management tool that enterprises can use to improve their clients' and other social actors' perceptions of them and of their products and services. For instance, small-scale businesses use industry awards to signal to the world that they have "arrived" and help cement their credibility.

This suggests that award-winning businesses are consistently seen as more reputable and honest, even if consumers are not consciously aware of this perception. However, to understand awards in business, it may be helpful to consider the competition structure in which business awards exist. Generally, business awards range from accolades, accreditations, and certificates bestowed on businesses that achieve above-industry performance in a valuable organisational outcome(s) (Matten and Moon, 2020). Broadly, most business excellence awards share some standard features comprising a nomination criterion, selection processes for winners, and the main award events (Ghobadian and Woo, 1996). Business excellence awards are mostly presented annually with an event circle comprising

different stages, from the pre-award events to the post-awards activities (Iyer et al., 2013). At the pre-awards stage, the awarding body (professional associations, non-profit organisations, government bodies, private organisations, regulatory bodies, institutes, and semi-government agencies) engages stakeholders, including potential nominees, mainly to encourage them to enter the award or shortlist them for further evaluation (Capponi et al., 2019). The nomination process outlines the perimeters by which the award is structured for participation. Depending on the award criteria, the nomination may be done without the nominee's prior knowledge (Ruigrok et al., 2006). Most award bodies that use this method of nomination rely on public opinion through voting or a survey conducted by the award board or use verifiable data from the nominees (financial statements, audit reports, and stock performances). In some cases, regulators of nominees are also consulted by award boards for a professional valuation. Conversely, some awards programs allow self-nomination (Bovaird and Loffler, 2009). In this case, potential nominees are required to submit a verifiable document to justify their qualification for being nominated or awarded by the board. Generally, firms set up specialised groups internally to scout for and enter awards that strategically suit the firm's visions and values (Ghoshal and Bartlett 1995).

However, due to the increase in competition for business awards, many companies now outsource this function to third-party companies specialising in creating a competitive portfolio to avoid missing out on an award (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2000). These third-party companies provide consultation to firms seeking awards on various types of guidance ranging from the kind of categories suitable for a firm to enter, the right documentation to submit, preparing attractive applications, award-winning speeches, and even coaching staff who represent the firm on how to carry themselves during the award gala (Rogers, 2014).

After the rigorous valuation of potential nominees' competencies and performance within the awarding period, nominees are then announced by the award boards. The announcement of nominees is mostly made via emails to the selected firms. However, to promote the award to the public, most award organisations publish the nominees' names and their respective categories on their websites, various social media platforms, and radio and television shows (Adamczyk et al., 2012). Consequently, the scope of publicity and promotions on an award programme can positively affect the award's image and attractiveness, reflecting the number of entries and the extent of competition in the award programme (Hartley and Downe, 2007).

Figure 1.0: Business excellence awards: preparation, entry, and conferment
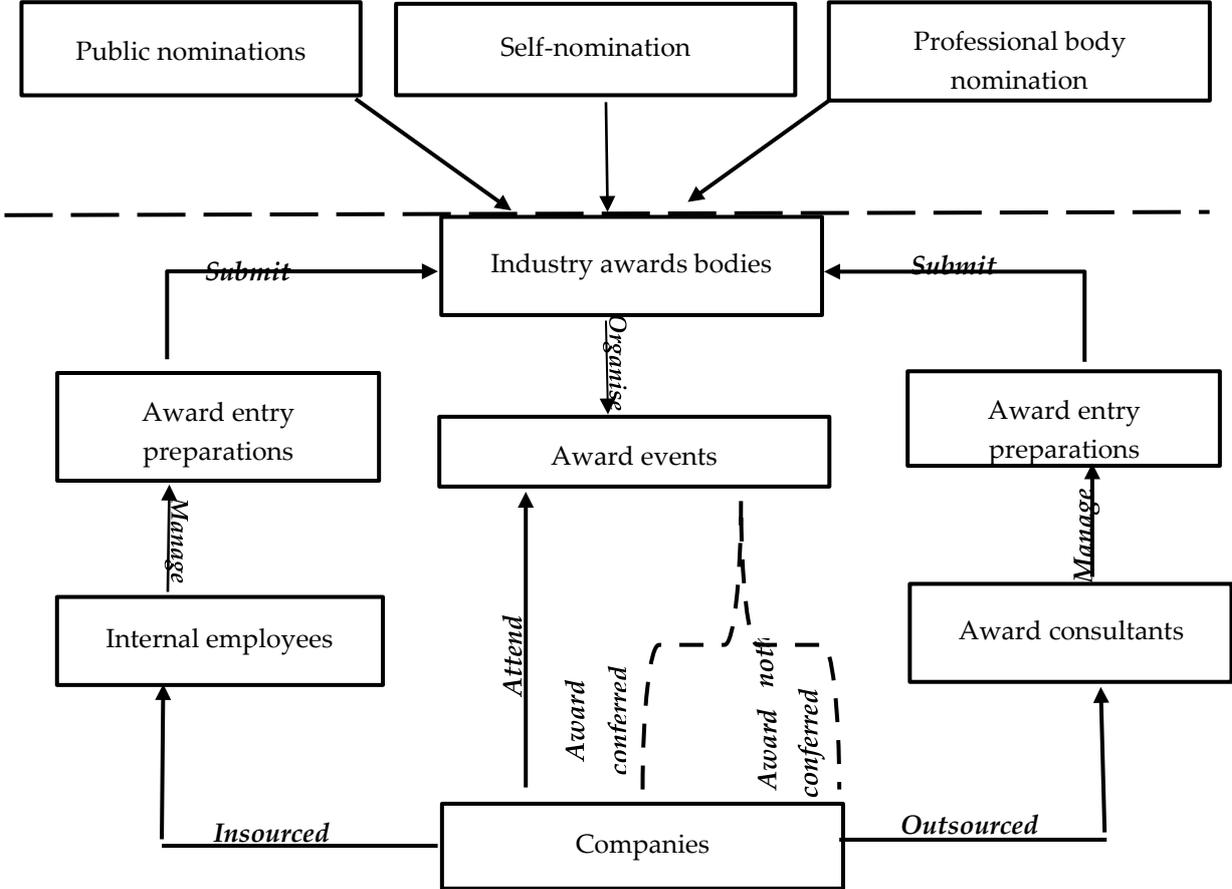
The next stage of the award process is the competition stage. At this stage, firms prepare their staff towards winning the award competition they have entered and encourage the public to vote for them, where voting is the criterion for winning the award. Firms prepare their staff when they go in for awards to give them something to aim for and look forward to, thus galvanising the team to work together as well as cultivate a richer sense of team spirit and togetherness (Kaufman and Englander, 2005). In some instances, the staff are briefed about the required criteria for the firm to win the award so that they all work towards that. When needed, some firms train staff members in areas they fall short of, as some award boards may

visit for an unannounced evaluation (Taylor and Tyler, 2012). These trainings are sometimes outsourced to third-party companies that are specialised in the award process (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2000). The third-party firms go further and train staff on how to approach stakeholders and competitors during the main event. In the case where voting is set as the criterion for winning awards, firms encourage customers through promotions to vote for them (Djelassi and Decoopman, 2013). The third stage of the business awards process is the main event itself. These events have recently become important in the corporate calendar, as it provides staff with a fun and convivial experience at the end of an assiduous trading year (Andersson and Cook, 2019). Not only are the events a break away for firms, but they are also a significant celebration that can attract major stakeholders ranging from competitors, investors, industry critics, and customers/clients, which can be an important networking platform for SMEs (Klassen and McLaughlin, 1996). Notably, business excellence awards events take the form of award dinners/breakfasts, gala cocktail evenings, or national conferences characterised by spectacular celebrations, glittering nights with live entertainment, keynote addresses from respectable industry giants, and distinguished venues (Brown and James, 2004). Before the events are held, competing firms spend time and resources to prepare for brand installations and, if possible, point-of-sale units at the event venue. In addition to this, firms also organise the logistics of sending corporate executives to represent the company at these events, which includes expenses associated with accommodation and travel. The post-award activities follow the award event. At this stage, winners are published in the mainstream and social media (Street, 2005). Some award organisers take winners on exciting vacations or business trips. At the firm level, internal staff meetings are held to celebrate the firm's victory.

2.3 Antecedents to the surge of business excellence award entries

This section presents the possible driving forces that induce firms to enter business excellence awards, resulting in the surge in BEAs; these include how past investments and experience in awards may influence the managerial decision to continue entering awards. The section continues with a discussion on how the managerial attitude towards awards informs their decision to enter awards, and this is followed by a discussion on how competitive environment influences firms to enter awards. Lastly, the section ends by discussing the impact of product-market diversification on the increase of business excellence awards.

2.3.1 Past investment in awards and experience

In most cases, organisations competing for awards have already invested heavily in this endeavour in previous years (Akafo and Boateng, 2015; Mishra and Mishra, 2017). As such, these investments are driven not only by the desire to retain a previously won award(s) but also by the desire to reinforce their winning position in the following years. Lăzăroiu (2015) maintained that many firms had been motivated by a belief that the only way to justify the money spent in preparation for an audit is by winning the award. In support of this assertion, Gallus and Frey (2016) observed that experience and investment in awards motivate firms to improve their performance due to the previously derived benefits of winning an industry award. Conversely, many firms have the structures for entering business awards to combat competitive pressures and ensure that the awards entered or won are publicised to relevant stakeholders via the firm's communications outlets (Shields et al., 2015). These structures may include a specialised team within the firm with the explicit duty of monitoring award openings and deadlines as well as the type of awards programmes coinciding with actual

business needs (e.g., recognition of excellent customer service or recognition of quality management). Past experience in award competitions helps firms to identify their shortfalls (i.e., there is a steep learning curve once organisations/managers decide to reflect on previous mistakes and poor decision-making) in losing out on business awards and, as a result, invest in those areas relevant to improve performance in order to win awards in the following years (Idowu, 2017).

2.3.2 Managerial attitude toward business excellence awards

Winning an external business award plays a significant role in promoting financial and other gains for both the winning organisation and its manager(s) (Corneille and Stahl, 2019). For this reason, many managers are motivated to enter awards with the hope of winning to achieve purposes such as KPIs, therefore resulting in a positive managerial attitude towards entering business awards. According to Anas, Rashid, and Annuar (2015), business managers' attitude towards external awards has the potential to either promote or inhibit winning an industry award. For instance, organisational-specific circumstances may also play a pivotal role in determining the extent to which an organisation intends to enter business award competitions. Although Anas, Rashid, and Annuar's (2015) study focused on Malaysian firms in the context of CSR performance disclosure, the study has shown that the possibility of winning an award may influence companies' inclination to disclose their CSR performance. This implies that a combination of positive managerial attitudes to awards with external incentives is another trigger for firms to enter awards. However, this proposition so far has been mostly explored in the domain of CSR disclosure. According to a study by Leonidou *et al*. (2017), a senior leadership award may help enhance a manager's profile. Correspondingly,

being shortlisted for an industry award can lead to invitations to attend conferences, join panels of judges, and enhance managers' opportunities to speak at business events, all of which increase the profile of managers (Harrison, 2018).

Somewhat conversely, Gubler, Larkin, and Pierce (2016) noted that in most instances, managers' remuneration rates get a significant upswing when they lead their firms to success in business awards as a form of appreciation for their excellent work. These factors motivate managers to develop an attitude of promoting teamwork (or any other internal activities that may, in one way or another, enhance business productivity) among their employees to ensure their winning agenda is achieved. Further to this, Lasrado and Uzbeck (2017) claimed that (based on data collected from firms operating in the United Arab Emirates) since business awards are accompanied by incentives for the winning business, managers who lead their businesses to win an award will equally gain fame and recognition from the giants in their industry, other competitors, and members of the public. Accordingly, Anas, Rashid, and Annuar (2015) asserted that there is increased demand for these managers (with an innate interest in acquiring various external business awards and certifications) since such managers and leaders are considered to have the outstanding managerial skills needed to propel businesses towards winning the targeted awards.

However, not all authors maintain a uniformly positive view of top managers' interest in business awards. For instance, Hendijani, Bischak, Arvai, and Dugar (2016) mentioned that when managers are focused only on winning external awards to attain personal gains (i.e., promotion, annual bonuses, or other outcomes to improve their position within their respective organisation), underperformance may set in. Such managers tend to be overwhelmed by their personal needs and start investing their resources heavily into awards

to achieve recognition. At the same time, this behavioural tendency comes with an inclination to avoid giving the recognition due to other employees who play significant roles in winning awards.

2.3.3 Competitiveness of the business environment

The increased number of new business enterprises has created significant competition in the marketplace as every enterprise strives to gain more in order to retain and expand its market share. Consequently, to stay in the competition, many firms have explored different avenues to reinforce consumer trust and communicate their business's intangible characteristics. In support of this argument, Lasrado and Uzbeck (2017) asserted that the scale of competition around business/industry awards is intensifying exponentially, principally due to the wide range of benefits organisations can glean from engaging in the process of an award competition. From this point of view, Beer et al. (2018), looking at supplier awards, postulated that the majority of firms competing for business awards recognise the awards as opportunities to acquire valuable corporate recognition, both locally and globally (another reputational effect of business awards). This benefit acts as a form of advertising and increases the business's chances of attracting new customers and retaining existing customers in a competitive business environment.

According to Belás and Sopková (2016), in recent times, many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have positioned their operations so they stand to be favourites in winning awards, and they deploy effective strategies to facilitate their competitiveness by winning such awards. For many of these firms, which operate on a smaller scale with limited resources,

winning business awards represents not just prestige but is a means to increase their recognition in international markets, where traditionally large-scale and multinational firms would compete. Shi *et al*. (2017) concurred with Belás and Sopková (2016), arguing that competition for business/industry awards has recently intensified as modern organisations operating in a competitive business environment leverage their award credentials as the means of developing a lasting competitive advantage over their chief market rivals. Although the study explicitly looked at Chief Executive Officer (CEO) awards (usually a form of recognition for outstanding performance), the study noted several practical implications at the executive level. Shi *et al*. (2017) further added that the competition around business/industry awards is intensifying due to market saturation, resulting in the need to adopt more (sometimes unconventional) strategies to compete for customers. This theoretical aspect closely resonates with those arguments resulting in an explicit linkage between business awards and competitive strategies. Besides, Shi *et al*. (2017) noted that firms could not afford to miss out on the chance of viral marketing via the major award events broadcast over various social media platforms. Such events are critical in product advertisement in today's hypercompetitive digital world. In line with Deng, Liu, and Ji's (2020) observation, being nominated for or winning external business awards leads to significant growth of the nominated or winning business, as the awards and nominations positively influence consumer behaviour and increase demand for the products and services sold by the awarded firm.

2.3.4 Corporate culture

Business award events are becoming increasingly common in all parts of the world. Usually, these events attract considerable attention from businesses as an opportunity to network, socialise, and entertain employees. According to Yap and Webber (2015), business awards have become a valuable aspect of today's workplace, as winning them can assist businesses in developing themselves as the pillars of the community. Such developmental efforts result in brand recognition to enhance bottom-line performance and assist managers in reaching various discretionary business goals. Whilst winning business excellence awards could lead to financial gains, higher recognition, and an expanded customer base, it has been evinced that the competition for business awards also plays a role in shaping employee productivity and performance (Prutina and Šehić, 2016). The reason behind this motivational effect is relatively simple. Awards, or the prospect of winning a business award, motivate employees to work cohesively to engage in innovative activities aimed at propelling firms to qualify for business excellence awards to enhance their public image and their competitive potential.

Despite all the aforementioned benefits of business awards, Bolton *et al.* (2009) stated that it is the award event itself that delivers the most significant benefits to firms entering and competing in business/industry awards. These award events provide staff with something to look forward to after their hard work throughout the year and also give employees something to aim for or look forward to at the beginning of the next working year. Bolton *et al*. (2009) further argued that the involvement in competition for external business awards helps organisations prevent burnout in both lower-tier employees and top-line executives to avoid any significant performance deterioration. Ghicajanu, Irimie, Marica, and Munteanu (2015) asserted that even if an organisation fails to emerge as the winner or a nominee for an external

business award, the employees of the participating firms are presented with a novel, stimulating challenge for the future to improve their chances of winning other business excellence awards. Building on some of the benefits discussed above, Kost *et al.* (2014) argued that inviting staff members to award ceremonies enables attendees to engage in networking opportunities to benefit their career development as well as to represent the company brand positively. However, this comes with the potential risk of them being poached by rival brands/employers also attending the awards show. Cumulatively, it has been demonstrated that both the award-winning firm and other competing firms end up transforming their staff members through the values acquired in the process of competition, ultimately improving their corporate culture and competitiveness (Schein and Schein, 2019).

2.3.5 Product market diversity

Product diversification is the practice of expanding the original market for a product (Johnson and Scholes, 2002). This strategy is used to boost the sales associated with an existing product line, which is especially useful for a business that has been experiencing stagnant or declining sales. Product diversification can be motivated by a variety of perceived benefits associated with increased market control, more effective allocation of resources by internal capital markets, use of existing resources in new environments, or decreased output uncertainty as a result of an imperfectly correlated set of business portfolios (Chakrabarti et al., 2007). On the other hand, this concept has led to an increasing number of companies entering business awards, as the possible award categories a business can enter increases due to the variety of the range of products they produce. That is, the higher the product diversity of a firm, the higher the number of different business excellence awards a company may apply for in a year.

Therefore, a widely diversified company may enter or win more awards due to having more award-eligible products within a particular market and/or geographic region.

As stated by (Penfold, 2007), firms seek both business-level and corporate-level diversification with the introduction of new products targeting high-end business awards both within and outside their traditional business markets. For instance, a firm with award-winning products in each product category can realise 'spill overs' from one product category to another, which serves as another justification to expand the product and/or service range. Companies have adopted this strategy by investing in products and sectors that provide faster growth potential to outperform competitors (Tallman and Li, 1996). The associated benefit of this strategy is the ability for firms to use the diversified product range to secure a larger number of entries for relevant business awards. Again, firms diversify their products and enter business excellence awards to seek market development to stimulate growth by targeting the acquisition of new market segments through their existing products. In either case, the wider the product portfolio, the higher the chances of winning prominent business awards.

Firms can diversify their products and markets either as part of a defensive or an offensive approach (Rijamampianina, Abratt and February, 2003). Firms have used business excellence award platforms to actualise defensive diversification to spread the risk of losing their market share or to diversify if the current product line/existing market orientation shows growth potential in the future. As such, companies use business excellence awards to further this objective either on the corporate or the product level (Ansoff et al, 2018). Thus, companies invest in diversification strategies for offensive reasons to conquer new positions by using business awards to capture opportunities that offer a greater level of profitability as opposed to expansion opportunities using retained cash (Park and Han, 2013). In sum, the increase in

business awards can be attributed to the rise in product diversity strategies by firms. As firms introduce new products, the more their chances of entering or qualifying for awards increase. Again, as firms introduce new products to the market, they face stiff competition from the products already on the market; therefore, many firms resort to business excellence awards to increase the credibility of their new products resulting in an increase in the number of business awards.

2.4 Potential outcomes for firms entering business excellence awards

After discussing the antecedents to the increase in business excellence awards, the preceding sections of this thesis unpacked the potential outcomes of firms entering business excellence awards by reviewing the relevant literature pertaining to firms' outcomes in entering awards. This section starts with an analysis of corporate credibility as a key potential outcome of firms that enter or win business awards. The arguments made are then followed by image repair, publicity, staff motivation, and firm performance as key potential outcomes. Figure 2 provides a generic overview of the interactions among the antecedents, the three theoretical perspectives, and the potential outcomes of firms that enter business excellence awards, suggesting that each theme informs the other conceptually.

Figure 2.0. Framework mapping empirical evidence on why businesses enter awards
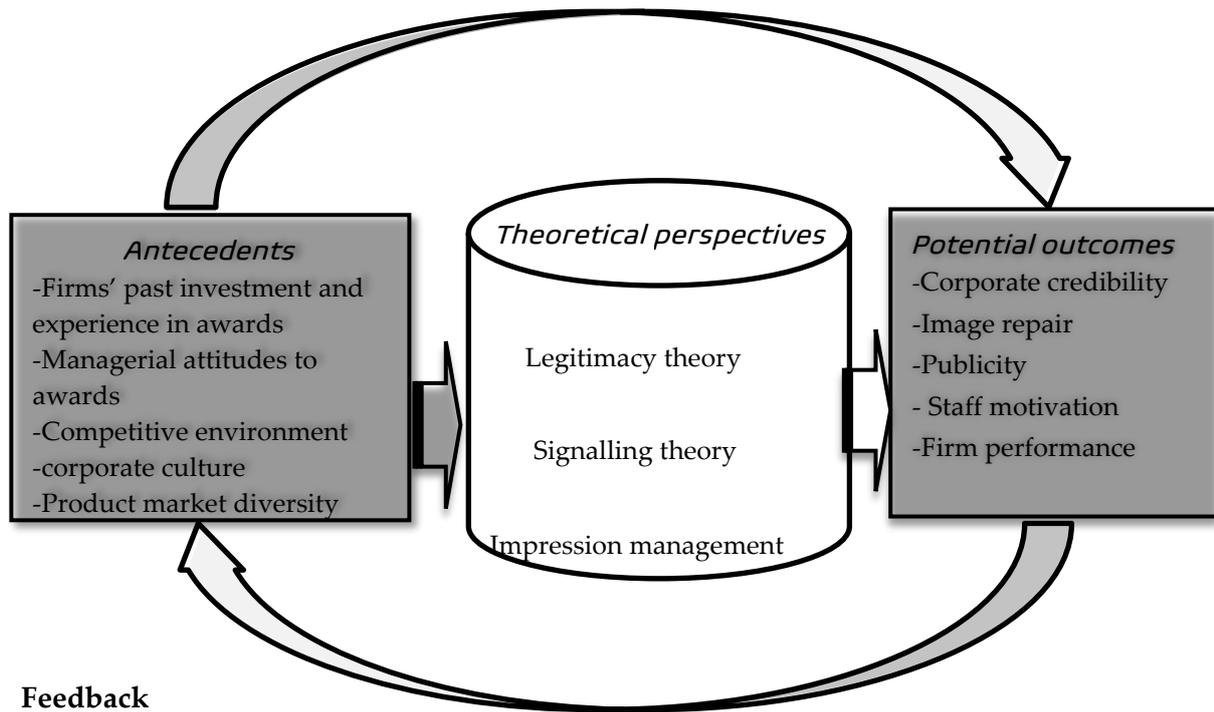
As presented in Figure 2, the conceptual framework's first theme considers the key factors fuelling the increase in business awards. As mentioned earlier, four key points were discussed, specifically, firms' past investment and experience in awards, managerial attitudes to awards, competitive environment, and product market diversity. Based on the signalling, impression management, and legitimacy theories, the next theme presents the theoretical rationale and empirical evidence that explains the motives of firms that enter awards. The final analytical themes discuss the potential outcomes of firms winning awards.

2.4.1 Achieving corporate credibility

One of the main outcomes demonstrated in the literature is the potential for instant credibility to be transferred to a business. Winning an award, even a relatively minor or regional award, can open doors and give a business instant credibility with potential customers and partners. For example, Swaffin-Smith and Jebb (2000) reviewed the Danbury Trophy case, an East Anglia regional business quality award, showing that winners receive significant benefits in the number of orders and total revenue after their win. These rewards can be further amplified by the ability of firms to incorporate the award into their communications, especially if the award is prestigious or comes from a credible institution. Specifically, Grigg and Mann (2008) showed that many contemporary business excellence awards are administered in a rigorous and transparent manner, with a specific focus on "the duration of the evaluation process; the number of evaluators on a team; the level, number, and focus of awards conferred; the documentation required, and the costs to the organisation". The more effective this process is, the greater the benefits, in terms of credibility, which accrue to the winners. Government backing for an award scheme can also enhance the credibility benefits, particularly in emerging market contexts. For example, in China, the 'Government Quality Award' has been administered since 2004 and has been shown to provide a benefit-to-cost ratio of over 700 to 1 to award-winning enterprises in terms of their enhanced credibility and growth in revenue (Wen et al., 2017).

Further to this, there is evidence that winning business excellence awards can boost an organisation's reputation, setting them apart from the crowd in a congested market. This is particularly relevant in the market economies of the world, where traditional tools of competitive strategies, such as quality assurance systems and marketing strategies, are no

longer sufficient to drive success. Instead, the performance of organisations needs to be supported and verified through the provision of business award programmes, which provide credibility to winners and information to the market about the relative performance of different businesses (Chuan and Soon, 2000). Winners can also use business excellence awards to prove the credibility of their existing model and competitive strategy. For example, Yoo and Pae (2016) analysed the case of business award winners in Korea, showing that award winners tended to make more charitable contributions than their peers prior to winning the award, even though these contributions did not increase their chances of winning. This suggests that award winners' charitable contributions indicate their overall strong business strategy, with the award serving only to legitimise and enhance the value and benefits of the said strategy and the firm's performance as a whole (Yoo and Pae, 2016).

A final important consideration in this area is that younger, smaller, and potentially marginalised or overlooked businesses can use the winning of awards to signal to the world that they are credible and successful and thus deserving of a level of attention similar to that provided to established businesses. This is particularly the case for more niche business awards, such as those administered by the Advanced Technology Program (ATP) in the United States. While these awards are beneficial for most companies, they have been particularly valuable for small businesses in verifying their technology competencies and capabilities, thus triggering the investment and support they need to grow and launch new products (Feldman and Kelley, 2003). Similarly, the annual 'Black Enterprise' Small Business Awards in the United States play a similar role in helping to publicise small businesses founded by black entrepreneurs, who often face social barriers to investment and market position. Evidence from these awards indicates that winners can gain additional credibility,

which is vital in helping them succeed, and in turn, they normalise black entrepreneurship and help build more opportunities in this area in the future (Brown, 2012).

2.4.2 A means for corporate image repair

Generally, with the rapid spread of fake news and the power of social media platforms, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many companies to repair any damage to their corporate image. Interestingly, competing in business awards has become a useful tool to change consumers/customers' perceptions of firms with a dented image. In particular, as argued by Townsend (1992) using a sample of winners of corporate responsibility awards in the United States, winning business awards from credible third parties can go a long way in solidifying a reputation as a trustworthy brand that delivers. This is particularly the case for social responsibility awards, which help to prove to customers that a company is legitimate, transparent, and operating responsibly according to social standards. However, it is also the case for general business excellence awards. In particular, Grigg and Mann (2008) showed that when these awards are operated effectively, they also help to provide image benefits to their winners, helping to repair any image problems they may have around their levels of efficiency, excellence, and innovation.

Consequently, as stated earlier, award-winning businesses are consistently seen as more reputable and honest, even though consumers may not be consciously aware of this perception, and, as a result, their image also becomes more resilient to damage. This is particularly reflected in the perceptions of a business's quality, with the MBNQA, the EFQM, and the Deming Prize remaining highly credible and globally accepted business quality awards. Specifically, according to Talwar (2011), these awards help provide strong benefits to

the corporate image and support the ability of businesses to achieve sustained business results in turbulent modern environments. This is broadly through the extent to which these awards help to influence customers' perceptions regarding the winners' image and reputation. This can be seen in more recent examples of business award winners, which gain a similar resilience to image damage. For example, when Unilever Group won the UK's Most Admired Companies Award in 2017, it gained significant image benefits, and many of its brands showed enhanced resilience to criticism as a result. This was also the case for other recipients of similar awards, such as Diageo and Rotork, thus further demonstrating the value of business excellence awards.

Business excellence awards also have the potential to help companies to establish themselves as pillars of the community, resulting in increased brand awareness and causing organisations that have earned accolades to be looked upon with favour, thus making them more likely to win customers and contracts. This is particularly the case for companies whose efforts to position themselves as such pillars are met with cynicism and distrust by the wider public in the absence of such support. In particular, O'Toole (1991) noted that the rise of scandals and events, such as the Vietnam War and Watergate in the United States, caused society to become more willing to question the motives and legitimacy of businesses that display virtue in their actions, feeling that this may have been done to cover up some ulterior motives or other wrongdoing. However, the foundation of the Business Enterprise Trust (BET) annual awards in the US helped overcome this by providing third-party evidence and validation to help provide legitimacy and avoid companies being seen as somehow 'dodgy' for investing in social causes. Similar outcomes have been observed for the impact of CEOs, who are increasingly associated with their companies. In this case, the public image of a CEO, and their

perceived level of trustworthiness and quality, can reflect on their company (Love et al., 2017). As such, CEOs who win industry awards can help address any issues with their own public image and boost their firms' reputations and enhance their performance as a result.

2.4.3 Free publicity

In addition to the image repair benefits, winning business excellence awards can help boost a company's profile and provide enhanced levels of publicity. This increased awareness not only applies to consumers but can also provide businesses with more attention from suppliers, vendors, investors, and lenders, many of whom survey articles and award ceremonies for potential business partners. In particular, the UK's Small Firms Research Award for Research and Technology (SMART) award has been shown to influence banks' attitudes towards the business models and proposals of the winners, making them more likely to extend finance to these businesses (Keogh and Pearson, 1992). This additional publicity can be particularly valuable and even critical when businesses face challenges and crises. For example, Teale (2009) analysed the North of England Business Excellence Awards' impact on the success and survivability of local companies during the economic recession that followed the global financial crisis. In this case, the awards were given in recognition of the winners' business success and the improvements they made to their operations, with the net result being to increase the profile of these companies and make them more resilient to a loss of customers, suppliers, and finance during the course of the recession. Winners were hence more likely to survive the recession than their peers were.

Another key element of the business awards, even for non-winners, is the resulting level of brand recognition and free positive public relations (PR). Specifically, even being shortlisted as an award contender can give an organisation free publicity from the awards organiser as well as from the other nominees and judges, with this publicity being even more far-reaching and impactful for winners. This is reflected in the case of the Dubai Quality Award, which is awarded to businesses in the UAE based on the quality of their performance against the award criteria. According to Lasrado (2017), the organisations that enter and win this award are more likely to come from the trading, finance, and retail sectors, where the strong customer focus of these businesses means that they gain most strongly from the associated publicity around competing for and winning the awards. However, this free marketing can be of value to any business, particularly when combined with effective PR exposure. As a result of this, Gosney (2012) described entering a business award as the smartest move that a business can ever take, with the resulting award shown to strengthen a firm's market potential through the resulting free marketing and publicity-enhancing outcomes for all industries.

This free marketing can be enhanced through the incorporation of business and industry awards into the wider marketing process, making them a valuable addition to the marketing arsenal. Specifically, whilst the free publicity an award-winning business receives can result in more business and new connections, using the award as the basis for a strong marketing campaign can help to provide an even larger boost and higher levels of success. This is particularly the case for quality awards, with evidence indicating that "quality has become the source of sustained competitive advantage that provides organisations with the supremacy of the global markets characterised by competition which is becoming more and more intensified" (Ilies et al., 2015, p.1128). Receiving quality awards thus helps not only to

demonstrate a superior level of quality but also to use marketing tactics to turn this validation into a source of competitive advantage. This is the case for winners of the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award, with these businesses having been shown to increase their marketing focus on the quality of their products in the wake of winning the award, showing the potential of this strategy (Hogdetts et al., 1999).

A final consideration in this area is the extent to which awards can be a valuable tool in the overall business toolbox. Whilst simply being listed as a nominee for an award can improve brand awareness and promote a business to new customers, the award qualification process can also act as a source of validation and publicity for existing customers. This is particularly relevant when considering the extent to which global developments in areas such as supply chain and operations have made companies more susceptible to risk around their operations, making customers and partners warier. Winning quality and business excellence awards can thus signal effectiveness in managing these risks, particularly in challenging environments (Di Serio et al., 2011). Similarly, there is evidence that businesses can use the very process of competing for these awards as a way to improve levels of organisational excellence and performance. This can be seen in the case of the UAE, where the introduction of business excellence awards resulted in local companies making ''considerable progress in introducing and developing their quality management systems'' (Lasrado and Uzbeck, 2017, p.716). Winning these awards thus requires an even more significant level of progress with associated business benefits.

2.4.4 A source of motivation for firms and their staff to do more

Another important area of consideration when entering business excellence awards is the impact on employees. In particular, staff morale and motivation levels often improve when a company wins a business award due to the sense of achievement and the potential to celebrate the victory with colleagues. This is reflected by Gosney (2012), who noted that one of the main outcomes of entering an award is the potential to motivate employees to strive hard to win the award, whilst victory in an award makes everyone at the business feel better, as they appreciate being recognised for their hard work. Such outcomes are key elements of process theories of motivation, with the award providing a valuable outcome with clear targets for employees to work towards and a genuine chance of winning. Motivational outcomes can also extend to specific forms of business. For example, the Massachusetts Family Business Association Awards have been shown to provide a substantial opportunity for inspiring employees about the family business's mission and legacy and helping overcome the difficulties that can be encountered when looking to motivate a business run by family members.

In addition to the motivational benefits of working towards an award, awards also recognise the hard work and achievements of employees, so winning one can help boost staff morale and improve motivation. This is a reflection of the fact that employees can focus on what is good about the company they work for and can feel proud to be a part of it, with Gubler et al. (2016) noting that awards can help to support coalescence in a group and hence improve the motivation of employees to work together for common outcomes. At the same time, the article also notes that awards can change the view held within a business about its role in the market

and community, helping employees build external connections and feel more confident in their jobs. This is particularly the case when winning focused awards such as those for innovation. As noted by Zhang et al. (2014), winning innovation awards can be seen as a measure of the ability of companies to execute their innovation strategy effectively, as well as being a validation of this strategy and its appropriateness. As such, in the minds of employees, companies that win innovation awards are highly innovative and thus encourage the type of creativity and risk-taking that is necessary to achieve innovation in the first place. Investing in winning these awards proves the company's existing level of innovation and acts to increase it in the future. This is recognised in the study of Zhang et al. (2014), who showed that businesses that win innovation awards enjoy a change in return on assets, which is almost a third higher than that of a control sample of their peers, along with associated increases in revenue, cost efficiency, and market valuation. Many of these improvements occur prior to the win, but there is a notable boost after winning, which shows the motivational value of the award for creative employees.

Another important consideration is the impact of winning awards on the employer brand and the firm's attractiveness to recruits. In particular, business excellence awards can validate a business's stature in the labour market, allowing a company to pitch itself as the best and thus attract the talent needed to push the business forward whilst also providing the increased employee morale needed to retain new recruits. This is reflected in Stewart's (2004) analysis of the impact of winning awards on employees. This article indicates that many businesses do not focus sufficiently on their competition, thus failing to compete for talent and human resources, with awards helping to engender a more strategic approach to recruitment and talent competition. In addition to this, Duska (2008) considered the case of the American

Business Ethics Award, which evaluates a business's commitment to ethics, code of ethics, and procedures for resolving ethical issues. Winning this award, or even being shortlisted, provides a strong signal around the firm's ethics, which in turn, makes the company more attractive to potential recruits, helping to attract and retain the best talent in the future.

Another important consideration is the influence of entering and winning business awards based on a business's culture, values, morale, and team cohesiveness. In general, employees like to feel a part of a recognised and well-functioning team, and recognition from an outside source, such as an industry association or a respected publication, will have even more impact than internal recognition. This is particularly the case for awards focused on business excellence. These awards rely heavily on formal, external assessments and promote continuous improvement, with the achievement of success depending on the effective alignment of employee actions, performance measures, and overall activities (Angell and Corbett, 2009). Achieving such improvement in isolation can be challenging, but entering a business excellence award can provide a strong road map to follow and identify associated cultural norms and values to instil in the team. This can be particularly strong when the award is built around a recognised quality framework such as Total Quality Management. For example, the Canadian Awards for Business Excellence include a specific award for Total Quality. The award provides guidance and requirements around "the frequency of performance measures improvements; the mechanisms of these improvements; assignment of responsibility for creating, updating and monitoring performance measures; and the role of employee participation and training" (Kumar et al., 2009, p.605). Thus, entering this award provides a clear roadmap, with verified feedback, to support improved employee and company performance in these areas.

2.4.5 Improved firm performance

In a competitive business environment that is marked by frequent shifts in demand and intense competition, many organisations have found the need to use business excellence awards as a marketing communication strategy to attract and maintain consumers. Researchers in this area have concluded that awards have the propensity to attract potential consumers' interest, drive a positive purchase attitude, and ultimately stimulate customer response (Dean, 1999). In addition to this, firms with listings on the stock exchange experience improved stock prices as they enter/win awards (Adams et al., 1999). This is because stocks move according to a short-term trend whereby being nominated for/winning an award sends positive signals to investors, thus boosting their confidence in investing in that company (Hendricks and Singhal, 1996). Relating this, stocks of nominated/award-winning firms gather momentum, as "success breeds success", and the popularity from their award exploits buoys the stock higher and eventually improves the firm's financial performance (Lyon et al., 2013).

Further to improved financial performance, being shortlisted in business awards can significantly help firms reach a new audience with their brand. Research has shown that 70% of consumers rely on product reviews before buying (Gavilan et al., 2018). As a result, product reviews are seen to be twelve times more trusted than product descriptions from manufacturers (Clemons et al., 2006). Business excellence awards afford firms badges and trust seals, which are invaluable in influencing conservative customers to patronise the services or products (Malik and Guptha, 2014). This, with the addition of the free publicity associated with business awards, allows firms to expand to new markets. However, in expanding to new markets, the benefits of gaining a significant share of the market become minimal if the award is not well known to the new market (Graham and Pettinato, 2002).

Similar to market expansion, pursuing or winning an award signals to firms' existing and future customers that independent entities have reviewed them and are credible and leaders in the industry they operate (Covin, 2006). This potentially influences buying decisions, as customers and vendor partners will feel better about their business relationship with award-winning companies, a response which is reflected significantly in sales.

2.5 Competing perspectives on why firms enter and compete for business excellence awards

Consistent with differing views as to why firms may enter business excellence awards, disparate and often competing perspectives have also informed research on the subject. This section presents an overview of the three salient perspectives that have dominated and shaped scholarship on business excellence awards. The first is strategic signalling, emphasising how organisations employ these awards to signal their intentions, aspirations, and visions. Second is legitimacy gaining, which provides insight into how firms may use these awards to legitimise their doings and organising practices to their potential stakeholders. Finally, impression management provides insight into how firms use awards to manage external views of their organisation.

2.5.1 Strategic signalling

As Spence (1973) suggested, signalling is the resolution of information asymmetry between independent actors who may use signals to represent unobservable or hard-to-find qualities. Interestingly, many firms utilise entering and winning awards to portray their credibility in providing quality services to clients or customers (Lee, Ang, Dubelaar, 2005; Tsai and Yang, 2010). In this case, business excellence awards may be considered a reliable signal because only competent businesses could withstand scrutiny by the independent third parties that confer awards. Drawing from Spence's (1973) conceptual example, full information availability is rarely present in business transactions; thus, one party is assumed to be in possession of more information than the other party (Wankhade and Dabade, 2015). Whether or not this information asymmetry is exploited in any strategic way is contingent on

situational characteristics. Furthermore, irrespective of the actual role and/or influence of information asymmetry during the interaction between the supply and the demand sides, the entity suffering from its inability to access all information may have recourse to different coping mechanisms to reduce information asymmetry (Helm, Mark, 2007, Meents, Verhagen, 2018 and Berger, 2019).

The instance of assessing product and/or service quality clearly illustrates the implications of information asymmetry for consumers and the subsequent role of signalling theory to reinforce consumer choice (despite the lack of any proper, objective means to verify quality) (Connelly et al., 2010). That is, firms tend to use different 'signals' (e.g., awards) to communicate the expected level of quality to reduce consumption risk. A simple depiction of the signalling theory is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3.0: A Simple Depiction of Signalling Theory
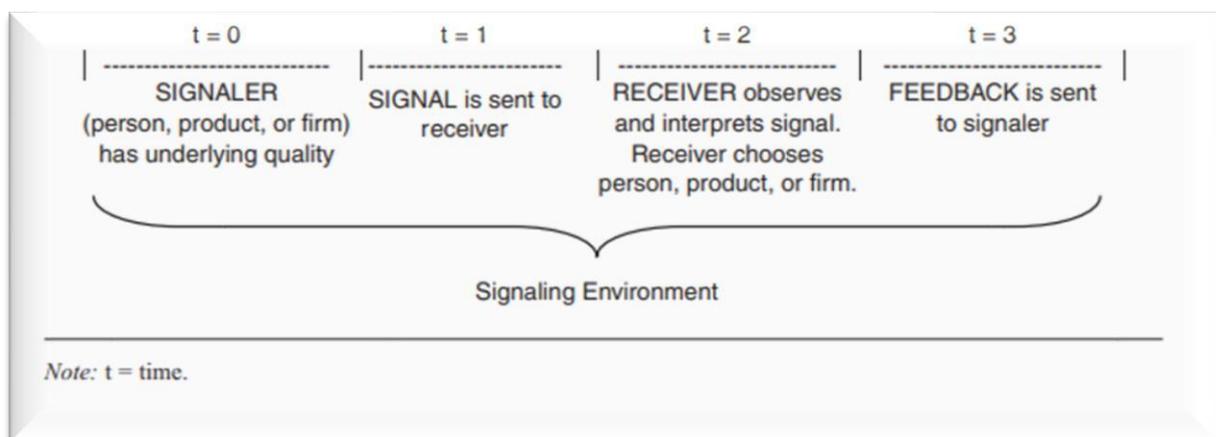
Source: Connelly et al. (2010 p.44).

The mechanism of signalling shown in Figure 3 is relatively simple. In the signalling environment, there are three main constituents: the signal itself (e.g., the display of a business award), the signaller (the business/communicator using some form of signal to influence

consumer perceptions) and the receiver (i.e., the consumer) (Connelly, Certo, Ireland and Reutzel, 2010). To begin with, the main impetus of signalling is to effectively display to the receiver certain (positive) organisational attributes that may not be observable at first sight. Upon receipt and processing of the signal, the consumer interprets the information (against a set of expectations and/or rules) and finally sends the feedback to the signaller (i.e., decision outcomes can be seen as relatively accurate portrayals of the effectiveness of a particular type of signalling (Reuber and Fischer, 2009). In fact, the business management literature distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' signals (Gulati and Higgins, 2002), referring to the extent to which the signal can be detected by consumers (or other stakeholders with some vested interest in assessing a firm's credibility). Thus, as Connelly, Certo, Ireland, and Reutzel (2010) stated, it is indispensable for firms to maximise signalling observability and the fit between the signal and the unobservable attribute of the signaller (e.g., quality or other intangible characteristics with a definite impact on consumer choice). Therefore, signalling theory's main theoretical contribution involves the strategic use of signals to verify specific product/service attributes to abate information asymmetry to maximise sales and develop relationships.

The business and marketing literature utilising the signalling theory in the last couple of decades has also produced an extensive research history (Rahman, Rodríguez-Serrano, and Lambkin, 2018), although only a small number of papers have explicitly sought to examine the signalling potential of business awards. The review of different theoretical contributions to signalling theory (with options to extend the conceptual ideas to business awards) can be exceptionally useful in advancing the key ideas further. According to Erdem and Swait (1998), signal clarity, consistency, and credibility are the main determinants of receivers' response to

signals (either negative, positive, or neutral). Signal clarity refers to the transparency of the attribute being communicated, and credibility entails consumer confidence and credibility gauges whether the signals are consistently reinforced in other elements of the sellers' marketing communications mix. For instance, a firm applying multiple signals at the initial stages of the consumer journey must have specific control systems (that may or may not include awards) in place to monitor the initial signals (Erdem and Swait, 1998). Should this not be the case, signal credibility issues may arise. Unfortunately, signalling theory's enhancing mechanism through business awards (from an external point of view) is a heavily under-theorised domain of management research. Internally, awards have been shown to positively influence workers' motivation and commitment (Gubler, Larkin and Pierce, 2016). However, the reputational (external) and other incentivising properties of business awards are scarcely understood.

2.5.2 Legitimacy theory

From the previous section, it is apparent that firms turning to the use of various approaches to effectively convey abstract information (e.g., credibility and quality) to external stakeholders must also ensure that the right type of information is communicated and perceived as intended (Bebbington, Larrinaga-González, and Moneva-Abadía, 2008). Several independent third-party online review sites now supply possible clients with valuable and mostly impartial information on realistic service/product quality. In theory, unrestricted access to such information may (in some form) disturb organisations' signalling strategy, especially if online reviews are incongruent with the elements of the different signals (e.g., awards) used to engage the target audience (Argenti, 2013). However, while both of these

areas (information access and the perceived legitimacy of communications) in the recent past have enjoyed distinguished academic and practitioner attention, research into a combination of these two conceptual areas remains, at best, a work-in-progress (Reuber and Fischer, 2009).

Drawing on Suchman's (1995 p.575) definition of legitimacy theory ("a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms"), legitimacy theory can be conceptually linked to the three main characteristics of signalling, namely, clarity, consistency, and credibility (Erdem and Swait, 1998). Interestingly, a large number of research papers applied the legitimacy theory in assessing firms' CSR disclosure strategies (Sharma, 2013). Yet, it is reasonable to assume that expanding the concept to decipher the triggers of the 'gold rush' to acquiring business awards to supplement and verify internal and external communication strategies to forge mutually supportive stakeholder relationships is a theoretically justified research direction.

Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) apparent reference to organisational legitimacy as a *resource* presents another clear indication of business awards' possible practicality. As discussed in the preceding section, consumer decisions are by no means linear/rational. Instead, these can be seen as multi-dimensional behaviours relying on various information sources to assess organisational trustworthiness and, consequently, the perceived legitimacy of an organisation or other entities in various social exchanges (Jann and Przepiorka, 2017). In other words, returning to Suchman's (1995 p.575) definition of legitimacy, the links between business awards and legitimacy theory can be best clarified by viewing legitimacy as a social construct and not necessarily as an immediate reflection (or signalling) of one specific transaction (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). Even if the links between legitimacy theory and business awards

would undoubtedly benefit from additional research, a reasonable hypothesis would be that a higher number of awards is positively correlated with the views of the collective audience mediating certain cues of the legitimacy of the business (Jann and Przepiorka, 2017).

A brief assessment of recent academic and practitioner publications also reinforced the potential linkages between the legitimacy of business awards and the capacity thereof to differentiate organisations (Frey and Neckermann, 2008). Unfortunately, many businesses drawing upon the psychologically positive experiences of receiving awards have become specialised in the 'monetisation' of awards by requiring award winners to compensate for the award in return for some media exposure (e.g., business/trade magazines) (Dee, 2017). This tendency would clearly contradict the legitimacy theory's definition and would radically question the credibility of business awards. Even though the academic literature so far has not examined such credibility concerns in detail, once these recent developments are juxtaposed with the benefits of business awards, there is a genuine incentive for adopting a more systematic approach to reviewing and contrasting different academic ideas on the perceived value of business excellence awards. Wang, Beatty, and Foxx's (2004) comprehensive study (situated in a retail context) in this respect displays the fragmented (and somewhat uncritical) state of current research.

The listed benefits of business excellence awards (enhanced credibility, business image, and consumer trust) (Wang, Beatty, and Foxx, 2004) may not be automatically manifested if those neutral institutions issuing awards sustain motives incompatible with the main pillars of legitimacy theory. Contrastingly, Jones *et al.*'s (2014) empirical study based on the UK SME sector exposed a variety of options to realise the highest returns on awards to reinforce the legitimacy and to benefit from the signalling potential of awards. These include the promotion

of the award to stakeholders, an appropriate external communication strategy and the "the ongoing participation in and therefore the winning of various business awards" (Jones *et al*., 2014, p.23). The next section of the chapter builds upon the discussed theoretical constructs to examine how, through the practice of impression management (a precursor to investing in business awards), firms generate and sustain external trust.

2.5.3 Impression management

Finally, the concept of impression management is another theoretical construct that may be used to model firms' intentions to enter and accumulate a variety of awards to signal legitimacy and bolster consumer confidence. The term encompasses all planned efforts to craft the desired image, often calibrated to long-term strategic goals (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 2013). Impression management may also be used to alter pre-existing public images to recover from reputational damages in the shortest time (also referred to as defensive impression management) (Van Raaij, Van Veldhoven and Warneryd, 2010). Beka's (2013) review of a ¨ sample of impression management literature shows a predominant theme in publications to examine impression management practices at the individual level. As brand representatives, salespeople habitually engage in the practice of impression management to frame perceptions during transactions (Leathers, 1988).

Notably, impression management is a viable tool to manage external views of the organisation and, indeed, to signal various attributes deemed to be among the key decision factors in a particular consumer market. Hence, there is another possible link to the signalling theory. Grunig (1993) highlighted the diversity of approaches to conceptualise impression

management. Grunig (1993) also noted that irrespective of the definition applied, impression management aims to challenge existing assumptions with the ultimate intention to evoke consumer trust, commonly seen as the precursor to developing long-lasting relationships with customers and other stakeholders and other outcomes consistent with business goals.

Leary and Kowalski's (1990) descriptive model of impression management was initially developed to model impression management on the individual level. In light of previously introduced theories of signalling and legitimacy, the model can also be applied as an analytical model to categorise previous publications and sketch a preliminary construction of the different motives behind firms' decisions to enter different awards. Leary and Kowalski's (1990) model is depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4.The Two Distinct Processes of Impression Management
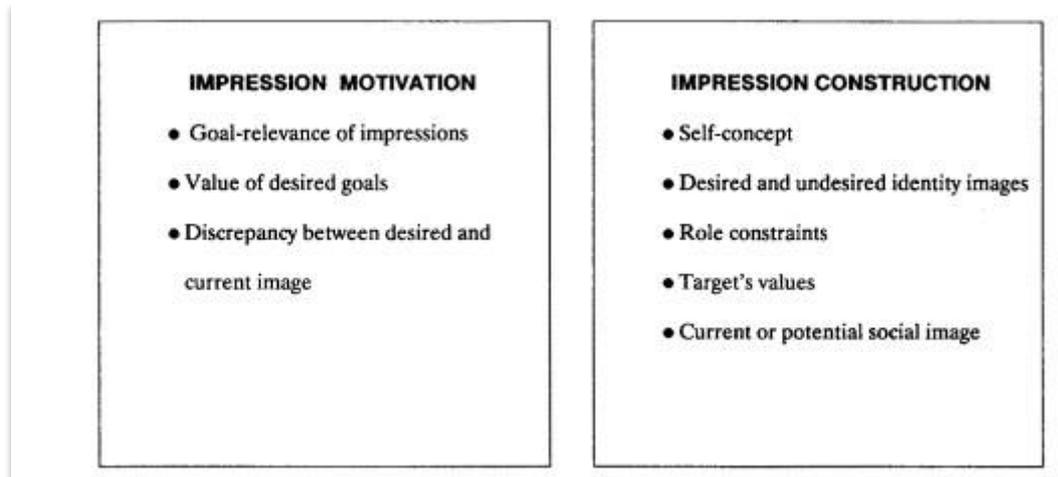
Source: Leary and Kowalski (1990 p.36)

The primary benefit of the model in Figure 4 is its versatility in applying to a range of business management scenarios, that is, not just to initiate impression management strategies but also to assess the necessity of possible changes to self-presentation (through the deployment of a variety of signalling tools). Thus, the fundamental motivations for firms to engage in the

practice of impression management involve the goal-relevance of impressions, the value (both quantifiable and non-quantifiable) of goals, and the discrepancy between the current and actual image as reported by the marketing and other functional departments responsible for managing PR (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Following the triggers of impression management, the stages of impression construction (right column) address the target audience's values and the discrepancy between current and potential social image by reflecting on self-concept and role constraints. As advised earlier, Leary and Kowalski's (1990) model was developed to analyse impression management on the individual level. Therefore, some of its elements may not apply equally to impression management on the corporate level. Even if there is a prevailing consensus among academics and practitioners on the importance for firms and individuals to proactively manage public perceptions to facilitate the attainment of long-term objectives, the lacuna of research on corporate-level impression management remains a pending barrier.

2.5.4 Limitations of the legitimacy, strategic signalling and impression management theories in conceptualising the surge in business excellence awards

Put together, this section has provided a critical overview of legitimacy theory, strategic signalling and impression management as applied within the business excellence literature. In doing so, it first defines the tenets of these theories and how BEAs can be considered a resource necessary for the survival of firms in today's competitive markets through these theoretical constructs. Generally, management scholars have utilised these theories when seeking to explain why corporate management undertakes certain actions. Although mainly utilised in explaining or predicting particular managerial activities, the underlying focus of each of these theories does not wholly uncover the identified motivations that drive firms to compete in BEAs on their own. For instance, conceptualising the keen interest in competing for BEAs as a means to gain relevant endorsement for public credibility (legitimacy theory) leaves a considerable gap in accounting for the managerial interest and role of past experiences and investments in influencing firms' decisions in competing for BEAs. Again, these three theories fail to provide an understanding of how firms may come by their BEAs choices and the processes that lead to such decisions.

In talking these gaps head-on, the study endeavours to draw on the practice approach to fully explain how social practices such as BEAs come to be formed, sustained and transformed. The study contends that this perspective would be of value in responding to and unpacking the numerous underlying influences of the surge in BEAs. Understanding the material, competence and motivation elements that constitute this practice can help explain better the source of change in firms behaviour toward BEAs leading to the development of the phenomena. Again, through these perspectives, the earlier discussed strands of theories (legitimacy, strategic signalling and impression management) can be utilised as the roots of the central elements constituting BEAs

as a social practice. For instance, the material and meaning elements of the circuit of practice in the context of BEAs can be argued to have points of connection with legitimacy seeking, strategic signalling and impression management. Finally, the circuit of practice offers the theoretical framework to unpack and understand the important competencies firms may need in making efficient award entries and making informed decisions on their award or category choices. Considering its broad range of framework for analysing such a complex social phenomenon as BEAs, the study contends that the circuits of practice present a perfect analytical framework to unpack and bring to light the surge of BEAs.

2.6 Entering business excellence awards: A discursive practice perspective.

The theory of practice is generally identified as a way to account for social practices through the synthesis of societal structures and a person's individual actions (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). The idea that social practice is an ongoing development that emerges from people's repeated acts is central to the theory of practice. Another fundamental point consistent with the theory of practice is the correlation between individual instances of situated activity and the social world in which they occur. Although various practice theorists emphasize different aspects of these relationships and elaborate distinct logics, most generally subscribe to three key sets of arguments in theorizing practice. The first theme of the argument is that situated actions are consequential in the formation of social realities. Here, according to practice theorists, actors' daily activities are pertinent in forming the structural contours of social reality. For instance, Giddens (1984) argues that practices are those social actions that recursively produce and reproduce the structures that constrain and enable actions. For

Bourdieu (1990, p.57), the habitus is a "generative principle of regulated improvisations which reactivates the sense objectified in institutions." Meanwhile, for Schatzki (2002), social orders are formed by the theory of practice and are generally identified as a way to account for social practices through the synthesis of societal structures and a person's individual actions (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). The idea that social practice is an ongoing development that emerges from people's repeated acts is central to the theory of practice. Another fundamental point consistent with the theory of practice is the correlation between individual instances of situated activity and the social world in which they occur. Although various practice theorists emphasize different aspects of these relationships and elaborate distinct logics, most generally subscribe to three key sets of arguments in theorizing practice. The first theme of the argument is that situated actions are consequential in the formation of social realities. Here, according to practice theorists, actors' daily activities are pertinent in forming the structural contours of social reality. For instance, Giddens (1984) argued that practices are those social actions that recursively produce and provide convergence of the social actors' activities that constitute practice. Similarly, the notion of consequentiality associated with the theory of practice has been further expanded by MacIntyre (2007, pp.189–191). In his argument, portrait painting production is guided not primarily by an external demand for portraits but by the standards of excellence developed by practitioners through the practice of painting. Thus, what makes portrait painting, or any other activity, a practice, in his view, is that the act of doing it has a direct effect or consequences for the activity's development. However, the idea of what and how practice is generated differs among scholars: it may be social structures (Giddens, 1984), field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), or the interrelation of action (Schatzki, 2001), but the consequentiality of daily activities is a constant theme of their arguments.

The second theme of the practice theory argument is the rejection of dualisms and the acceptance of the underlying relationship between elements that have commonly been viewed as separate actions. These include philosophically opposing views, such as mind and body, cognition and behaviour, objective and subjective, structure and agency, entity and institutional, and free will and determinism (Reckwitz, 2002). Bourdieu's (1990, p.55) idea of practice, for example, emphasizes the deconstruction of the long-held assumption that the subjective and objective are separate and opposed concepts. In the view of transcending the dualism of agency and structure, Giddens (1984) argued the constitution of agents and structures is not two distinctly given sets of events, a dualism, but represents a duality. Although, in some cases, analytical oppositions can be valuable in defining a concept, the theory of practice, on the other hand, promotes scepticism toward them and provides a philosophical means for redefining and reintegrating concepts that have been partitioned and polarized in other theories. Practice theory, in particular, allows scholars to theorize the complex composition of dualities and thereby avoid the twin fallacies of "objectivist reification" on the one hand and "subjectivist reduction" on the other (Taylor, 1993).

Lastly, the third theme of the theory of practice argues about the relationality of collective constitution. Here, practice as a collective constitution suggests that social orders cannot emerge or develop without cognizance of the role of agency in their development; likewise, agency cannot be understood "merely" as a human activity but must be understood as an action already configured by structural conditions (Gherardi 2006, Chia and Holt 2006). Generally, this constitutive relationship, characterised by the theory of practice, is an active or routinized process that occurs when social activities occur (Gherardi 2006, Reckwitz 2002). Although the word "relational" is often used to refer to interpersonal relationships in practice,

the interpretation intended here is similar to that of Foucault (1977) and others. It stipulates that no phenomenon can be considered independent of other phenomena (Bradbury and Lichtenstein, 2000; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005). Thus phenomena develop primarily in relation to one another as a result of a shared structural process. However, practice theorists have different views on the particular associations of phenomena entailed by relationality. An example is Giddens' (1984) work on conceptualising the recursive correlation between structure and agency. In his view, recurring acts constitute structures, and the structures that are implemented also constitute continuing actions. For Gherardi (2006, p. 31), practices become recursive when they are constantly recreated by the same means with which they convey themselves. Bourdieu also postulated that social activities do not stand on their own; rather, habitus, practice, and field link together to develop and replicate actions; however, in his case, he did not directly use the term "recursive" in defining the concept.

In this thesis, we draw on the discursive turn to the theory of practice to extend our understanding of the epistemic gaps between what people say they do and what they actually do. This is in line with the linguistic turn to practice, where social practice is argued to be a repeated act of sayings and doings through which the knowledge and power fundamental to human behaviour are developed and best understood using discursive practices such as narratives, arguments, and writing (Foucault, 1977). However, the study's interest is not the "things said" in terms of their content or linguistic structure, but the operation of a whole package of relationships, including symbolic and material elements, that make those "things said" legitimate and meaningful. Hence, firms' discursive practices in this thesis are conceptualised as "what they say" but only in the broader context of the plural and contingent processes involved in producing *what* they say as "a reality".

2.6.1 A discursive practice approach to business excellence awards

The notion that social phenomena come into existence through the stabilizing effect of a generic discursive process has led to a new turn to the discursive practice lens of accounting for social life (Hardy, 2001). Likewise, in this thesis, the constitutive or performative effect of discourse is central in our analysis of conceptualising business awards as a discursive practice. Primarily, the discursive practice approach employs language and the constructive influence of text to create, sustain, and transform the constellation of social interactions, localized patterned behaviours, and practices in daily organizing (Foucault, 1977). According to Fairclough (2003), language is more than just a representation of social reality; it is the means of creating and reproducing the world as it is perceived. In other words, discourse is the medium whereby people in social settings exchange information, make sense of their situations and bring reality into existence (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). It can be argued that the realities produced from discourses are to be something given or fixed, but rather, they exist and are maintained by the repeated verbal and non-verbal interactions of social actors. As a result of the repeated interaction pattern, social actors' discursive practices become set rules, norms, and guidelines that shape future interactions.

For Meriläinen et al. (2004, p. 544), the constellations of language and practices define "who and what is 'normal,' standard and acceptable", and they influence social actors in their ways of thinking, talking, and acting. According to Foucault (1977), discourse influences and creates the objects of our knowledge. Thus, it governs how a subject can be meaningfully analysed and reasoned about. It also has an effect on how ideas are transformed into practice and are used to control the behaviour of others (Hall, 2001, p. 72). As such, discourses are argued to be associated with power relations that constrain and enable what individuals can think, say,

and do (Samra-Fredericks, 2005). In other words, ''People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does'' (Foucault, quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 187). Unlike some more radical approaches, this thesis shares a view according to which discourse is not reducible to just the linguistic components, but instead, discourse is also embedded in material practices (Fairclough, 2003; 2005). Thus, instead of seeing discourse as a series of statements with some coherence, we consider it to exist as a function of a complex set of practices that hold them in circulation (Mills, 2003, p. 54). Additionally, it is argued in this thesis that the causal powers of discourse are important but that their concrete effects are mediated through cognition and material practices (van Dijk, 1998, Fairclough, 2005).

2.6.2 Visualising business excellence awards through the circuit of practice

Social practices, according to Reckwitz (2002, p. 49–50), are a ''routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge''. In simple terms, practices are argued not to be isolated events or unique performances; instead, they are repeated at different times and places (Warde, 2005). In line with Reckwitz's definition of practice, two central arguments are made in conceptualising business award competitions in this thesis. First, business awards competitions are argued to be an organised pattern of activities that involve regular and repetitive routines. Second, business awards competitions are identified as activities comprising elements such as materials, meanings, and competencies that are actively integrated and linked over time to generate, sustain, and renew

the practice (Hargreaves, 2011). The material component of practice refers to the tangible entities in which objects are made. Competence, on the other hand, refers to the intelligibility, techniques, expertise, practical consciousness, deliberately cultivated skills, and shared understanding required to perform an activity, and lastly, meanings, which are the ideas, symbolic meanings, and aspirations underpinning an action (Shove et al., 2012, p. 14, pp. 24)- 29).

With regard to business awards, plaques, certificates, logos, and citations are the tangible entities that constitute the material element of the practice. Likewise, firms' award strategy, captivating storytelling skills, proper documentation, and general performance consist of the competence element. Additionally, the publicity from awards, the financial impact of business awards, and achieving credibility constitute the meanings that are actively linked together with the other elements that generate and sustain the practice of business awards competitions. The diagram below illustrates the linkage between these elements making up the practice of award competitions.

Fig.5.0 Business excellence awards visualised through the circuit of practice

tangible physical objects of
which event are formed.

Example :

▪ Citation plaques

▪ Certificates

▪ Logos

▪Citations

Material

Meaning

Business
awards
competitions

It refers to the ideas,
symbolic meanings, and
aspirations underpinning
an action.
Example:

▪ A way to taunt competitors

▪ A means to benchmark
firms' products or services

▪ A way to demonstrate
competence to regulators
and key stakeholders

Competence

Intelligibility, techniques, expertise practical
consciousness, deliberately cultivated skills
Example:

▪ The ability to tell a good story

▪ The capacity to provide the required
documentation for an award

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Confirmation of accolades, logos, and citations for award-winning firms can be argued to be a primary feature of business excellence awards events (Matten and Moon, 2020). As such, obtaining these symbolic elements is principal to the antecedent underlying firms' motives to enter and compete for awards (Pulendran, Speed, and Widing, 2000). Notably, many firms use their award winnings as a PR tool by printing and attaching these symbolic elements to their marketing materials, such as business cards, banners, websites, sales brochures, and adverts on social media platforms (Beck, 2015). For this reason, many firms do not want to be left behind regarding the opportunities business awards present. Therefore, many firms are encouraged by these prospects to compete for business awards, resulting in the surge of the phenomenon. Interestingly, this account makes the material element of business excellence award competitions a very important component within the link that makes up the practice, especially regarding the emergence and sustainability of the phenomenon. Admittedly, it can be argued that without these plaques, citations, and certificates, business excellence awards may not have achieved their significance in today's business operations (Matten and Moon, 2020).

On the other hand, the stiff competition for business excellence awards suggests that firms may have to establish a certain level of understanding and expertise to succeed in their award application processes (Gold, Malhotra, and Segars, 2001). The expertise here includes monitoring awards' openings and deadlines, identifying and presenting the required documentation needed to support an application, and writing appealing stories to prove to the judges why the firm deserves the award. Again, an important aspect of firms' competence lies in their award strategy and their ability to use their award entry or winnings as a resource to support their PR and marketing operations (Blackburn and Rosen, 1993). Generally, the

application processes for business excellence awards are cumbersome for many firms, especially due to the demands of other equally important duties and activities. As discussed already in this thesis, most firms shift these duties to third parties (award consultants) who coordinate and manage most firms' award entries. Generally, the competence of firms in these processes determines the success of their award entry (Gallus and Frey, 2016). In this regard, the competence element of the practice of business excellence awards can be argued to be characterised by intense competition because it is through a showcase of an exceptional level of competence that a company can beat its competitors to emerge as an award winner.

Finally, the competition for business awards, just as in any other practice, is generally motivated by various reasons. In the case of business awards, firms are mostly keen to compete to achieve an inspired purpose. Consequently, these purposes are underlined by the meanings that actors utilise to signal messages to competitors and other key stakeholders (Czinkota, Kaufmann, and Basile, 2014). For instance, getting a nomination or winning an award is a prestige that firms capitalise on to taunt their competitors through their communication mediums. In this case, firms display their award successes to show the public the number of times they have beaten their competitors in award competitions. The practice of taunting competitors with award achievements is similar to the ancient war practice whereby conquerors mounted their flags in their rivals' territories to signify their victory in and authority over that area henceforth (Baruönü, Örs, and Gürdal, 2012).

Additionally, firms use business excellence award competitions to benchmark their products or services. Most companies enter these competitions to compare the strength of their operations or products to those of others in their industry (Cetindamar and Kilitcioglu, 2013).

Therefore, award competitions' outcomes become a source of feedback to such firms to know where in their operations they should improve, and which practices they should maintain to stay competitive. Again, firms in industries with strict supervision may utilise their awards successes to create an impression to their regulators and other key stakeholders that they adhere to their operational standards (Jackson, 2010). For instance, winning a prestigious environmental award may suggest to the authorities that a firm operates within the standards of the regulations; as a result, this may influence the way regulators or authorities audit award-winning firms. On the other hand, many firms may enter awards to signal to investors that they are ahead of their competitors (Jann and Przepiorka, 2017). Thus, by putting themselves forward for and subsequently winning prestigious awards, firms exhibit to their potential clients that they are a solid investment moving forward.

In conclusion, the arguments above suggest that business awards competitions, when identified as social practices, are defined by an interdependent correlation between materials, competencies, and meanings, constituting the phenomenon's emergence, sustenance, and replication. On the other hand, the conceptualisation of social practices as an integration of these three elements suggests that within an environment, elements may exist without being actively linked to form a practice, or practices may have disintegrated because these links were not actively sustained (Reckwitz, 2002). In this case, this theoretical framework can be criticised for not discussing social actors' role in sustaining practices. Likewise, the prospects of existing practices in transforming and generating new competencies, meanings, and materialities are duly overlooked in this theoretical framework (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson, 2012). Nonetheless, the arguments made here can be applied to expand the understanding of

the nature of interdependences that constitute the practice of business awards competitions and what is entailed in keeping the practice together.

2.7 Chapter summary

The sections above have presented a comprehensive discussion on the composition of business excellence award competitions, the underlying motives behind the surge in business awards and the potential outcomes of firms that enter. The theories of legitimacy, signalling, and impression management were drawn upon to provide nuanced insight into an organisation's propensity to compete for business excellence awards. Further in this chapter, the discursive practice approach was drawn upon to demonstrate the theoretical logic underpinning the surge in business awards in organizing. In this vein, it is argued in this chapter that many interconnected elements come together over time to shape and form business awards as a social practice. Following the analysis and discussions in the various sections of this chapter, the thesis so far has made salient contributions to the literature on business awards. First, it is an argument in this chapter that firms benefit from associated unique possibilities of winning business excellence awards ranging from improvement in publicity, firm performance, and employee motivation. Again, it has been suggested that a nomination for or a win of a business excellence award is an endorsement of corporate products and services from a third-party entity which can change the social perception of award-winning firms. Finally, this chapter has developed an integrative framework to demonstrate how the interactions of different contextual factors can entice a firm to participate in a business award.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methodological approach that underpins the empirical inquiry. It starts with an overview of the empirical research context within which the empirical inquiry was conducted. The following section details the methodological approach adopted by the study and discusses the theoretical sampling strategy employed to recruit the study's participants. Next is a comprehensive discussion of the data collection and analysis. Finally, a discussion of the methodological limitations is presented, after which a summary of the chapter is presented.

3.1 Research context and setting

Business excellence awards (BEAs) are growing increasingly popular across all industries within the UK (Dale et al., 1999). Although official data on BEAs are scarce, figures suggest that the economic impact of business awards trips and events alone is more than £22 billion, owing to the industry's multifaceted nature and diversity (VisitBritain, 2021). In the UK, BEA programs have become a common means through which gatekeepers of industries and private bodies celebrate the success of individuals, teams, and businesses. In their efforts to recognise excellence, BEA organisers identify and engage with stakeholders, including potential nominees and other people who may influence nominees to get involved (Zott and Huy, 2007). These activities include promoting and advertising their award programs to attract nominees, often utilising multiple marketing channels, including social media,

billboards, and magazines, to reach out to potential nominees and the public (Ekici and Toksoz, 2021). However, other award programs, especially those organised by professional bodies, get the opportunity to advertise in industry publications, which are often available in both print and electronic format, giving them wider reach and credibility. In most instances, award organisers use eligibility criteria and award categories to restrict and target award nominees (Conke, 2022). For instance, some eligibility criteria require accomplishments to have occurred between a range of dates, while professional award programs may require a nominee to be a member of the awarding organisation where membership is possible or to become a member before the nomination closing date. In other instances, a nominee must be within a particular industry or sector for a minimum time before an entry is allowed (Botelho and Gertsberg, 2022). Regional BEA programmes may require nominees to be located within the boundaries of the region. On the other hand, the eligibility criteria may address nominees' past participation and not allow previous award winners to enter again. Alternatively, reentry may be allowed but only in a different category or with a different initiative, solution, or contribution. Some criteria include a timeframe in which entry is limited, so winners may not enter within three years of participating. To ensure that the right candidates have been selected, award organisers appoint judges from different backgrounds, such as leading industry practitioners, experts, academics, and sometimes, the event sponsors, to evaluate participants' submission documents (Wang et al., 2021). Based on the recommendations of the panel of judges, the award organisers then announce the nominees for the various categories, which is followed by the conferment ceremony. The conferment ceremony has become an important event in the corporate calendar where most businesses look forward to being rewarded and to socialising with other professionals from other firms (Arcodia and Reid,

2004). The UK business award programmes are characterised by modest ceremonies, regional banquets, parties, and large-scale events on a national and international scale (Gold, 2016).

Increasingly, BEA organisers and industry regulators use business awards as a means to achieve a wide range of objectives. For instance, professional bodies utilise BEA programmes to increase membership, as many of these bodies require participating firms to be a member of the association (Harcourt et al., 2021). Again, BEAs are a means for such bodies to give back to their members and position them as custodians of standards in their industry. BEA events have evolved into an important avenue for networking, knowledge production, and knowledge transfer for a large number of industry stakeholders (Setini et al., 2021). The events bring together colleagues from comparable businesses, professions, or interest groups to exchange ideas and information, as well as to just enjoy and celebrate their professional accomplishments (Rogers, 2013). By bringing together people from all industries, both inside and outside the UK, these events, in effect, contribute significantly to the economic development of the destinations where they take place. These economic gains are derived from the expenditures of both the organisers and attendees of such events. Beneficiaries of such financial gains are local suppliers of travel, shops, and hospitality services (Jones and Li, 2015). More often than not, business award events attract the top and middle management of companies with a high per capita value, which constitutes the high-yield end of the tourist sector. As Davidson and Hyde (2014) suggested, those attending business events generate a premium demand for hotel rooms, train and airline seats, and tables at restaurants, and their spending can extend farther into local stores, as well as entertainment and recreational facilities. In this regard, communities, event venue owners, and suppliers lobby and create a

compelling business case for award organisers to bring the events to their communities (Hoyle, 2016).

The majority of BEAs take place in towns and cities where the required infrastructure is mostly available for such ceremonies (Buhalis, 2000). Apart from the activities themselves, such locations typically present events with the possibility of side trips to notable sights and famous landmarks. Interestingly, there are a few exceptions to this rule, as not all events take place in metropolitan areas of the UK; instead, some events take place in resorts and wilderness areas, offering participants a more natural atmosphere to enjoy (Hawkins and Middleton, 2009). With a few notable exceptions, organisers of business awards in the UK exercise considerable prudence in selecting their venues. For instance, the location of an award ceremony may vary from year to year, depending on the anticipated attendance and the availability of a suitable venue. On the other hand, some event organisers move their events to different locations to appeal to potential attendees. In terms of the events schedule, the majority of regional business awards ceremonies take place on weekdays, which may be a result of the high cost of holding events at weekends. Again, with regard to periods and times within the year, the majority of corporate awards programmes in the UK take place throughout the autumn and spring seasons rather than during the summer (Heo et al., 2022), when the bulk of potential participants may be unable to attend due to personal holiday arrangements.

3.1.2 Empirical research focus: The Southwest of England

This study's contribution is developed in the context of BEAs in the southwest of England. The southwest of England has one of the highest business density rates of 1,192 businesses per 10,000 resident adults in the UK, second only to London (1,563), with over 546,255 businesses (Gradsouthwest, 2018). Bristol, which is ranked as the second most affluent large city in England after London (Tallon, 2007), contributes a quarter of the region's economy, with the neighbouring counties of Somerset, Gloucestershire, and Wiltshire accounting for another quarter (Eurostat and Office for National Statistics, 2018).

The region's economy has traditionally been based on marine trade, particularly the importation of tobacco and the transatlantic slave trade (Lobel et al., 1975). However, since the early twentieth century, the aeronautics industry has taken over as the foundation of the region's economy, with businesses such as Airbus UK and Rolls-Royce contributing to this transformation (Parkinson et al., 2004). The region's gross added value (GTA) breaks down as 69.9 % service industry, followed by the production industry at 28.1 %, and agriculture at 2.0 % (Eurostat and Office for National Statistics, 2018). In comparison to the UK average, the southwest region has a marginally larger share of the production industries and a slightly lower proportion of service industries. Although there are no exact data on the number of business excellence awards schemes in the region or the number of firms that enter and compete for awards annually, the figures above show that there may be considerable competition among businesses to receive recognition due to a large number of businesses within the region seeking to stand out from a crowded market.

3.1.3 The Zibit business excellence awards

The Zibit business excellence awards programme was established by Mediaclash in 2018 to recognise and reward businesses, charities, and individuals with outstanding performances within their industries or sectors (Bristol Life, 2021). Nominations are strictly restricted to the southwest region of England, where the award has become one of the most renowned and competitive award programmes. It celebrates extraordinary achievements and meritorious contributions that benefit the southwest region in fields as diverse as tourism, the arts, community service, commerce, and philanthropy. Owing to the increasing number of entries, the emergence of new industries, and a fast-changing business landscape, the organisers have added new categories to the awards programme, from the 18 categories in its maiden edition to 22 categories currently (Bristol Life, 2021).

Nomination to the programme starts in January and ends in April. Most of these entries are self-nominations by competing firms or through award consultants, except for noncompetitive categories such as Charity of the Year, which is by recommendations from third parties. As a means to reach more participants and promote the award program, the organisers advertise the events from nominations to posting the event on mainstream media, social media, and their own Bristol Life magazine, thereby making it a popular and renowned award programme in the region (Bristol Life, 2021). Over the years, the award programme has gained repute and has attracted landmark sponsorship, such as Vodaphone UK, Lexus, BMW, Lloyds Bank, and Brunel Insurance Brokers (Bristol Life, 2021). It is not surprising that over 800 businesses entered the award despite the challenges posed to the business award industry by the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.1.4 The Xpac business excellence awards

The Xpac business excellence awards programme was established by the Great British Expo (a southwest-based corporate event organiser) in 2022 with an emphasis on recognising businesses and charities across the UK. Though in its maiden stages, the award is regarded by many industry players as competitive and prestigious. Given annually by the Great British Expo, the awards are nationwide recognition of excellence in corporate achievements and outstanding voluntary contributions to societal issues by individuals and charity organisations. The award entries' nominations are announced in January and closed in the early weeks of March. Due to the organiser's wide network with businesses across the UK through their regional business expos, many of their nominees are informed through emails to invite them for nominations. Aside from this medium, the organisers also utilise traditional media, such as social media, their website, and radio advertisements, to call for nominations. In its maiden event, the organisers boasted entries from over 1,600 firms, which were further trimmed to select potential nominees for the 16 categories these firms were competing in.

An award panel of seven judges goes through the nominations to select the potential finalists. This decision is then communicated to these nominees formally through emails and informally through publication on the award website and social media. The various category winners are awarded a copy of a wooden plaque, which depicts strength and resilience rendered in an art deco style. The Zibit award was first presented in April 2022 at a private dinner hosted in Reading, UK, in what would become known as the first edition of the awards. Table 3.0 is a summary of the BEAs studied.

Table 3.0 Summary of BEAs

	Zibit Award	Xpac Award
Background	Established in 2018	Established in 2022
Coverage	Southwest region of England	Whole of UK
Entry process	Entries via self-nomination	Entries via self-nomination
Number of entries	Over 800 SMEs from the Greater South-West region entered the award in 2021	Over 1,600 SMEs from all over the United Kingdom entered the award in 2022
Award categories	Twenty-two (22) award categories in 2021	Sixteen (16) award categories
Judges	Independent panel of ten (10) expert judges	Independent panel of seven (7) judges

3.2 Research approach

3.2.1 Explorative qualitative design

This study rests on the subjective (interpretative) view of research and contends that reality is socially constructed and is related to personal issues, motives, emotions and perceptions (Gray, 2004). In this perceptive, individuals are argued to be the architect of their social world, where they create their realities and meanings to it (Denzin, 2002). However, in constructing these meanings, individuals from different backgrounds and ideas turn to create their personal sense of truth (Crotty, 2003). The varying meanings individuals ascribe to their social realities make daily social interaction complex to be understood. Hence understanding this requires interaction with those involved in such activities to generate data and extract underlying patterns and order from their social lives (Morgan, 1980; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This means that the participant's perspective is explored rather than the researcher's.

In this study, given the paucity of research into BEA, an exploratory qualitative research approach was adopted for the study (Creswell et al., 2011). As suggested by Saunders et al. (2007), explorative research is conducted when little is known about a phenomenon and when it involves a problem that has not been clearly defined. Emphasising the actions and situated practices of firms that compete for BEAs, the explorative qualitative design presented a valuable understanding of and insight into their subjective experiences of BEAs and how they make meanings of such experiences. According to Hong et al. (2017), past experiences and the perspectives of study participants can be used to construct meaning. These meanings were imperative in developing a conceptual understanding of the underlying motives behind the surge in business awards competitions and the resulting entries from firms. In this light, the

study did not intend to provide definite and final solutions to the research questions but rather to provide an in-depth exploration of the question offered by respondents' perspectives.

3.2.2 Qualitative research methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted in this study, as the fundamental objective of the study is to capture research participants' subjective beliefs and thoughts about their experiences with BEAs (Bellamy et al., 2016). Focusing on participants' personal perspectives and opinions (Marshall and Rossman, 2014), the qualitative approach presents a standard method for understanding the subjective experiences of the study's respondents. In this regard, social reality does not exist in any concrete sense but is the product of individuals' subjective and inter-subjective experiences (Morgan, 1980, p.608), and these experiences people have are what produce authentic meanings of social life. The logic underpinning this approach, therefore, is to interact with those involved in the research, to generate data, and to extract underlying patterns and order from their social lives (Morgan, 1980; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As well as being apt for answering questions related to understanding and explaining human experiences, qualitative research provides the flexibility and framework required to explore human perspectives and opinions and utilise the information as research (Hong et al., 2017). Flexibility is necessary for this study because the perspectives and mentalities for entering BEAs may vary between firms (Hong et al., 2017). Therefore, the qualitative approach provided an effective and data-rich methodology with which to collect data from the respondents systematically and robustly (Burke et al., 2019). Following the qualitative approach, participants were invited to share their experiences with BEAs, from the preparations towards the competitions, the process they went through, and the perceived

value they aimed to or had captured from participating in BEAs. Thus, the study made sense of how firms enter BEAs, the underlying motives behind those entries, and the possible outcomes firms can capture from participating in BEAs through qualitative methods and procedures.

3.3.1 Theoretical sampling strategy

Appropriate to the chosen research design, a purposive sampling strategy was drawn to recruit participants for the study. Primarily, the purposive sampling strategy allows a deliberate selection of respondents due to the respondents' qualities or their insight into the topic under study (Pacho, 2015). Guided by this principle, managers selected from the case study award programmes were deemed suitable for this study due to their experience and well-informed understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the choice of selecting managers of firms was based on the assumption that they were the right individuals within firms in that they could freely articulate, express, and reflectively convey their experiences and opinions about a firm's award entries. However, due to a large number of potential participants, the following further criteria were set to narrow down the study's respondents among the many who met the following criteria.

1. The participant should be a manager in a firm that entered the zibit awards and the xpac awards in 2021/2022.

2. The participant should have been involved in making the firm's decision to enter the award and be actively involved in preparing the firm's entry.

3. The participant's firm must have successfully received a nomination or won a category they competed in.

4. The participant should have attended the zibit awards and xpac awards event, where the awards were conferred.

The established criteria served as a guide for identifying the appropriate participants to answer the research questions. This ensured that the data collected would be rich and relevant to the fundamental issues that the study sought to explore.

3.3 Participant recruitment

The first stage of the recruitment process began with gaining ethical approval. Following this, organisers of the case study award programmes were contacted through phone calls and emails to seek their permission to attend their award event as an observer and to use their platform to interact with the nominees and winners for a possible interview. After a series of corresponding emails, access was given by the organisers with explicitly stated conditions under which the guest attending the event could be approached. Some of these conditions meant that guests coming to the event were not to be approached when the main ceremony was underway to avoid disrupting the programme. Fortunately, the event had a break-in session for socialisation that gave guests ample time to interact. This window presented the researcher with a valuable opportunity to interact with most of the high-profile firms' representatives who attended the event and to establish a good rapport with them before the interview. Issues discussed through these interactions included the researcher's background as a doctoral student, the study's title, and what the study seeks to achieve. Fortunately, most of the guests at the event were interested and agreed to participate in the interview, and many of them willingly gave out their company business cards, while others penned their email and their LinkedIn contacts in a diary which the researcher presented to them.

Following this, official invitations were sent to the contacts that were made during the event through their email and LinkedIn addresses. The invitation included an outline of the study, an explanation of the ethical considerations, and a list of who was specifically eligible to participate. The recruitment process continued until a saturation point was reached, whereupon the data collected were deemed extensive enough to have covered the broad experiences and insights of respondents with regard to BEA competitions (Hardesty et al., 2019; Pratt, 2017; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Pratt, 2017; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). Although the number of respondents participating in the study was not expansive enough to generalise the research findings, attempts were made to include firms from a variety of sectors and industries in order to obtain a representative sample of UK firms that participate in BEAs. At the end of the recruitment process, some interesting trends were observed from the poll respondents who had been selected. More respondents from the information technology and legal fields chose not to participate than from any other group or industry, and three times as many women as males withdrew from this group. Due to the fact that men had a higher number of delineations than women in general, it is impossible to determine if the decision to opt out of the interview was motivated by gender. However, one explanation for some of these refusals could be the difficulties associated with working remotely due to Covid constraints and regulations.

Notably, a few respondents did not sign the informed consent form but verbally consented to the interview and subsequent recordings on the day of the interview. This was mostly because the interviews were conducted online, which made it difficult for some respondents to establish a computerised signature for the letters they had received. Additionally, despite being offered the opportunity, some respondents chose not to receive the study's findings and

recommendations upon completion. A snapshot of the recruited respondents indicates that the vast majority of the study participants joined the award programme through their own internal arrangements; as a result, these firms took full responsibility for their entire award process. Surprisingly, when questioned about award consultants and their role in their firm's award processes, the vast majority of respondents indicated they were unfamiliar with them or their role in firm's award processes. On the other hand, the few who participated via award consultants rationalised their entry as a cost-effective and time-saving measure. It is also interesting to know that the majority of the firms interviewed were SMEs from small-scale industries. This was not surprising, as all the participants were recruited from a regional awards programme. Most of the participants also occupied key positions in their organisation, thus meeting the established selection criteria set earlier.

Against the backdrop that all such participants had been approached during the award events concerning their consent for the interviews, the participants who accepted the invitation to be interviewed were contacted via telephone or email to arrange the interview date and time. Of the 308 contacts that were made during the events, 216 responded. Eventually, 68 agreed to take part in the interview. Of these. 23 who had agreed to take part in the interview later declined due to other commitments and reasons. Such issues included but were not limited to busy work commitments, family issues, and holidays. On the other hand, some participants also refused to participate but chose not to give any explanation. Overall, the final participants included people from different industries, ethnic groups, and ages, and both men and women were also fairly well represented in the study. In a total of 45 interviews, the number of males was 30, constituting 66%, while there were 15 females, constituting 34%. The age of the interview participants ranged from 29 years to 54 years, giving an average of 41 years. The

table below (Table 3.1) provides an overview of the participants recruited. To maintain confidentiality, the names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms. Overall, it is observed that a larger number of study participants within the study's time-bracketing strategy were from the service industries, followed by productive industries, with legal firms being the least represented industry.

Table 4.0 Biographical sketch of participants

No.	Name, Age (gender)	Position (years)	Venture type Nature of business [SIC code]	Awarding Scheme	Award category(ies) entered	Award entry preparation	Award outcome	Past awards experience
1	Jon 51 (M)	Financial Planner (8)	Financial services [66300-Fund management activities]	Zibit awards	Financial service of the year	Internal preparation.	Nominee	2 awards won in past years
2	Jane 42 (F)	Director (5)	Food and drinks [10720-Manufacture of rusks and biscuits; manufacture of preserved pastry goods and cakes]	Zibit awards	Food and drinks producer of the year	Internal Preparation	Nominee	First attempt
3	Alen 36 (F)	Accountant (4)	Business services [62012-Business & domestic software development	Zibit awards	Business Service of the Year	Internal Preparation	winner	First attempt
4	Tim 42 (M)	Manager (7)	Health care [74909-otherprofessional scientific & technical activities n.e.c.]	Xpac awards UK	Outstanding contribution to the community	Internal preparation	Nominee	10+ awards won in past years
5	Smit 38 (M)	Chief Executive (4)	Art [90010-Performing arts]	Zibit awards	Arts	Internal preparation	Nominee	Won 1 in the past years
6	Ama 40 (F)	Managing Director (2)	Financial services [64303-Activities of venture & development capital companies	Zibit awards	Financial service of the year	Internal preparation	Winner	Won 3 in the past years
7	Helen 32 (M)	Manager (3)	Leisure and accommodations [55209-Other holiday & other collective accommodation]	Xpac awards UK	leisure and tourism award/Business of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Won two in the past years

8	Jeff 48 (M)	Manager (3)	Technical consultancy [74100-specialised design activities]	Xpac awards UK	Innovator of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	8+Nomination/wins in the past years
9	Jake 34 (M)	Manager (5)	IT [74909 Other professional, scientific, & technical activities n.e.c.]	Zibit awards	Technology and innovation company of the Year	Award consultants	Winner	Won two in the past years
10	Toby 41 (M)	Manager (2)	Sportswear [13990- Manufacture of other textiles n.e.c.]	Xpac awards UK	SME of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Won 3 in the past years
11	Phil 47 (M)	Manager (4)	Engineering [71121-Engineering design activities for industrial process & production	Xpac awards UK	Innovator of the Year	Internal preparation	Winner	Won 4 in the past years
12	Claire 39 (M)	Manager (8)	IT [74909 Other professional, scientific and technical activities n.e.c.]	Xpac awards UK	Innovator of the Year	Award consultants	Nominees	Won two in the past years
13	Dani 29 (M)	Manager (mkting) (3)	Retailer [47290Other retail sale of food in specialised stores]	Zibit awards	Retailer of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
14	Drew 53 (M)	Senior Manager (5)	Restaurant and bar [56102-Unlicenced restaurants and cafes]	Zibit awards	Leisure and Tourism of the Year	Internal preparation	Winner	First award in 3 attempts
15	Chris 45 (M)	Manager (2)	Mortgage broker [68320-Management of real estate on a fee or contract basis]	Zibit awards	New business of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
16	Carr 32 (M)	Manager (3)	Wholesaler [46310-Wholesale of fruit and vegetables]	Xpac awards UK	Business of the Year/Employer of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	5 nominations in the past years

17	Steve 48 (M)	Manager (7)	Car dealings [52290-Other transportation support activities]	Xpac awards UK	Employer of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Two awards in the past years
18	Frank 62 (M)	Manager (28)	Hotel and other accommodations [55100-Hotels & similar accommodation]	Zibit awards	Leisure and Tourism of the Year	Award consultant	Nominee	7 awards in the past years
19	Chloe 38 (F)	Manager (6)	Arts and entertainment [93290-Other amusement and recreation activities n.e.c.]	Xpac awards UK	The Leisure and Tourism Award	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
20	Sarah 43 (F)	Manager (2)	Residential renovation [43390-Other building completion & finishing]	Zibit awards	Home and Interior of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
21	Fred 51 (M)	Manager (13)	Wealth and investment management [66300-Fund management activities]	Xpac awards	SME of the year	Internal preparations	Nominee	First attempt
22	Lucy 35 (F)	Manager (7)	Mind and body coaching [86900-Other human health activities]	Zibit awards	Health and wellbeing company of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
23	Laura 42 (F)	Manager (5)	Administrative & support service activities [79120-Tour operator activities]	Xpac awards	Leisure and Tourism of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	6 nominations in the past years
24	Noble 51 (F)	Director (11)	Property financial consultancy [64922-Activities of mortgage finance companies]	Zibit awards	Financial Services of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Second attempt
25	Gary 39 (M)	Manager (4)	Information and communication [62020-Information technology consultancy activities]	Xpac awards UK	Employer of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Two wins in the past years

26	Fiona 36 (F)	Manager (2)	Administrative and support service activities [9909-Other reservation service activities n.e.c.]	Xpac awards UK	New start-up of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Two nominations in the past years
27	Eades 34 (M)	Manager (4)	Administrative and project support services [70229-Management consultancy activities other than financial management]	Xpac awards UK	Innovator of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
28	Hill 31 (F)	Owner (6)	Salon and spar [96020-Hairdressing and other beauty treatment]	Zibit awards	Hair and beauty salon of the Year	Internal preparation	Winner	Second attempt
29	Perry 46 (M)	Manager (7)	Supplier of artisan gift boxes [47990-Other retail sale not in stores, stalls or markets]	Zibit awards	Retail of the year	Award consultant	Winner	Won 3 in the past years
30	Ford 51 (M)	Manager (13)	Accommodation and catering activities [56210-Event catering activities]	Xpac awards UK	Employer of the year	Internal preparation	Winner	8 awards in the past years
31	Smart 32 (M)	Director (4)	Event organisers [90010-Performing arts]	Zibit awards	Event of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
32	Bans 47 (M)	Manager (6)	Financial technology services [62090-Other information technology service activities]	Xpac awards UK	SME of the year	Award consultant	Winner	14 awards and nominations
33	Baker 54 (M)	Manager (9)	Digital agency [59140- Motion picture projection activities]	Zibit awards	Business Services of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	2 wins in the past years
34	Nash 32 (F)	Manager (5)	I.T service provider [62090-Other information technology service activities]	Xpac awards UK	Business of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Over 20 awards and nominations

35	Freke 43 (M)	Manager (8)	Tour guide activities [79120-Tour operator activities]	Xpac awards UK	The Leisure and tourism awards	Internal preparation	Nominee	6 nominations in the past years
36	Taz 39 (F)	Manager (5)	I.T and engineering service provider [71121-Engineering design activities for industrial process & production]	Xpac awards UK	Innovator of the Year award	Internal preparation	Nominee	3 awards in the past years
37	Kane 36 (M)	Manager (3)	Bar [56302-Public houses and bars]	Zibit awards	Bar of the year	Internal preparation	Winner	First attempt
38	Jane 43 (F)	Manager (7)	Café [56103-Take-away food shops & mobile food stands]	Zibit awards	Café of the Year	Internal entry	Nominee	First attempt
39	Pedro 41 (M)	Manager (1)	E-commerce marketing service[70210-Public relations and communications activities]	Xpac awards UK	New start-up of the year	Internal entry	Nominee	2 nominations in the past years
40	Ann 35 (F)	Manager (3)	Fashion designer [74100-specialised design activities]	Xpac awards UK	New start-up of the year	Internal entry	Nominee	First attempt
41	Philip 38 (M)	Manager (2)	Theatre [90020-Support activities to performing arts]	Zibit awards	Creative Company of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Won 1 in the past 3 years
42	Joice 40 (F)	Owner (11)	Hair salon [96020-Hairdressing and other beauty treatment]	Zibit awards	Hair and beauty salon of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Second attempt
43	Mark 47 (M)	Manager (9)	Non-alcoholic spirit producer [28930-Manufacture of machinery for food, beverage and tobacco processing	Zibit awards	Food and drink producer of the year	Internal preparation	Nominee	First attempt
44	James 39 (M)	Manager (6)	Producers of furniture [31090-Manufacture of other furniture]	Zibit awards	Home and interior company of the Year	Internal preparation	Nominee	Won 1 in the past 3 years

| 45 | Vera 42 (F) | Manager (4) | Brand and digital support services [73120-Media representation services] | Xpac awards UK | Business of the year | Internal preparation | Nominee | First attempt |

Note(s): *A SIC code is a Standard Industrial Classification code used by the UK Companies House to classify the type of economic activity in which a company or other type of business is engaged.

3.4 Timelines and procedures

3.4.1 Preparations for the research interviews

After a successful negotiation for access from the various organisational gatekeepers, the researcher had to plan and implement measures to ensure smooth data collection. This was an important stage of the data collection process, mainly due to the data collection approach adopted in this thesis. As indicated earlier, data for this thesis were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic; as a result, a face-to-face interview was not possible due to safety reasons and movement restrictions during that time. Hence, online interviews appeared to be an obvious choice for the data collection. Despite the numerous benefits of using online interviews for data collection, it was imperative to scrupulously plan how the interviews would be conducted and to become familiar with means to administer most of the software that would be utilised to organise meetings online in order to avoid a situation where a participant may choose an online application the researcher was not accustomed to. As a consequence, the researcher signed up for a number of these applications (Zoom, Google Teams, and Skype, to mention a few) to become familiar with using them. This idea proved beneficial when one of the pilot practices on how to run these applications revealed that a standard subscription does not allow a meeting time of more than 40 minutes; therefore, a premium subscription was required to conduct interviews lasting longer than 40 minutes.

Further, a recording device on which data collected from the interview would be stored temporarily before transcription was acquired in the preparation period. This device was also tested several times to check its effectiveness to avoid an interview being lost due to a faulty device or to it not being recorded properly due to a fault with the device.

Again, the supervisor of this thesis went through the designed interview questions with the researcher to ensure the data collected from the participants reflected the salient areas of the study and checked for grammatical and typographical errors. After corrections had been made, the designed interview questions were finally clearer for participants to understand and were arranged in a manner that would make the interviews interesting and engaging.

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

As it is an effective means of collecting qualitative data, the semi-structured interview was employed as the primary tool for collecting data in this thesis. In tandem with best practices, the researcher scheduled all the interviews with respondents in advance to give them adequate time to prepare for the interview. This was necessary, as most respondents were very busy during the pandemic period, where the majority were working from home. Each participant was requested to sign a consent form (see Appendix B) before an interview session began. In order to maintain confidentiality, the researcher acted as the only interviewer and created an interview documentation sheet before each interview. On the documentation sheet, the respondent's biographical information, the medium through which the interview was done, and the date and time of the interview were documented. This is consistent with the argument of Flick (2017), who suggested that when conducting interviews, documentation sheets should be utilised to capture the context and conditions under which the data were collected. Participants were notified of the official commencement of the interview and that recording would take place once their consent had been obtained and they had agreed to participate.

On most occasions, the interviews were started with informal conversations to establish a good rapport with the respondent, followed by the main body of the interview, where the respondent's consent for it to be recorded was sought. In an attempt to increase the comparability of the data, the interview questions were phrased and asked in a consistent manner throughout the interview process. Only in situations where participants appeared to have difficulty answering a question or did not provide a complete response were the interviews interrupted to obtain clarity regarding those answers. Despite efforts to prevent the use of leading questions as much as possible, some bias appears to be unavoidable at times. The environment in which the interviews were conducted was not always ideal, but this was out of the researcher's control. The online interviews posed challenges such as weak internet signals, technical hitches with microphones, and respondents' inability to use the medium through which their interview was conducted. On one occasion, a respondent's child disrupted the interview, so the interview had to be rescheduled to another time at the respondent's convenience. Notwithstanding these challenges, the interviews were done professionally with excellent recordings. On most occasions, respondents appeared to be a little self-conscious at the beginning of the interview, but they seemed to be more relaxed after a few minutes. The bond between the researcher and respondents was cordial, with most of them being forthright and honest in their responses. In terms of the general understanding of the interview questions, the vast majority of participants appeared to have few difficulties with the wording.

However, some participants sought additional clarification or confirmation that they had fully understood a question, particularly at the outset of the interview sessions. On the other hand, some respondents' reservations about clarifications can be attributed to their uneasiness and

sense of self-consciousness in the early stage of the interview. Various aspects of the interviews were met with diverse reactions from different people. For instance, some respondents felt more comfortable speaking about the motives behind their business awards entries, while a few were not very open about this issue. To develop a deep insight into what firms say they do with their award success/nominations and what they actually do when they achieve this goal, the researcher purposefully designed the interview questions to capture respondents' experiences and knowledge and the meanings they ascribe to it. As a general standard for collecting data, questions regarding respondents' biographic information were asked at the beginning of the interview. This was then followed by the second segment of questions, which attempted to get a general insight into what the respondents say they do with their award-winnings/nominations. At this juncture, the respondents shared their experience with business awards, the driving motives behind their decisions to enter these competitions, how they collectively discuss and select which award scheme and category to enter, and other relevant questions.

Following this section was the third set of questions, which focused on how business awards are labelled and identified within the discourse of certification and accreditation in contemporary organising. Here, respondents were asked about how rigorous the award entry process is compared to accreditation and certification programmes, the impact of business awards on consumer trust, how the stiff competition in business awards improves firms' operational standards, and other relevant questions. The final set of questions focused on the perceived values organisations captures from entering or winning a business award. The questions in this section were designed to capture what firms actually do with their award success/nominations. Based on the experience with earlier interviews, additional questions

were added to the initial schedule of questions to capture more areas relevant to the study, which the original draft had overlooked. On some occasions, not all the questions were asked as planned initially; some questions were posed in a different order from the original draft in order to interact more effectively with the participants. Prior knowledge of the selected participants' backgrounds and what their organisations do was collected by looking at the websites of the selected organisations and reviewing publicly available material related to the organisations on the Internet. While this alone was not enough to generate trust between the interviewer and the participants, the researcher's attendance at some of the awards events helped to generate a significant level of rapport between them as interviewer and the interviewee through which a degree of trust was established. This significantly affected the depth of insights respondents shared during the interview.

3.4.3 Field notes and documentation

A research diary and notes were maintained throughout the data collection processes to ensure there was a critical reflection against personal bias in the interpretation of the data (Englander, 2012; Flick, 2014; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This was, without a doubt, an effective method for increasing credibility. The diary provided a detailed record of the researcher's personal ideas, questions, thoughts, and insights that surfaced during the research and became a vital part of the data collection and analysis process later. Likewise, the diary functioned as a record of the research patterns and activities that took place throughout the data collection process; these were then presented in a way that could be easily reviewed and referred to later on during the data analysis stage (Maxwell, 2005). This was

done in line with Bogdan and Biklen's (1982) suggestions for keeping well-organised field notes. The date and time of the interview as well as the working title for the notes were recorded on the first page of each set of the notes. The field notes captured a range of issues, including specific experiences recounted by participants, a snapshot of emerging themes, points of clarification, and any links discovered between or among participants' perceptions (Bogdan and Biklin, 1982).

Additionally, the field notes included remarks about the participant's opinion and direct comments deemed useful to guide the interpretation of the data. Such remarks were highlighted in red in order to facilitate their retrieval throughout data analysis. Along with field notes, engagement with the relevant literature was maintained throughout the data-gathering process to guide and enhance the data-collection process (Tuckett, 2005).

3.4.4 Data validity and reliability

To help determine the objectivity of this study, the concept of reliability and validity were adopted as relevant approaches to measuring the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Morse et al., 2002). For instance, adhering to the reliability procedure ensured consistency, meaning the findings could be replicated in different contexts (Healy and Perry, 2000). On the other hand, the validity procedure ensured that the findings accurately reflect the participants' actual experiences with BEAs (Sousa, 2014). To achieve a high level of validity, Dornyei (2007) asserts that a study could consider employing multiple research methods, identifying research bias, or allowing participants to provide feedback on the findings to ensure that what they meant during the interview truly is reflected in the findings. However, in this study, in an

effort to increase validity, additional questions were asked when a participant's response lacked clarity to ensure that their responses were not misunderstood to eliminate the possibility of data misinterpretation. This approach to validity is consistent with the arguments of (Morse, 2015), who assert that validity in qualitative research can be attained by obtaining genuine, extensive, and well-formulated responses from participants.

Further to the validity measures, the study employed case study protocols such as documentation of procedures and the development of a database to strengthen the reliability of the finding. Yin (2009) asserts that upholding this sequence of proof allows other researchers to replicate the same instrument of data collection and analysis of a study in a different context. Consequently, this chapter describes in detail the process of gathering data, the participants' biographical sketch, and the interview protocols employed in this study. In addition, all interview questions are presented in Appendix 4. to allow similar studies to reach comparable results in different contexts.

3.4.5 Ethics

Qualitative research presents the opportunity to gather data by uncovering the emotions and feelings of respondents regarding a phenomenon, which in essence, makes the approach more intrusive (Dornyei, 2007). As such, ethical considerations were put in place early in the design of the research to safeguard both the prospective respondents and the researcher. To begin the empirical inquiry, ethical approval was acquired for the study from the Brunel University Ethics Board. Consequently, all recruited participants were approached and interviewed in accordance with the ethical procedures stipulated by the Brunel Ethics Committee. Thus, as soon as they agreed to participate in the study, participants were provided with the study

information sheet and consent form before the interviews commenced. The information sheets and consent forms guided the respondents to know what they could or could not say during the interview. For instance, they were made aware that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

Additionally, it was brought to their attention that they were under no obligation to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. Prior to the interview, participants were supplied with a basic description of the subject to be discussed, an idea of the type of information required of them, the rationale for conducting the research, and an indication of how the information they provided would be utilised. Participants were also encouraged to express any questions or concerns during the study, and it was stressed to them that they were under no obligation to divulge any element of their professional or personal lives that they did not choose to. As a result of the interview instrument adopted in this study (online interviews), participants' information and consent forms were provided online to participants, with the opportunity to decline to participate or choose to withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse consequences. Appendix B contains participant information and a consent form.

The recruited participants were also assured that their identity and confidentiality would be protected. This was done by using pseudonyms for individual participants across all written material, including field notes. However, participants were informed that roles within organisations would be specified, as the research necessitated getting a rich insight into competent participants' opinions with regard to their firm's award process and their experiences of such endeavours. The researcher's field notes were stored on a password-protected PC connected to a secure network that was available only to the researcher.

3.5 Data analysis and interpretation

3.5.1 Overview of approach

Analysing qualitative data is a multi-step process that includes data reduction, data visualisation, and conclusion drawing/validation (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.10). Generally, the nature of qualitative analysis is rooted in the research design, the nature of the research gap and objectives, and the methodological ideas derived from the related literature (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The study analysis sought to capture from the dataset the motives underlying firms' decision to compete for business awards and also to obtain an understanding of how firms give meaning to their award success. As a result, an evolved grounded theory technique was adopted as a suitable data analytical approach to expand on current theory by utilising fresh insights anchored in evidence rather than a priori (Saunders et al., 2009; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006; Michael Myers, 2010). This technique (Glaser, 1965) comes from a phenomenological perspective and is designed to generate substantive or formal theory by means of a "well-codified set of propositions or in a flowing text of theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties" (Glaser, 1965).

In essence, this analytical approach was not applied in its pure form to the data in this study, given that the method generally utilises an open and subsequent theoretical sampling to ensure maximum variance while making sure that every emerging category is grounded in data without preconceptions (Hallberg, 2006). However, in the case of this study, the literature review that was conducted prior to the empirical fieldwork revealed some theoretical explanations for the motive behind firms' award entries. As a result, a general understanding

of the relevant information to look for in the dataset was predefined; however, the analysis was left open to the possibility of discovering new information from the data (Suddaby, 2006).

A constant comparison process began at the outset of the data generation process. This was accomplished by starting with a small set of data, generating emerging categories through the coding technique, adding more data, disputing or altering categories, and switching back and forth from theory to data. The process aided in understanding and making sense of the massive volume of data (Saunders et al., 2009). Comparatively, the constant comparison method is not a rigidly standardised technique (Suddaby, 2006) but rather one that requires the researcher to use their imagination (Weick, 1989). As a result, it is a unique process that cannot be effectively explained or generalised. During the course of this analysis, the three key stages in coding, that is, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, were employed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

3.5.2 Stage 1: Recognising first-order codes (open coding)

The study adopted the open coding technique as an initial step to get a detailed understanding of the data gathered (Charmaz 2006). This entailed looking at the data at a macro level. In this phase, all the data were organised in a meaningful and methodical manner to identify important and interesting information that may be valuable to enrich the thesis findings (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). After the researcher was familiarised with the data, the actual coding processes commenced, which involved assigning descriptive names to the selected information within the data to form categories. This was done manually and in an analytical manner by using the data collected through the semi-structured interviews as a starting point

to develop codes, patterns, categories, themes, and subthemes within the data set. These selected categories consisted of one or more lines within the textual data that had smaller but significant narratives within the broader data. The process aided in breaking down large amounts of data into manageable fragments of information (Creswell and Poth, 2016). It required thorough analysis and constant review of the interview transcripts, and, when necessary, individual interview summary notes were referred to for contextual understanding of the data. In this way, a large number of codes were identified. The majority of these codes were composed of the respondents' spoken words and sentences, making them descriptive rather than analytical. For instance, some of the initial codes that emerged from the open coding process were promotional and advertising, use of communication media to improve organisational visibility, easy entry into new markets, and the possibility of generating new business opportunities through BEA competitions. Once all the first concepts were examined, the codes were constantly compared to each other to identify recurring themes based on their identified similarities and connections. These themes became prime candidates for a set of stable and common categories, which linked a number of associated codes. This process is known as axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), and it relies on a synthetic technique of making connections between subcategories to core categories to construct a more comprehensive scheme. In this thesis, using computer software to analyse data was avoided; as a result, all the coding processes were carried out manually, even though the process was tedious and slow.

3.5.3 Stage 2: Forming second-order themes

The second stage of analysis began with a systematic grouping of first-order concepts extracted from the transcribed material during the open coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The data reduction procedure advanced to a higher level of conceptualisation at this phase in the study. This was accomplished by scanning the emerging cluster of concepts for possible linkages and differences in how firms conceptualise their BEAs experience and assigning them a name that reflected the primary concepts within the emerging categories. In addition, the transcribed interviews were rigorously analysed to determine whether these notions were important and fit well within the relevant categories or whether additional data were required to enhance, justify, and explain the linkages (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For instance, a link could be seen between almost all the categories that referred to the mentalities underlying firms' BEAs entries and the potential outcomes from competing. In order to explore these concepts further, the transcribed data and the interview diary were revisited to understand the contextual reasons why these issues were important for the respondents in entering BEAs.

While comparing the relationships between the first other concepts, the suggestion by Scott (2008) of using an interrogative style, which he refers to as a 'conditional relationship guide', was adopted in this thesis to facilitate the axial coding process. This process involved delving into each category to establish the potential relationships by the use of relational questions, such as what, when, where, and with what consequence, in order to gain a better understanding of each category and its link to other categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In other words, the research questions were utilised to explore and develop the categories by identifying the links between the emerging concepts and their theoretical underpinnings. For

instance, the first research question aided in identifying, within the first order codes, the conditions that induce firms to enter BEAs which the evidence suggests having strong underpinnings to how the material elements constituting BEAs may influence the surge in firms competing in these competitions. The second research question particularly aided in comprehending the context in which the phenomenon exists, recognising the actions/strategies that firms use when approaching BEA competitions, which also indicates the competencies firms draw on to succeed in these competitions, and finally the third research question aided, the study in identifying the outcomes that emerge as a result of firms entering or winning a BEA, which indicates the meanings firms attach to their BEA fortunes (See appendix 5.0). In employing this approach, the categories were thoroughly scrutinised and examined to develop a deeper understanding of the categories and to ensure all of the questions relevant to these categories have been duly answered, thus implying saturation. This was a labour-intensive and time-consuming process, which required switching back and forth between categories and data for comparative reasons, as well as identifying gaps within each category. This approach was repeated in this study until all categories and pertinent data were analysed, leading to the establishment of high-level categories.

3.5.4 Selective coding

Selective coding was conducted only after the axial coding process was completed. This process is sometimes referred to as core login, and it is essential in preparing the groundwork for the development of core themes from the identified categories. In this analysis, the selective coding process was utilised to examine the core category from the key categories, and it enabled the construction of a typical relationship structure between the main categories centred on the core category. This was achieved through constant comparison, analysis, and refinement of the condensed data resulting from the second stage of analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 2008; 1990). The clustered concepts through the axial coding were then constantly examined and classified into coherent and meaningful concepts until the developing themes became recurrent, leading to saturation (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2018; Henrick and Kaiser, 2020). Using this method, it became possible to check if the data still supported the emerging categories and, if they did, to strengthen the categories, defining both their dimensions and their properties (Glaser and Holton, 2004). As a result of the constant analysis and review of the data and field notes taken during the interviews, the latent patterns between first-order concepts and higher-order themes were identified. Furthermore, bias is reduced by constantly comparing incidents to incidents to categories and categories to categories until the process becomes self-correcting. As the concepts coalesced, becoming increasingly conceptual of what is happening, the names of many concepts were distilled and absorbed into major categories as the generalisation of the study increased, thus establishing suitable explanations for firms' BEAs experience as an essential focus of the study. At the end of the analysis, answers to the research questions were identified by linking the research questions to the aggregate dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 2008; 1990).

By adopting this rigorous process of going through data to identify relevant categories and themes and provide a meaningful explanation of them, the study was able to reach accurate and useful results (Orlikowski, 1993; Martin and Turner, 1986; Pettigrew, 1990). Further, this mode of analysis required that broader, contextual issues, which are shown to influence the phenomenon under study, be given appropriate recognition in the development of theory. Hence, rather than focusing the analysis by disregarding these broader conditions, every effort was made to acknowledge and account for them. Below is an illustration of how the code was generated and organised.

Table 5.0 Sample of the data analysis process

Raw Data	Initial First-Order Coding	Second-Order Coding	Aggregate Dimension
Q. Can you please share with me what influenced your firm to enter this award? **A. As a start-up, I thought competing would give us equal exposure to what those already in business have... We made a few contacts during the event, and we have got a couple of orders from them as well… which is good for business.**	Participant justifies the reasons behind their award entry	Gateway to the market (Material element)	Mentalities behind BEAs entries
Q. How do you select an award or a category to enter? **A. For us, the credibility of the award is very important. Our clients are going to look at how credible that award is and be happy we are associated with that program.**	Participant demonstrates how they come to select and award or category to enter	Credibility as a key determinant **(Competence)**	The path to glory
Q. What are some of the benefits you got from competing in BEA programs? **A. So, we got a lot of marketing out of it; we did a lot of social media around, which got quite a lot of attention. I believe people loved it, and it kind of gives you a bit of social proof. I suppose people look at it and think why you've been shortlisted for an award; you must be good. So, in a way, I suppose it gave potential clients confidence. And even though we didn't win, it's still something that we're using.**	Participants account for the values they capture from BEAs	An important marketing tool **(Meaning element)**	The outcomes of competing in BEAs

To complete the analysis process, a Data Structure Framework (see Figure 6.0) representing the analysis from the data was constructed after multiple efforts (Gioai, Corely and Hamilton, 2013). The framework is composed of first-level concepts, second-level themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions. Additionally, it visualises their links and the important ideas buried in the data and their ties to the respondent's narratives. Thus, it demonstrates the conditions that induce firms to join BEA competitions, how they select which category or an award to compete for, and the possible outcomes of these competitions on their competitiveness.

Fig. 6.1.0 Data structure

1st order concept	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimention

1st order concept

- Improving company culture
- Building relationships
- Boosting employee morale

(A) Entering BEAs to boost organisational confidence

- Stepping stone for future successes
- The purist of self-esteem
- A feeling of accomplishment
-

(B) Securing market dominance and a lasting presence in industry and the public mind

- Proving brand consistency
- Building awareness and unique positioning through BEA
- Developing trust through consistent award participation
- A medium for brand differentiation
- To prove an organisation's resilience (tough to crack)
- Dominance motivation

(C) The financial motivations behind firms' BEA entries

- The opportunity cost of choosing BEAS ahead of certification and acc programmes
- The Status-Quo Trap
- The Sunk-Cost Trap

(D) Enabling a positive work environment through participation in BEAs

The mentalities behind firms' BEAs entries

The why?

1st Order Concepts

- A careful look into the genuineness of the award program
- Ascertaining the credible of BEAS
- Aligning an award choice to a firm strategy

- Location specific influence on seeking business excellence awards programs
- Destination appeal and side attractions
- Word of mouth recommendations
- Matching organisational objectives with award opportunities
- Matching internal firm objectives with the opportunities the award program me presents

- Weighing the chances of winning: internal analysis of the firm's capabilities before making business excellence awards choices
- The boons and burden of choices
- Influence of past successes or failure on taking risky choices
- Using precedent as a reflective guide to comprehend the intricacies of an award procedure
- Drawing on past experience to curb the challenge of inefficiencies and the lack of clarity in future entries

- Negativity experience with BEAs
- Loss aversion as an influence on firms' BEAs choices
- Emotional attachment on decision making
- Prioritisation choices

2nd Order Themes

(E) Embarking on due diligence to make informed decisions

(F) Socio-contextual influences on seeking business excellence awards

(G) Complexity of variety and the influence of prior experience in decision making

(H) Influence of Emotions (*fear and hope*) on decision making

Aggregate dimension

(2) Exploration of the methods firms use to enter or select an award/ category to enter. The how?

aggregate Dimensions *Fig 6.1.3 Data Structure Continued:3*

1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions

- Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan
- Customer interaction with BEAs
- Staying relevant
- Gaining visibility and attention

(I) Creating an attractive brand

- Establishing a loyal customer base
- Achieving customer satisfaction
- Staking out territories

(J) Crafting a positive brand perception

- Gaining public trust
- Boosting organiational crediilty
- Capturing value from the halo effect
- Elite status anxiety
- Enhancing product labelling and packaging

(K) Boosting organisational profile

- feeling appreciated
- Feeling valued
- A sign of being seen

(L) A boost to firms' morale

Exploration of the outcomes of competing in business excellence awards. The what?

3.5.5 Genre of the data interpretation

After a thorough and rigorous extraction of data from the bulk transcript, this study draws on the sensemaking approach as a genre of interpretation to assign meanings to the participants feeling and experiences about BEAs. Considering that accounts of social reality such as BEAs are mostly equivocal, the sense-making approach offers the opportunity for this study to give plausible explanations to these accounts out of the possible meanings available. To achieve this, the study combined an interrelated recurring process of noticing and interpretation. By noticing, the study singled out except data extracted through the earlier data analysis process as cues for further conscious processing out of the streams of experience of the participants with regards to their BEAs participations. The last process of interpretation entailed using data to form a frame of references, through which meaning from participants experiences is communicated to get a rich understanding of BEAs.

3.6 Methodological Limitations

Notwithstanding the rigorous procedures used to conduct the empirical inquiry in this thesis, there are several obstacles and flaws in the approach to the way data were gathered. The number of awarding organisations the study focused on in recruiting participants was not exhaustive. Likewise, the number of participants recruited for the data collection was not expansive enough to get the general scope of the main drivers and implications of competing for BEAs. As a result, the study's findings cannot be generalised, as individuals' accounts of their award experiences are unique, and such a limited number of selected participant views on awards perhaps does not reflect the representative sample of the broad range of firms that enter BEAs. Again, the decision to conduct interviews with only middle or top managers who

were involved in a firm's award process proved challenging, as gaining access to persons with such profiles is frequently a hurdle for researchers (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Goldstein, 2002). These middle and top managers are often busy senior professionals who are widely sought after; therefore, getting an appointment with them is difficult. For instance, the interviewed participants were chosen based on their availability and accessibility, which may result in sample characteristics that do not reflect the general population of firms that compete in BEAs hence posing the challenge of establishing a balance between the breadth and the depth of the interviews. One additional issue in this study was that participants were only justifying their decisions to enter the awards, the roles they played, and the significance of the awards to their firms. One way the study could have balanced these arguments was to explore multiple sources, such as firms' online publications of awards and other available media they used to project their award nominations or winnings. Although this was not done in this study, it is possible that the use of numerous award documents would have resolved this problem.

3.7 Chapter summary

This chapter unpacked in detail the methods and approach employed in the study to gather data. The study adopted an interpretive perspective by utilising an exploratory qualitative approach to garner rich insights from top-level managers who have successfully led their firms to business excellence award competitions to understand the meanings they make from their BEAs experience. In the first section, the chapter provided an overview of the research context and settings. The chapter began by outlining the backdrop and setting for the research. By shedding light on the theoretical sampling technique adopted in the study, the next section

discussed the justification for choosing the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to recruit the study participants. Additionally, the chapter discussed the participant recruitment method and provided a summary of the study sample. This was followed by a detailed overview of the research process, ethical issues, and data analysis procedure. Three phases of evaluation were performed to analyse the data. This began with an open coding procedure which involved labelling identified concepts from the transcribed data leading to the development of the first-order concept. Next, the data analysis was taken to a more abstract level through the development of second-order concepts, which were then used to further refine the initial concepts identified through the open coding process. A continuous and constant comparison analysis was carried out to establish prospective overarching categories in the last phase of the analysis. As a result of these processes, it was easier to identify conceptual categories and higher codes, which were then used to construct a sampling framework for theoretical reasons. Finally, a critical reflection was provided on the limits of the approach and procedures employed in the study.

Unpacking the key drivers underpinning the exponential rise of firms competing for business excellence awards

This chapter expands on the study's findings and aims to expand the understanding of the drivers that motivate firms to enter and compete for business excellence awards. The first objective is to provide answers to expand our understanding of why so many firms spend so much effort and resources to participate in business excellence awards. The second objective is an attempt to uncover and explain how the material components of the three elements constituting BEAs as practice can better explain why many firms enter and compete for business excellence awards. The chapter consists of four themes. The first theme uncovers the psychological and emotional motivations that keep firms going as they keep their eyes on getting recognised. The second theme unpacks another striking antecedent, which explains how some firms BEAs participation is driven by the need to secure a lasting presence in their industry and in the minds of the public. The third theme shares insight into how financial considerations, familiarity with the award processes and the need to justify bad investments in BEAs keep firms pushing harder to enter more BEA competitions to potentially get something to prove critics wrong. The final theme shares participant's thoughts on how the possibility of attending the flamboyant BEAs events encourages them to participate in BEAs and utilise such opportunities to foster a positive corporate culture and employees' well-being. To draw the curtains to the chapter, a brief discussion of the major findings uncovered in the chapter is presented.

4.1 Entering business excellence awards to boost organisational confidence.

4.1.1 Beacon of Hope; entering business excellence awards as a stepping stone for future successes

Receiving a nomination for business excellence awards or winning, in the long run, is argued to be a motivator upon which many firms build on to attain greater success (Pronin and Ross, 2006; Vasquez and Buehler, 2007). Notably, most businesses feel very confident when they get applause from third parties in the midst of fierce competition from other companies. This acquired confidence from the recognition of such eminent bodies is argued to improve firms' ability to handle, control, and master their internal and social circumstances, which then results in improving their performance and the potential to achieve more success (Baumeister and Ilko, 1995; Edwards et al., 2018). Equally, it was identified from the data that although business excellence awards, certification and accreditation programmes are typically designed to improve organisational operations standards, a unique distinction that sets the former apart from the rest of these programmes that gives quality marks is the challenge it presents to firms to aim for success through a competitive measure of excellence whereby being selected to compete alone is an achievement to many. It appears from the data that the value of such recognitions entices firms to enter BEA competitions, and depending on the outcome, many of these firms utilise the results as a confidence booster in their future endeavours. The following extract typifies this:

> ''From my experience, I would say the awards ignite the desire to improve, and it gives you something to look out for compared to other programmes that focus mostly on training, workshops, and regulations to ensure best practices''. [Smart, Director]

He further stated:

''There are some colleagues here who I know felt very tensed during the award period, they kept talking about it, and we all made fun of our chances…. I can say it brought us together to achieve an important goal''. [Smart, Director]

In the same vein, James shared an insight into how feedback from the panel of judges has enlightened his knowledge of the award process and addressed how his firm can improve in other areas of their operations. However, recalling his experience with other award competitions he had previously entered, he expressed his disappointment with the judging processes of those programmes. He believes that a fair judging system leads to an admirable awards competition that attaches value to winners and gives losers something to hope for. He stated:

''The competition is good anyway, my only problem is the fairness of the judging processes… other than that, I believe we are all pushed to do better at the end of the day. Although I didn't win my category, I have got some good feedback which I hope if we work on, fingers crossed we can win a couple of them next year''. [James, Manager]

These findings imply that, while standardisation and regulation are necessary for quality improvement, providing firms with a level playing field to compete for recognition can amplify this effect. Again, the narratives indicate that a fair award system stirs up the hopes of the award applicants of winning again, and in the case a firm does not win, it also gives them hope to bounce back with improved performance.

In addition to the excitement in competing with corporate rivals and the hopes that business excellence awards ignite in organisations, the data also shows that another attraction that keeps firms competing for BEAs is the insightful feedback from the organisers and judges, which firms benefit in benchmarking their product and services to industry standards. One interesting relation most participants highlighted was how in benchmarking their products

and services, they get encouraged by feedback from award judges to set reasonable goals and expectations for themselves. Notably, in today's competitive markets, many firms are tempted to set higher targets and sometimes become blinded by the excitement of coming up on top of the competition, which, when things do not go as planned, can significantly kill their motivation (Adler et al., 2013; Ruiz et al., 2015; Ramón et al., 2016). Similarly, many of these highly competitive firms often fall into this trap when things do not happen as expected in their award submissions. These firms mostly question their ideas and future possibilities and eventually lose steam. The beauty of business excellence awards competitions is that, although it is very competitive, experienced judges, who are mostly experts, guide firms with overambitious targets to align their efforts and competence to areas they can likely gain their expected goals (Vansteenkiste and Deci., 2003; Harackiewicz and Sansone, 2000). In this study, the participants frequently went into great depth to describe their experiences in such situations:

> ''I can boldly say those feedback helped us in improving in some areas. Initially, it looked harsh and felt like someone outside trying to boss you around. but with a second look into it, we were able to identify some gaps in our story, and with the kind of result we got last year, we switched the categories and look where we are now''. [Hill, owner]

> ''We had a goal for the new business of the year of which we were nominated, but unfortunately, we did not win. It was disappointing, but when I read the feedback, I think I now have a clear idea of which shots I will be aiming at next year''. [Chris, Manager]

Expectations, of course, have an effect on attitudes and mindsets. Implying from the participant narratives, they first struggled to accept the reality on the ground because it did not conform to their expectations. Perhaps they would have responded positively if their expectation had been satisfied. Howbeit, after careful reflection, such valuable feedback

becomes a stepping stone to guide firms through their pursuit of recognition. The study suggests that the ability to mitigate high egos and expectations of firms with constructive feedback that reshapes the thinking of over-ambitious firms is another unique hallmark of business excellence awards programmes. The evidence is clear that some of these firms get inspired by this constructive criticism in channelling their efforts to get the low-hanging fruits that perhaps are not that far from their reach. The competitive nature of today's markets puts so much pressure on these firms to achieve even beyond their capacity (Du and Chen, 2010). Perhaps scaling down some of these targets may not result in achieving their expected goals but can also build their self-esteem and boost their morale. From the narrative of the participants, the idea of setting a realistic target does not necessarily mean they are unambitious. To them, it only meant easing the pressure a bit to enjoy smaller achievements and appreciating their shot targets as they still remain focused on their main goals.

Another interesting takeaway from this finding is that while business excellence award competitions are a source of encouragement for future endeavours, it is primarily in the hands of firms that participate in business excellence award competitions to reflect on and translate constructive feedback from the panel of judges who are mostly experts into actionable takeaways. Again, while most participants shared a positive experience of business excellence awards on their future successes, this study suggests that the inspiring desire to win more can potentially translate into greater success if firms keep improving in what they do (Contan, 2017).

4.1.2 The purist of self-esteem

Evidence from the data suggests firms also capitalise on BEA competitions to boost their self-esteem. This they do by aligning credible third parties' perceptions in harmony with their brand image or values. An identified trend in the data suggests that the fair and rigorous processes firms go through in other to bag an award or a nomination stimulates feelings of competency and pride hence increasing their self-esteem (Burke and Stets, 1999). Indeed, the need to feel good about one's business is not the only self-centred motivation at work but faced with reality, most firms utilise the platform business excellence awards present to identify themselves among other competitors and acknowledge where they fall short with regard to their operations, although they would prefer to learn that they are good (Stuart et al., 1999; Podolny, 2001). According to many of them, getting these awards or nominations reassures them about their abilities and competence. Knowing that their product or services stand among or even tall from corporate competitors eliminates the obstacle of doubts in making positive judgements and trusting their abilities as a firm. For example, using Jane's account, she noted that joining a competitive award programme is something she did not initially want to do. She thought her business was a local business that offered satisfactory services to a few clients; hence, the idea of entering a competition was too risky and a frightening task. However, being pushed by one of her assistants to join the award competition, she gave it a goal, and on her first attempt, she got a nomination, although she did not win. She identified her participation in the award competition as a proud moment in her entrepreneurship journey, and she is now encouraged to join more of the competitions now. She commented:

''I think a big part of that is because we just started as a local shop with much emphasis on serving our few clients to the best of our capacity. Participating in an award competition was never a thing for me because I thought we would not stand a chance with other shops with a considerable force and experience….. It was his idea, and like I said I was not up for it… it was a proud moment for me to receive the email that we had been nominated. I think it shows we are doing some things right. Sure, I will be joining a few this year, I believe we are going to win this time around, wish me luck''. [Jane, Manager]

Aside from feeling good and positive about their confidence, it was also identified from the participant's narratives that getting a nomination or winning an award was a fulfilled ambition that contributes to attaining higher self-esteem as a group or organisation. The data indicate that achieving objectives that are personally desired and valued is central to the satisfaction of many of these firms (Chen et al., 2006; Diener and Diener, 2009). In addition to achieving their desired goals, it was interesting to recon that business excellence award competitions also serve as a vehicle that gives some of these firms a sense of direction. As many of them shared, anticipating to entering the competitions guides them on what they need to do and how to organise their efforts to achieve their desired goal of getting a nomination and potentially winning. Thus, setting the goal of winning an award gives meaning and structure to their direction, which, when achieved, boosts their sense of self-esteem, and increases their feeling of competence (Bahrami-Ehsan & Cranney, 2015; Raynor, 1982; Bandura, 1997). Although setting targets is not new to everyday business administration, the study suggests that the possibility of getting external recognition out of achieving firm's internal goals makes it more rewarding and exciting for some of these firms to enter BEA competitions. Using the extracts below as an example, most of the participants that shared these views recounted how their firm set targets to determine which of their operations would stand the chance of getting nominations or winning BEAs. For instance, Smit recounted:

''We entered the award because it has been on our radar for some time now. We have had a fair idea of what we need to do to at least get a nomination from previous attempts''. [Smit, Chief Executive]

When asked whether the standard of competition has remained static based on his account,"

He further suggested that the competition continues to get much tougher as time goes on, but

most of the criteria largely remain the same. He explained:

The stiff competition demands maximum effort in wowing the panel of judges with your achievements (Smit, Chief Executive)

Building a similar argument, Dani noted that eyeing an award stimulates his firm to work

harder. According to him:

''The decision to join the competition stirred us to act. It gave us a purpose…. Although some of them were challenging, I believe it would have been more exciting to have won the categories we entered. but I would say with the nomination, we have better motivation and additional stimulus to improve, grow and handle some few areas well''. [Dani, Marketing Manager]

Additionally, participants talk about their experiences with satisfying their desire to win or be

nominated for awards, which the study suggests adds to developing a stronger sense of self-

esteem. According to them, the achievement of business excellence awards is a source of pride

that boosts their egos and adds value to them. These participants divulged how the taste of

winning breeds contiguous confidence that empowers members within the organisation to

strive for more and not shy away from bringing out creative ideas. Most of them frequently

indicated that they had a deep-seated satisfaction with winning in competitive environments.

For instance, Jake narrated:

''I really try to stay competitive, especially when it is healthy. If we can all achieve something and be happy, that's fantastic". [Jakes, Manager]

Another participant expressed similar sentiments. When asked about his take on business

excellence award competitions, he gave this remark:

> ''I find it very exciting to go head-to-head with other firms . . . there has always been what I term direct competition in the industry…my best experience is raising my head up high when walking to receive the award we won. It comes with this swagger which is a positive feeling''. [Perry, Manager]

In another interview, one participant recounted how their win boosted the mood of the entire

company. Jon stated:

> ''The competition moved our staff to do more. I can say they are confident now, at least we all know if we can maintain these, possibly we may win more awards going forward''. [Jon, Financial Planner]

In another instance, one participant offered a different stance on his views on joining BEA

competitions. Unlike the previous two participants, that were motivated by the desire to win

something and feel good about their capabilities, Kane noted that although there was a desire

to win, the stronger motivation was to avoid being left out.

I would say it was not based on winning, but we just wanted to experience how it was….

When asked about what he gathered from that experience, he further stated,

> ''It was a great experience which I can say had a spill over effect on our confidence. I have a different perspective about it now, it is not only having fun, but you can learn a lot from these programs''. [Kane, Manager]

4.1.3 A feeling of accomplishment: entering business excellence awards to compensate for previous failed attempts

In other instances, other participants also talked about how previous disappointments in their awards journey motivated them to enter subsequent competitions in an attempt to compensate for their past failed attempts. To most of them, overcoming those previous obstacles makes the possibility of future success taste so much sweeter. The study suggests that the fact that the competitions are becoming increasingly popular and intense makes setbacks from competing inevitable (He, 2019; Bain, 2013). However, how firms respond to these obstacles is of great importance to both their motivation and future achievements. What is observed from the data suggests that firms are very competitive and often persist with their desire regardless of the challenges they face in achieving such desires (Rauter et al., 2018). As already identified in these findings, firms are not shy from readjusting their desires to what appears within reach to compensate for previous failed attempts. This perspective aligns with the cognitive dissonance theory in psychology (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019; Cooper, 2011), which suggests that firms seek to maintain a positive and consistent view of themselves (Harmon-Jones, 2000). Thus, when the outcome does not fit their perceived image, they respond by coming back stronger for the possibility of winning or even devaluing the goal rather than devaluing their self-esteem (Vaidis, 2014). The study further argues that the pursuit of further BEAs to protect their sense of self after facing the previous setback becomes easier as they get to learn from those setbacks. Some participants shared how their previous experiences were beneficial in attaining success in their current award entry. Most of them related that, past outcomes from award programmes guided them in their current attempt. According to them, they developed on those experiences to better their chances of winning. Drew mentioned that although his past attempts did not go as he expected, he gathered much

experience from them. He accredited his determination and patience to the expected joy that

comes from bouncing back to win the ultimate. He stated:

> ''The nomination alone was encouraging… The board provided valuable feedback to
> us, and we also had access to the reasons why they chose the other firm as a winner in
> that category. For us, putting them together encouraged us to push us towards getting
> there eventually because we knew we were not that far. Yes, I can say this win
> compensates for last year's disappointment because that's what we all wanted to
> achieve''. [Drew, Senior manager]

Another participant related that the competition for awards is intense; hence not getting the

desired outcome is unavoidable.   To her, the best way to manage such disappointments is to

readjust their entry strategy and identify spots that they can likely win. Hill stated:

> ''The insight from our previous entries opened our eyes to the need to choose a
> category that best suits us best…. This year we got three nominations. We did not win
> all of the categories we entered but, in the end, we won one which is better than what
> we did last year…. when asked about how this win means to them, she further stated:
> it a plus for us to bounce back to win at this time. Confidence here, I may say, is in an
> extreme level''. [Hill, Owner]

These narratives support the logic that some firms' motivation to compete for business

excellence awards can be attributed to the protection of their self-esteem. Like Hill, who lost

on previous attempts, she did not only express the determination and effort they put into

winning the current award but also claimed that the ability to win the award was relevant to

the firm's identity and morale. In other instances, some participants spoke about how winning

business excellence awards evokes a sense of accomplishment in them. To them, coming out

with a nomination or a win is a feeling that their hard work has been worthwhile. According

to many participants who shared similar views, getting recognition reassures them that they

are progressing or heading in the right direction. The study argues that the sense of

accomplishment that comes with receiving recognition through award competitions

motivates these businesses to be more committed to maintaining and improving their good works to entrench their BEAs winnings (Blackburn and Rosen, 1993; Phillips and Gully, 1997). This sensation of accomplishment is analogous to the perception of successful agency, which is the sense of commitment to achieve goals that fuel confidence and self-esteem (Snyder et al.,1991). The study suggests that as firms taste the joy of getting a nomination or winning an award, they make efforts to entrench this success and, as a result, direct a considerable measure of their efforts to achieve such expectations (Nickell et al., 1997). As their expectations keep rising, they tend to give more value to the outcome (BEAs) that they worked hard for (Burg and Mann, 2008). Ama shared her experience with such feelings; she narrated:

> ''It was a proud moment. If you can recollect, I blacked out. I forgot my speech….. it's a great achievement, I know it will be difficult next time, but I believe my team and I do a great job, and I won't be surprised if we win a couple more''. [Ama, Managing Director]

Taken as a whole, it has been evident in this section that achieving the coveted prize (logos, award plaques and citations) from business excellence awards competitions have a strong influence on making a firm look brighter, bolder, and more attractive. The section has demonstrated the phycological and emotional inspiration that drives firms to lock horns to compete with each other to get recognised. Like any other competitive endeavour, climbing that height of success comes with some obstacles and happy moments, which in turn push the actors involved to continue until they get their ultimate goal.

4.2 Securing market dominance and a lasting presence in industry and the public mind

4.2.1 Entering to prove brand consistency

Maintaining consistency in one's performance and appearance is frequently cited as a major motivator of behaviour. (Meybodi, 2022; Gomes et al., 2018). Consistent with this argument are the views shared by some of the participants of this study. The data shows that some firms' motivation to participate in business excellence award competitions can be justified by their goal of wanting to be seen as consistent in what they do. This is because participating in business excellence awards competitions can be a credible signal to the public about a firm's expertise, predictability, and reliability (Luffarelli and Awaysheh, 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Arguably, there are many indicators that can be used to measure a successful brand, but one of the most important gauges to measure the success of an entity is how consistent the brand has been over the years (Galadanchi and Bakar, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2019). For instance, in competitive markets, having a fluctuating or inconsistent performance can be very bad for a firm's image in the eyes of the public. Hence consistency signals have become an important asset to firms image these days (Pecot et al., 2018; Mukherjee, D., Makarius and Stevens, 2018). Although regarded as a valuable asset, it is hard to earn commodity. Traditionally much bigger firms can have the luxury of boasting about their long years of operation as a sign of consistency (Ahmad et al., 2019). Equally, others can leverage their ties with other bigger brands as a credible consistency signal (Makarius and Stevens, 2018). On the other hand, for firms with limited resources and experience in operation, signalling consistency is a difficult thing to do. Hence to most of these firms, business excellence awards competitions present an avenue for them to showcase some level of consistency. To them, the constant participation in business excellence awards proves to the public that the firm has been doing well consistently

hence deserving of such nominations or awards all this while. As firms with little to show to the public with regards to quality and competence, some firms communicated that the idea of entering these awards goes beyond winning but rather entrenching those wins over time to build a strong identity for their brand. One participant shared that:

> ''We have entered this category; I think three years now. Surprisingly we won on our first attempt, but we have not had luck on other subsequent attempts. we have been considering other categories now, but it is a general belief in the group to keep going for this one. I believe it makes marketing much easier when you focus on a specific one. for us even the two we did not win, we posted them as successful nominees in that category… With this, I think customers get to know what we stand for''. [Philip, manager]

After recounting the story of their past failed attempts due to their persistence in entering a specific category, he was asked for how long he would continue to enter that same category if the firms kept missing out on the ultimate. He further stated:

> ''As much as we get recognition from it, I think is a win for us. As I said, we want It to be the root of our business identity''. [Philip, manager]

4.2.2 Building Awareness and unique positioning through business excellence awards

Again, it was evident from the data that some participants used their consistent award entries to raise awareness about their businesses and their values. At a minimum, being nominated for a category for an extended period of time demonstrates to the public how competent a business is in that area of its operations. This, the study argues, helps businesses stand out in a competitive marketplace and attract more attention from future clients who will learn more about these firms and become top of mind when they are ready to make a purchase. It was evident from the data that the goal to create awareness about a product or a brand is part of

the underlying reasons why many firms would like to compete for BEAs and brandish their

fortunes from the competition in public spaces. For example, these two participants agreed

that their award participation made their customers aware of what they stand for as a firm.

As Jake stated:

> ''The award factor do work for us. We get new clients now and then because I think they have got to know what we stand for. People see the social media post we do and have won the same category on a bounce get us more of attention and credibility''. [Jake, Manager]

To Frank:

> ''The plan is to utilise the awards as a recognisable feature in our social media ads. Hopefully, if we are able to keep this consistency, with time people will get to know us by the awards we have won, which in a way creates an awareness of how good we are''. [Frank, Manager]

An important take from these narratives is that the participants were of the view that social

media was an important stepping stone in creating the kind of awareness they wanted with

their award fortunes. The study argues that, if combined or utilised well, both the awards and

social media platforms can yield an incredible result of getting the desired attention a firm

would want to achieve from the public.

4.2.3 Developing trust through consistent award participation

In addition to creating awareness through award competitions, some of the participants

shared an account of building the public's trust through their consistent award participation.

According to most of them, being consistent breeds familiarity, which leads to higher levels

of trust. The study suggests that winning or getting continuous nominations from business

excellence award programs helps prevent potential clients from wondering what is at the

heart of a firm's business. It appears that the frequency with which a firm has received awards or nominations demonstrates how constant the firm has been in terms of quality and competence, which sends out trustworthy signals to clients and, more crucially, to future customers. One participant stated:

> ''Most people are sceptical now than ever. With these nominations, we have been able to build that strong, lasting relationships with our customers, and for future clients, I believe when they do come across our posts, at least they can find something reassuring to meet their expectations''. [Jon, Financial Planner]

As observed from the data, most of these firms do not simply display their awards on their social media posts and advertisements however, in order to garner the maximum amount of attention and trust from the public, they incorporate crafty gimmicks from their awards fortunes to hype their achievements. It appears that these gimmicks create positive emotions towards a brand, which, when utilised well, stimulate people to feel good dealing with a brand.

4.2.4 Brand differentiation

In addition to gaining trust through award competitions, some participants shared their views on using their consistency in award competitions to differentiate themselves from other brands. To them, gaining a nomination or winning for a period of time shows what their firm has that others do not have. This Noble explained:

> ''We continue to receive nominations, which indicates that we are doing something well. We are not yet a popular brand, but we may eventually establish ourselves as the industry's go-to brand with continued effort, consistency, and good fortune with awards''. [Noble, Director]

From Noble's account, it is evident that winning a couple of awards may not always be enough to prove the consistency these firms may need to position their brands ahead of competitors. Hence competing in these competitions consistently has become an apparent decision for many of these organisations to accomplish such enviable goals.

4.2.5 Organisational resilience

The capacity to bounce back from setbacks is commonly highlighted as the distinguishing quality of successful and failed businesses (Andrews, 2015; DesJardine et al., 2019). However, it is usually believed that resilience is built only when tested and that the capacity to overcome that test results in success (Bonanno, 2004). While this notion portrays resilience as an organisation's unique capacity to persevere through difficult times, the data reveals that most firms' resilience is enabled by their inspired motivation to achieve success regardless of the obstacles they face. From the interviews, many participants agreed that the ultimate goal to gain award recognition encouraged them to persevere even in challenging times. This, the study argues, is mostly due to the potential benefits of participating in business excellence awards which can be a positive reassurance for the future prospect of these firms. For instance, in the case of Perry, one of the participants, who defined his workplace as a good working environment that gave employees the flexibility and all the support they required to function well, with a few exceptions during times of high demand, when they were required to work through stress in order to satisfy their customers' needs or to meet personal targets; he suggested the covid 19-pandemic changed everything. According to him, due to the fact that the services his firm provides were among the essential services that required them not to resort to remote working in accordance with UK covid guidelines, Perry and his team found

themselves in an overwhelming predicament they had never encountered before. He

recounted:

> ''I was unable to sleep at night for over six months... I thought I was endangering individuals with little protection and was unsure how many might contract the virus. The weight of responsibility for both a staff he adored and the ability to keep the firm afloat during this trying period was overwhelming. I had to establish how and when my staff would operate in these tough circumstances, putting in routinely 8-12 hour shifts. On nights and weekends, some colleagues called me and sobbed over the phone... individuals were terrified for their lives, but none of this broke us; we remained united to accomplish this amazing feat''. [Perry, Manager]

Jane shared similar views, she said:

> '' I have entered a few so far but the start-up of the year one this year, in particular, was pretty special, because we started during COVID a really difficult time. So any other year, that would have been special anyway too but you know it's the story behind how we set up I think that makes this one special and it really meant a lot just because we started in really difficult times, we had no money, we had literally nothing, just a 20 hour a week job with a cat. And that was literally our income. But you know what any other categories from now would work for us. That's what I was looking at the other day, I haven't actually filled in the form yet it was the businesswoman of the year category. I quite like that one. I haven't even been in business for a year yet. I will be here in July. So I kind of thought by one that within my first year of business, that was that'd be quite nice. But to be honest, any award at this point would be appreciated. Because when we got shortlisted, it was an opportunity to look back at what we've done. And it's been a hell of a journey. A lot of work, a lot of stress, a lot of tears. So I guess they're kind of just, you know, just having that certificate there is just like, Look what you've done, you know, a little reminder when things get tough''. [Jane, Director]

On the other hand, one significant result from the data reveals that some organisations use

their business excellence award successes to demonstrate their perseverance in the face of

adversity. This is primarily because winning or being nominated for a prestigious award

during trying times displays to the public how well a firm did in the face of several obstacles.

This also demonstrates to sceptics that the firm is once again viable for business. This,

according to Lucy, was her main goal in joining the competition. She stated:

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''The whole covid thing kind of influenced my decision to participate in the awards this year….although we worked very hard during the lockdown to keep the business afloat, we did not have proper interaction between us and most of our clients who I believe were in difficult situations too. So the idea for the award was to get something to celebrate with them and show how resilient we have all been''. [Lucy, Manager] Additionally, she admitted her award participation was a means to relaunch the firm after the challenging times with covid uncertainties. She stated:

''Yeah, it was important to let people know we are still in business and there is no other way than making such a statement better than getting a nomination for an award''. [Lucy, Manager]

4.2.6 Dominance motivation

It appeared from the data that some firm's decision to participate in business excellence awards is also motivated by a desire to maintain dominance in terms of power and accomplishments. The data suggest that the motivation for power is associated with the desire to exert market influence and control through collecting more awards by beating corporate rivals. Whiles the achievement motive of these firms is mostly concerned with the general desire to achieve more success in their award entries to project their outstanding status to the public, the study suggests that firms driven by these desires are more likely to monitor cues for potentially adding more BEA accolades to increase their dominance or identifying threats to losing grounds to their corporate rivals (McClelland, 1985; Fodor and Carver, 2000). Hence, such firms will continue to participate in awards when there is a chance to win or throw a tougher challenge next time another corporate rival beats them to it. Additionally, the data suggest that dominant motivation influences how firms define their award objectives and goals. Inferring from the data, firms with a high level of dominance motivation are more invested in gaining the respect and social attention of others. This, the study argues, can be correlated with the pursuit of extrinsic admiration, such as fame and status in their various industries (Duriez et al., 2007). This notion was apparent in some of the participants'

sentiments about participating in awards. Helen who identified that there exists stiff competition in the industry hence leading to significant pressure on them to put their brand in the spotlight discussed that the business excellence award platform offered an excellent opportunity to reach that mark. In her view, the awards his firm has received transmitted strong signals that made their brand very popular and well-positioned in the industry. She stated:

> ''One good thing about award competitions is that mostly you get all these industry players under one roof, so winning a couple of the categories speak well about your brand to them….. most of them may not even know who we are, but because of the awards they get to know your impact in the industry''. [Helen, Manager]

In a different interview, one participant also shared an account of how peers often perceived his firm as a top firm due to their business excellence award fortunes. Even though she did not dispute that he was deserving of this label, he suggested it was not their intention to go into the competition to dominate necessarily. he also started:

> ''Once you get to win more awards, people start to see you as a powerful and successful brand…. For us, that was not our focus. We believe we do a decent job to deserve some recognition, but people have their own way of interpreting this''. [Ama, Managing director]

4.2.7 Dominant behaviour and activities

In addition, it was observed from the data that firms with a high drive for dominance are more likely to enter BEAs to carry out dominant actions. Equally, these dominant actions necessitate greater success in their award pursuits in other to sustain their dominance. As a consequence, the study argues this drives such firms to continue to compete in business excellence award competitions. From the data, some of the competitive use of awards for dominance the

participants revealed includes asserting authority and competence; expressing confidence in their own values and positions; discouraging others from competing for or exerting control over specific market resources, and consciously working towards winning more awards in order to regain control when corporate rivals take that prestige away. This study suggests that they do so to boost their social status and inclusion as well as improve the public impression of their brand value, respect, and position (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Brown and Kasser, 2005). In an interview with Nash, she demonstrated that awards are sometimes used to capture higher status and strengthen market positions. She explained:

> ''It is a game-changer (business excellence awards). People get to see the excellent job we do, which translates into all these awards. So there is nothing much to prove literally''. [Nash, Manager]

Smart shared a similar opinion. Although he did not explicitly state his intention for continually competing and hoarding more awards, his opinion suggests some of these values motivate his firm to go all out for these awards year in and year out. He explained

> ''It takes a great deal of time and effort to get these awards. The competition for it is fierce, and we are not about to back down just yet…. I trust we do a great job, and as such, we will keep competing for more awards subsequently''. [Smart, Director]

To Ford:

> ''Obviously, I think our competitors may get jealous of the kind of coverage we received. It was important to us to let people know we stand out from the rest''. [Ford, Manager]

4.3 Financial motivations behind firms' business excellence award entries

4.3.1 The opportunity cost of choosing business excellence awards ahead of other alternatives

For many businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, staying within budget is a difficult task (Danielson and Scott, 2006; López et al., 2012). As a result, managing such businesses entails a great deal of creative financial manoeuvring and strategies to get the maximum value for money on their investments (Hall et al., 2012; Williamson, 2010). Interestingly, this statement was amplified in some of the participant's views of participating in business excellence awards competitions. To some participants, business excellence awards competitions offer an effective means of maximising their limited financial resources to achieve valuable goals. This is mainly due to the backdrop that most of the competitions require significantly less money as compared to alternative means of attaining third-party recognition (certification and accreditation programmes). As expected from an entrepreneur who started her own business not long ago, Jane noted that although her goal was to get hold of an award for marketing purposes, the cost involved in entering was a strong motivator for her to participate in award competitions. She explained:

> ''Yes, that was our first one. but we have entered a couple more now. After the Bristol life I started looking at what other awards are out there, and there are quite a few. I have gone for the free and cheap ones. There's one that's just launched and they're charging 10 pounds and you can enter and then you get a badge and all this stuff. Have not entered the expensive ones yet, that is going to be probably next year's goal because some of them cost like 200 to 1000 pounds. And the ones I answer I want to make sure that I get something out of it, because obviously we are going to use it in marketing, you know, we want to make sure that we can write press releases about it that we get a badge for our website and our social media. And yeah, just get as much out of it as we can for the money that we're paying to enter because some of them are just ridiculously expensive. So hopefully the goal is to win or at least get shortlisted again for another one by the end of the year. And then next year, we're going to hopefully invest in someone that can help us with writing the entry form so that we can actually win one''. [Jane, Manager]

She further stated

> ''And with the team, me and my husband, Kevin, he, he doesn't put much thought
> into what he doesn't think they're that good. He thinks they're nice to have, but they're
> not worth spending hours of your time filling in the forms. I can say to him, it's free,
> or it only cost a tenner, then he's like, yeah, whatever, I don't care. But for the more
> expensive ones, that's going to take some convincing. I don't quite know how I am
> going to do that, to be honest. I am hoping by that point, we will have some smaller
> awards. And I can say to him, look, see how much these smaller awards have done for
> us. Okay, now, let's pay to this bigger award. And if I can show him what we're going
> to get out of it. I have seen a couple where you literally just pay 200 pounds to enter
> and get nothing. But if we can get some marketing materials from it, then I think I
> think you will be convinced then. But it is justifying that investment. That's difficult
> that, especially at the moment''.

On the other hand, business excellence awards, in some cases, come with financial returns, which can shore up some firms' finances. In that case, success in the competition even contributes directly to the finances of such firms. Philip, whose firm had received a cash prize on top of the award he won from a different award programme, explained

> ''Although our lives did not depend on it, it was a good push for us… we did not win
> this one but usually most of the regional awards do not give cash prizes as compared
> to the national award programmes. when asked if the money involved influences his
> decision to join award competitions, he further explained: "Money is not the reason. I
> am very competitive, so in a way, these competitions push me to work even harder,
> and the results are clear''. [Philip, Manager]

Again, it appeared that the award competitions offer an effective way to advertise the qualities and competencies of firms online without paying a fortune to create such an impression hence enticing many firms to enter BEA competitions. According to Some of the participants, winning or getting nominations for awards put their marketing strategy into their own hands because they do not need an expert to make advertising content with that. All they mostly do is post these winnings in online spaces to get the public's attention without incurring the

additional cost of hiring content creators. This was a common view shared by many of the participants, Mark, for instance, narrated:

> ''Yes, so we did a press release in the local paper. LinkedIn, Facebook, emailed our clients. What else did we do? We had a blog page on our website, which was just about the award and why we were nominated and all that stuff…. It went really well, actually. I mean, the press release was in local paper. And that went to the back of the paper, they put it in the recruitment section, which I did not think anyone actually read. But we got a lot of comments from people saying, Oh, we saw you in the paper… So that obviously, worked really well. The LinkedIn worked Well too. We got a lot of comments from people. We reached about 500 people with our posts saying we've been shortlisted. So I believe, if we had more time we may have done even better with that, it was quite rushed. The gap between being shortlisted and the ceremony is short. But even that I will say it went well, especially as we did not actually spend money promoting it''. [Mark, Manager]

4.3.2 The status-quo trap

The evidence from the data also suggests that some firms get themselves trapped within the status quo of joining awards year in and year out hence influencing their decision to join business excellence awards competitions. The study suggests that as firms enter more award competitions, they become accustomed to the processes, making it easier for them in their subsequent entries (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2019; Hu, M. and Shealy, 2020). Coupled with the capabilities they develop in their entries processes over time, many of these firms capture significant values from their participation in business excellence award programmes, which influence the thinking of these firms to develop a strong bias towards alternative means of gaining third-party endorsements and legitimacy (Madaan and Singh, 2019; Filiz et al., 2020). These with time perpetuate the status quo hence making it difficult for these firms to stop BEAs entries or look into other alternatives. Some of the participants shared similar views on this:

''I remember on our first attempt there was one lady from the organisers who will call and she basically will help us fill in the entry form and she will word it properly for us too. And you know, she would use all the keywords to tell you what categories you should be entering and which ones you should be looking at. It was indeed an eyeopener, we learnt a lot from that which helps us going now" [Taz, Manager]

The way I look at it has changed now though. For example, when we got shortlisted, it was a shock. And I just thought we could actually win this especially when we got an email saying that only 54 nominees had bought tickets. I was so excited because well I had bought a ticket. I thought we had a better chance of winning just because we had bought the ticket and I really got my hopes high. But now I will not do that again. But on the other hand, I am definitely motivated by the outcomes …. I am going to keep going with it. We have got a couple more forms that we filled in last week… So I am literally just going to enter them and leave them and see if we win. it definitely works and it is a. a big part of our marketing now" [Lucy, Manager]

According to the participants' accounts, they believe that their decision to participate in these awards is rational and objective, but this study argues that they have identifiable biases (building award entry capabilities and capturing values from awards) in their justifications for participating in business excellence awards. From other accounts, it was identified that the source of this status quo trap lies deep within the psyches of top management in their desire to protect their egos from damage. Usually, changing an organisation's status quo or routines entails making uncertain decisions, which may expose those with such responsibilities to serious scrutiny if that decision backfires (Lozano, 2007; Feix and Philippe, 2020). It is no surprise that most of these top managers use any excuse to make decisions that conform to the status quo. This argument continually emerged in the conversation I had with Philip. He is new to the role and the place he works now. From the outset of the interview, he made it clear that though he had within his mandate to pull the pluck off in joining the award competition, he did not see it right to disrupt a process that has been part of the organisation's routines. He stated:

''To be honest with you, Shadrack, I am pretty new to this award thing.... I have not been here that long, but you can see the joy and passion they approach this competition with. So with my experience, it was just natural not to rock the boat" [Philip, Manager]

Philip has shown that most of these firms' participation in business excellence awards is firmly embedded in their cooperative culture, so it becomes a routine that even top managers may be unable to stop.

4.3.3 The sunk-cost trap

The data also highlighted that another deep-seated bias that keeps firms in entering business excellence awards is to use their constant involvement in the competitions to justify past actions, even when these past actions no longer seem convincing (Van Putten et al., 2010; Thames, 1996). Most of the participants interviewed seem to have fallen into this trap where their award strategy seems not to have yielded the maximum outcome they hoped for, but yet they were determined to stick to competing in awards competitions. One of the participants, Joice stated:

> ''So, we got a lot of marketing out of it; my team and I focused predominantly on digital marketing through social media, which we believe is less expensive and can get quite a lot of attention. I believe people loved it, and it kind of gives you a bit of social proof. I suppose people look at it and think why you've been shortlisted for an award; you must be good. So, in a way, I suppose it gave potential clients confidence. And even though we didn't win, it's still something that we're using''. [Joice, Manager]

Carr shared a similar account, although with a different approach:

> ''Well, getting two nominations without winning one maybe somehow disappointing but I will not classify it as such. I can understand the emotions and seriousness some people put into it but hey life is not always about winning... For me, it proves how competitive awards are these days, so it is better to go there to relax, make contacts and have a wonderful time''. [Carr, Manager]

What is striking about the narrated experience of both Joice and Carr is that they are unwilling, consciously or not, to admit they were not able to capture the maximum value from their participation in the award competition. Such positions, the study argues, can be attributed to the fact that admitting to making a bad decision may invite critical scrutiny from superiors and even colleagues (Hammond et al., 2006; Lefgren et al., 2015). Hence it may seem right to stick by the past action or strategy in hopes of getting a better outcome to finally make a strong case for such decisions (Haslam et al., 2006).

4. 4 Enabling a positive work environment

4.4.1 Entering business excellence awards to improving organisational culture

The data also indicate that competing in business excellence awards makes a company look good to the outside world and improves how they look at the inside working environment as well. According to many of the participants, their employees are valuable assets to their business, and events like business excellence awards are a good way to prove to them how important they are. Tim, who supported his marketing team for an award in the ticket of their organisation, shared his thoughts on why the organisation decided to back that department to compete for the award. He recounted:

> ''Sponsoring them for the awards was in a way to show our support and prove their value to us. To them, It is an excellent opportunity for them to excel, which also benefit us in a way because If our employees do not have the opportunity to interact with one another or to come to know and respect one another and support each other to compete externally, it may be difficult for them to function efficiently as a team… Yeah, so it's a fantastic opportunity to create team-building through collective support, bringing people to have fun and achieve excellence". [Tim, Manager]

Inferring from James's narratives, the study suggests that some of these firms recognise the importance of having solid and highly motivated teams. Hence, in efforts to deliver standards that keep their consumers happy, firms today incorporate social activities into their itineraries to encourage a positive working environment which translates to better well-being of their employees. The study argues that not being able to incorporate social activities into firms' operations may be an expensive oversight in achieving a positive, cooperative culture (Nguyen et al., 2021; Saks and Gruman, 2011). Fortunately, business excellence awards competitions offer an excellent opportunity for firms to get their employees more engaged whiles having a good time. This study argues that most of these firms enter BEAs to get employees more engaged through the preparation stages to the event itself, where they mostly celebrate together when they win the ultimate, which the data support that it creates a happy working atmosphere and inspires employees to perform better. In another interview, Laura shared how entering business excellence awards makes her firm attractive for current staff to stay and for new recruits to join. She stated:

> ''Quite so many firms overlook how important participating in awards can be on employees' happiness and the positive impact it has on the workplace. I would say, it is an excellent way to boost their morale. Our support for their award adventure is an investment we put in our staff to showcase to the world the sacrifices and efforts they have put in this business over the years…… In a way, everybody works hard, plays hard, and wins big. I think most of them enjoys it this way, everyone is excited here, they connect, hopefully, if we keep it this way, I think people are going to stay here for a long time… I would say this makes here attractive for people to join us, as most people prioritise working in a cool place as we have here''. [Laura, Manager]

In ferrying from Laura's narrative, her firm's involvement in business excellence awards has helped create a favourable business culture that keeps existing staff excited to stay and attractive new personnel who would like to join a firm where the contribution of staff to the success of the company is valued and rewarded. This study suggests that helping to sponsor

a team, department or perhaps individuals on a ticket of a company for an external award demonstrates that everyone can make a positive contribution to the firm in different ways and, on the other hand, helps employees discover their value to the firm and builds confidence in their abilities.

4.4.2 Building relationships through participation

Another interesting pattern observed from the data was the team bonding implications of joining business excellence awards that urge firms to enter the competitions. In the course of the interviews, some of the participants shared their thoughts on the use of awards events as an opportunity to build relationships. As expressed by Perry:

> ''It provides an opportunity for them to communicate with people with similar skill sets and interests, which, in my opinion, leads to larger opportunities… The team also get to know each other well, trust one another, and respect one another, so we do not only put them out for the entertainment side of things''. [Perry, Manager]

Similarly, Baker discussed his experience of using award events to bridge the divide amongst personnel at various levels at his firm. He narrated:

> ''I realised there was a disconnection between top management and other staff members, so I told Hr to book us a table when we got the nomination. It was expensive but we achieved the intended purpose. People sat together, enjoyed their food and wine. In effect, individuals become more open and willing to express their ideas openly and freely as colleagues rather than as bosses and employees''. [Baker, Manager]

It appears from the data that many of these firms enter business excellence awards competitions and utilise the events as an opportunity to get their employees to function and bond well. As narrated by Perry and Baker, when these firms go out for business excellence award events, they build stronger relationships and collaborations, which boosts

performance. Again, connecting and engaging with staff in these events demonstrates a positive attribute of a firm to the public which would otherwise be difficult to see in serious office settings. Other participants highlighted the impact of business excellence awards in stimulating their creativity drive. For example, Bans asserted:

> ''For us joining business excellence awards can only be a good thing… None of us gets excited to look at the same old walls every day – even if the décor is changed with elegant colours and many plants. Although we do like our workspaces here, it gets a bit boring and a little interesting at times. So, in a way, this event allows us to take the team somewhere fresh and fascinating to stimulate their imagination and encourage them to think outside of the box''. [Bans, Manager]

This account showcases how some firms enter business excellence awards competitions and utilise the event to stimulate creativity among their staff. To managers like Bans, participating in business excellence awards makes their team excited and uses the events as a conducive environment for new ideas.

4.4.3 Boosting employee morale

Again, some of the participants shared the opinion that they often participate in BEA competitions because it instils enthusiasm in their employees. Such excitements are argued to make employees loyal and stay with a firm for longer. According to most of the participants that shared this view, joining award competitions and consequently attending the events is an opportunity to reduce stress by having a good time as a group while celebrating each other's accomplishments. This, according to them, is an active step in improving their organisation's well-being and group morale. For instance, Laura justified that entering for business excellence awards brings her employees together. She further cited that this strong bond and cohesiveness led to further successes in other areas of their operations. She stated

''The fun does not stop at the event; I can tell you people come to work early in the next working day to share the excitement with those who could not make it to the event. For me, that's all life and work is about. Having a strong team that brings the best of each other and celebrate successes together. We may have some differences and bad days but moments like this keep us through it all''. [Laura, Manager]

Inferring from this account, the study suggests that getting a strong team is not necessarily having a robust recruitment strategy, but it is an achievement that comes along outside the office activities such as business excellence awards through which employees get to interact with each other in a non-work-related environment and encourage stronger collaboration. Reinforcing this point, another participant commented:

''A day away from the office helps the employees see each other in a new light and interact with colleagues with whom they may not have the opportunity to interact regularly. Again, It is hard to get to know someone when you only talk about work. By attending these events they can talk about their families and other interests. This helps them to bond better and perform better in general. So, we try to incorporate these competitions into our calendar, and when we are lucky to get a nomination, we take full advantage of it by taking many of the staff here to the event''. [Baker, Manager] Analogous to boosting employees' morals, some participants suggested that they utilise their business excellence awards participation to make their employees feel valued. For example, Fiona stated:

''When we won last year, we took a group photo and added them to our website. We used the same photos to send appreciation posts to our clients. in doing this, everybody gets the deserved recognition and also feels valued by the company''. [Fiona, Manager]

This study argues that expressing appreciation for employees' contributions makes them feel valued and enhances the company's image to the public as an excellent place to work. Further, making team members visible gives potential clients a glimpse into those behind a successful brand. As a result, many firms are motivated to participate in BEAs to carve such an image to their employees and the public.

4.5 Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter expands the understanding of why so many businesses devote significant time and resources to entering and competing for business excellence awards. In achieving this, four main themes were identified from the data in relation to the research question and were extensively analysed to provide insight into how multiple motivations put together come to drive business excellence awards as a social phenomenon. The first theme unpacked how some firms capitalise on their business excellence awards nominations and winnings to develop themselves into positions that ensure more success in the future. The study participants recognised that such motivations stir their passion, build their confidence, help them to overcome their doubts, and believe in what they do to achieve greater heights.

Furthermore, the addiction to the taste of winning, realising a firm's potential through BEA competitions, and the use of BEAs as a measure of accomplishment were discussed. The findings suggest that all these motivations put together prompted BEAs participants to take gallant steps to build on their confidence and self-efficacy and learn from their past mistakes to bounce back stronger if that be the case. Interestingly among all the emotional and phycological motives discussed, it was evident that the core underlying attraction that binds them together is the prestige and significance of the material elements (award plaques, logos and the ceremony) that constitute BEAs as a social practice. Extrapolating from the presented findings, the prestige and significance of getting hold of these material elements that the study argues to be part of the three elements that contribute to the production, sustenance and reproduction of the phenomena (BEAs) are seen from the participant narratives to be the fuel that drove their purposes to enter and compete for the awards.

The second theme discussed how the need to prove brand consistency, resilience and awareness, among other antecedents, serves as a motivator for some firms to tap into the values and significance of the material elements of BEAs to achieve such goals. It was evident from the data that getting recognised with award plaques, logos and citations enables firms to signal their dominance, consistency and resilience to both competitors and the public. This suggests that so far as these award plaques, logos and citations continue to remain relevant to firms, the material fragment of the elements that constitute BEAs as a social practice will remain a crucial and strong link in sustaining the phenomena. The third theme captured the opinions of participants on issues concerning the cost-effectiveness of participating in business excellence awards. It was also evident from the data that some firms are biased in choosing BEAs over other alternatives owing to their familiarity with award processes and sometimes the benefits they have enjoyed from their previous involvements. On the other hand, the need to justify the disappointment of a few firms who cannot substantiate the real values captured from joining BEAs was identified as a potential motive that keeps some firms perpetually competing for BEAs until they get something to prove. In the final theme, the use of business excellence award events as a team-building platform was identified among many of the participant's narratives as a potential motive that influences many of these firms to continually enter these competitions. According to most of the participants, getting the opportunity to attend BEAs events is an activity they place a higher value on to encourage a positive corporate culture in which team bonding, creative ideas and employees' well-being are assured.

In conclusion, this chapter has provided some salient and fascinating findings to address why so many firms are motivated to enter business excellence award competitions. The findings

support and make theoretical advances by demonstrating the value of business excellence awards as a reliable signal to the public of the nominees/ winners' credibility and competence, hence inducing many firms to compete and achieve such recognition. Again as an excellent medium to measure a firm's position in terms of status and prestige of elite group belongingness, the findings share insight into why so many firms participate in BEAs to achieve this sense of belonging. This contribution supports previous studies that BEAs serve an important signalling function to many firms (Frey, 2007; Frey and Neckermann, 2010).

Further, the findings offer a major insight into the role and relevance of the material elements (Award plaques, citations, logos, and events) as an independent section of the three elements the study earlier argued link together in sustaining BEAs as a social practice. It was evident from the data that most firms are inspired by the values these elements offer to their firm's competitiveness hence informing their decision to compete for BEAs. Considering the relevance of these material elements and their value to firms' distinctive goals, the study argues it remains a strong link in sustaining the advancement of the phenomena as many firms will continue to be motivated to compete and capture such values. Whilst the findings have corroborated several results from prior studies, there are still some gaps that call for further investigation.

First, even with the best intentions, the right motives for competing for business excellence awards may lead to ends that were not part of firm's original plans. Beyond the apparent logic firms shared to be the reasons behind their BEAs participation, the study suggests firms may want to enter BEAs to cover up bad practices or even use their potential winnings to engage in unhealthy rivalries, which deserve more academic attention. Second, the chapter only scratched the surface, notably regarding why firms enter and compete for BEAs. However,

further studies can explore how the decision to enter BEAs affects performance. Thus, does the decision to enter BEAs encourage firms to put their affairs In order to stand a higher chance of winning or do firms overemphasise their attention to the award processes and forget about other relevant activities, which may lead to underperformance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Making sense of award categories and business excellence award choices

This chapter expands on the study's findings and aims to enhance our understanding of how firms decide which business excellence awards or categories to compete for. The chapter has two-fold objectives. The first goal is to provide insight into the underlying influences that shape the outcomes of most firms' business excellence award choices, as well as the processes these firms embark on to arrive at these decisions. In doing so, the emphasis is placed on the practical consciousness informing firms' BEAs choices and the competencies most of these firms may have developed from prior experiences in these competitions, which adds to their advantage of making informed decisions and improved entries in subsequent attempts. The second goal is to unpack the theoretical underpinnings of these identified competencies and skills in making informed choices and effective bids for their business excellence awards participation. This is accomplished by drawing on the conceptual similarities between what is identified in this finding as knowledgeability and understanding in making rational choices to the multiple forms of competencies postulated by Shove et al. (2012) as the second element of the circuit that links to form practice. The organisation of this chapter is as follows: The first section draws insights from the participants' narratives to explain the complex processes of due diligence they embark on in identifying credible awards and categories to enter. The second section highlights the influence of external attractions in shaping a firm's decisions. Following this is a discussion on the biases in firm award choices owing to external and environmental influences. Again, the discussion is stretched to cover how emotions,

specifically fear, subconsciously play a significant role in the choices firms make with regard to the kind of awards and categories they select to compete. To draw the curtains to the chapter, a brief discussion of the major findings uncovered in the chapter is presented.

5.1 Embarking on due diligence to make informed decisions

Due diligence is an exercise or effort to gather and analyse information before making decisions (Perry and Herd, 2004; Cumming and Zambelli, 2017). This arduous but important process was identified among many of the participants in this study as a guiding principle they frequently use to evaluate the many business excellence awards programs available to them and, through that, make informed choices to avoid the risk of selecting awards programs that may even dent their image in participating in such competitions. As identified in this study, many of these firms largely embark on this process by relying on the Internet to conduct background checks on the organisers of award programs they endeavour to enter. In most instances, some of these firms go further to access some of the requirements these programmes demand to ascertain what may be a fraudulent or non-merit-based awards scheme. The facts prove that by embarking on this exercise, firms become exposed to all the important details of an award programme before entering. In addition to using this process to assess the risk of joining an unknown award program, firms appeared to use this same process to establish the values award programmes present to them and, as a result, choose among the many options they have, those that correspond to their award strategy. What follows in the sections below is an expanded discussion on how some of these firms, through effective due diligence, come to conclusions about the awards and categories they compete for.

5.1.1 A careful look into the genuineness of the award program

As common with many activities, an increase in demand necessitates a significant supply of the desired wants (Croxton et al., 2002; Bates, 2007). Equally, the increasing appetite among firms to be externally recognised has created the need for more corporate recognition programmes across various industries and sectors to meet these high demands. This in the opinion of some management scholars, is a positive development because getting many organisations and platforms to give out external awards to firms at different levels and industries will create a vibrant recognition industry which will improve these competitions and help in duly recognising many of these firms that may look out for being rewarded for their hard work (Xia et al., 2016). Surprisingly the data suggest otherwise, it appears that many of these firms are conscious of the kind of business excellence awards programme they associate their brands with. In this study, most of the participants expressed concerns about the trustworthiness of many of the business excellence award programmes these days due to the potential risk of fraud and cheating, which hinder the spirit of the competition. According to many of them that shared similar arguments, the trustworthiness of the awarding body significantly influences the kind of business excellence awards programme they select to compete. In different accounts but with a similar view, the participants expressed how the trustworthiness of the awarding bodies and the award process mattered in choosing the kind of business excellence awards they compete for. According to Smit

> "Most often we look at the people behind the award. We try to look into how they do their things to establish their credibility. When asked how they do this due diligence, he further stated that they look out for some obvious red flags. This he said, most of these shady awards programs ask for a huge sum of payment for participation. They use this to exploit many firms that are disparate for awards. For us, we prefer to enter merit-based competitions. The advantage is that they are competitive which makes it more gratifying to win". [Smit, Chief Executive]

In Helen 32 statements:

"They are so many of them these days but we enter the ones our clients will be proud of. We do not just look at winning but most importantly how credible the award is. The reputation of the organisers is important to us because people regard these sources as valuable as the award itself". [Helen, Manager]

Jon also stated:

"Well, we enter many of our awards based on our own assessments. Some award companies also contact us to make entries and at times we do get some stating a happy client has nominated us for the awards. What we do is, In most cases, our brand's Manager, who has been with us for quite a long time l, will review the award criteria, consider if it's appropriate, and then apply to enter accordingly. So that is how we have been we have been doing it let here". [Jon financial planner]

These accounts demonstrate that, while many firms are ready to vie for business excellence awards, most of them are attracted by the credibility of the source of the award (Weismueller et al., 2020; Breves et al., 2019). The trustworthiness of award organisers appears to represent a more nuanced and vivid picture of the traits of the firm that won the awards, and in most instances, the awarding source's legitimacy even elevates just receiving a nomination to a level of distinction for participants. This also indicates that as most firms seek to leverage their fortunes from business excellence awards to forge an emotional connection between their brands and their customers, they will continue to depend on credible business excellence award sources to facilitate such objectives (Hu et al., 2019).

5.1.2 Ascertaining the credibility of business excellence award program

It is wealth to emphasise that distinguishing between what firms see as credible or trustworthy is subjective and largely dependent on what measures firms may put in place to sieve through what they regard as fake or credible business excellence awards. In addition to sharing their perspective on trustworthiness as a criterion for entering and competing in award programmes, many of these participants shared their experiences with unscrupulous business excellence award programmes they have encountered and how they spotted the red flags to withdraw from those programmes.

According to Ford:

> "I received an email that we had been shortlisted for an award. It did not sit well with me, so I asked the guys here because they would have told me if they had made an entry. They also expressed their shock, so I ignored it. Tell you what; these guys never relented; they continued sending the emails, so I said let me check what they are about. To add to my scepticism, their website was new, with nothing serious to be convinced about. My question is, how can you shortlist a firm without proof of their work? As a result, I immediately marked their messages as spam". [Ford, Manager]

In Frank's statement:

> "We had an eye on this award programme. They initially made no requests for money, as was stated emphatically on their web page. We put all the necessary stuff together and made the entry. Not long after, they began soliciting donations for a charity they run in conjunction with the award programme. Do not get me wrong, signing a check for a charity is not my problem, but it does give the impression that they are selling the awards to the highest bidder". [Frank, Manager]

In Jake's view:

> "There are some of them we are not going to enter again. They give no feedback as to why and how winners were chosen. They leave everything vague. I don't trust such award programmes, honestly". [Jake manager]

Lastly, on Drew's accounts:

> "Well, we received an email, stating that we have been nominated for best restaurants, so to speak, they told us , we needed to offer a meal, a complimentary meal for a couple of people, as part of their charity program. Again, we needed to buy a couple of

expensive tickets to attend the award ceremony to find out if we won. And then we went to the award ceremony, we were a little bit late. It might have had something to do with the couple of champagne we had before going. we were greeted pretty unpleasantly at the door because we were running late, which was fair enough, but at the same time this is hospitality and I expect any serious event organiser to know how to manage some of these issues. And yeah, we won an award, we went up on the stage and gave a speech talking about how difficult it is running an independent restaurant on our own blood, sweat, tears, and the sacrifices that we have made, personally and professionally. And then we did a little radio interview afterwards, which they did not seem to know much about our operation, which was a little bit weird. In the end, we found the awards ceremony a little bit, unorganised and unprofessional and that was the last time I entered that program". [Drew, senior Manager]

These accounts demonstrate how the participants use various actions by business excellence award programmes as an indicator to filter among which are fake or credible. To some participants, the transparency of the award process indicates the trustworthiness of the awarding body. Many of such firms appear to be anxious about how and how various award boards and judges take nominations and other critical decisions. Typically, these firms prefer to enter business excellence awards programmes where the selection criteria, background of judges and feedback are given before or after the program. This assures them of what the processes are about and enables them to know where they stand or even fall short as compared to the winners (Heald, 2018; Bouwens et al., 2022)

In other arguments, the sense of being financially exploited through business excellence awards participation appeared to be a deal-breaker for many of these firms in selecting an award to compete for. As competitive and important as winning business excellence awards are to these firms, it appears that many of them genuinely want to be rewarded for their hard work and excellence than using money as an influence to reach that goal (Ellingson-Cosenza, 2020). The study suggests that this makes highly monetised BEA programmes of less interest to firms when choosing an award to compete for. That being said, the study further suggests

that though it may look easy for firms to make a diligent choice in identifying an unauthentic BEA programme to avoid, in practice, such risk may be difficult to avoid as not all of these signs may show until these firms have a sour taste of what they get themselves involved with. The good news is that making such mistakes a few times turn out to become an important experience from which they draw their expertise in choosing the right award sources and making good outcomes from them.

5.1.3 Aligning award categories with a firm strategy

According to some participants, matching their award entry objectives to the calibre of award and category they hope to win is imperative when deciding which business excellent awards programme or categories to compete for. According to many participants who expressed these common opinions, identifying awards or categories that fit with their intended marketing strategy makes publicising the award's outcome reasonably simple and efficient. This, the study suggests, can be largely due to the fact that the majority of the audiences firms seek to use their awards to reach are relatively fragmented (Viltard, 2021). Therefore, entering an award programme that aligns with the values that firms wish to project to these audiences has become increasingly important in contemporary publicity campaigns in the attempt to make the public aware of what a firm is good at (Joshi and Hanssens, 2018; Schouten et al., 2020) . Related accounts of this argument are presented below. Over the course of his interview, Claire talked about the importance of selecting categories that reflects the intended purposes of his firm's marketing goals.

She commented,

"Choosing a category to enter can be a somehow difficult but an important decision to make. Clearly, there is a great deal that goes into making these selections. For instance, after the pandemic, most of the categories that have surprisingly become very competitive these days are related to Community championing and wellness initiatives. It is obvious that many of the clients out there are interested in learning how the firms they patronise have contributed to assisting their local Community during these difficult times, and with this in mind, many of us would want to incorporate these human elements into our marketing initiatives hence prompting the sudden surge of firms competing for those categories". [Claire manager]

In line with Claire's views, Steve emphasised the need to match the award his firm enters with the principles his firm symbolises.

He explained:

"I am really picky about the reputation and principles that the award programme reflects." We generally consider the name to see if it accurately depicts what we do. So, we basically regard it as an extension of our brand. Therefore, the ones we choose should at the very least reflect a positive image of our firm in the eyes of our clients".[Steve, Manager]

The above narratives imply that many of these firms tend to be attracted by the values of the awards they choose to compete for and the influence such values may have on their marketing strategies. It appears that these decisions are carefully evaluated among the rank and file of these firms to check if what they have identified in an award programme corresponds with their values as a firm and, most importantly, the intended purposes for which they hope to use the awards. The study argues that getting these decisions right presents these firms in a positive light, giving them an edge over their competitors in attracting customers who may use such values and standards to make their purchasing decisions.

5.2 Socio-contextual influences on seeking business excellence awards

External attribution is a well-known social psychology theory that explains how our social environment and events influence the behaviour and choices of individuals. In recent decades, management scholars have adopted this idea to characterise the cognitive process through which individuals see the causes of their actions. Similar to the tenets of this notion, the study identified a number of socio-contextual antecedents that were prevalent in the participant's narratives in justifying their decisions regarding the type of business excellence awards programmes or the categories they chose to enter. A full account of these intriguing insights is described in-depth in the following subsections.

5.2.1 Location specific influences on selecting business excellence awards programs

locational bias is a well-studied economic phenomenon that scholars suggest influences social actors' behaviour while making financial and strategic decisions (Levy, 2020). Just as in many other areas of management where this tendency has been recognised as affecting people's choices, the data revealed that some participants had comparable biases in making their business excellence awards decisions. In this study, most participants suggested that they strongly preferred regional and community-based awards programmes over national and international awards. Many of the firms' justifications for this decision appear to be based on the possible contributions their participation may have to the growth of their communities, yet many of these justifications do not appear to go beyond purely profit-driven considerations. In the subsections below, the study presents some of these accounts.

5.2.1.1 Competing through participating in local business excellence awards

The first identified reason for most of the firms selecting local awards is due to the fact that the majority of their targeted audience already knows the awards, and, as such becomes relatively easier to grab their attention by winning such awards. For other reasons, the local awards are argued to make competitions even stiffer and more intense as everyone gets to know who has won what and who has lost out (Zagorsek,2020). Consequently, there appears to be an invisible pressure on corporate rivals to outperform each other to get these important local bragging rights; hence such awards programs are regarded as a top priority on many firms' business agender. Some of the participants shared these views below.

According to Noble:

> "In the future, we hope to win these big awards, but for the time being, we are concentrating on those ones close to us. Tell you what, it is not only the stress involved in those big awards that put me off but for me local awards have that feel of the community identity which reflects the pride of who we are as a community, so winning one tells our client that we have been appreciated by the same area we all live. I think it is also easier for most people to authenticate and relate to what we are trying to communicate to them" [Noble, director].

On a different account:

> " Competition in a positive way drives the industry, so getting one from your own area is a huge statement about our operations. The locals relate it and as such many of us are keen on competing and winning. In this case, local awards always come to my mind first and I am proud of all the nominations and the ones we have won so far. [Perry, Manager]

5.2.1.2 Contributing to local communities through local and regional business excellence programs

The sense of making an economic impact on their local economy was identified as another social reason for some of these firms joining local and regional awards programs. The rationale behind this decision is that when these companies come together, they spend and patronise local goods and services such as hotels, catering, and even transportation, which has a multiplier effect on their own local economies (Ferguson and Thompson,2021; Ajulo et al., 2020).

Jane stated:

> I live and work in this Community, and I take great delight in making this place a nicer and cleaner place to live and work. Ultimately, I prefer to participate in any community activity that promotes the same goal as mine. like the majority of awarding schemes here, they donate a considerable portion of their revenues to charities in the area, which, in my opinion, is an excellent way to give back to the Community while also participating. [Jane, director]

According to Hill:

> It is beneficial to all of us. Other local businesses profit from these events, which contributes to the development of a strong regional economy. To give you an example, I met this client at one of the events who happened to be a member of the media crew that was covering the event. Despite the fact that it was more pleasant to see him there, it occurred to me that even if I do not win, I will at the very least have participated in a programme that impacts the lives of our locals. [Hill, owner]

In sum, the evidence from the extracts above suggests that while getting recognition from anywhere may have the same values that firms may utilise to enhance their competitive advantage, some of these firms do not lose sight of the possible financial contributions their participation in these events may have on their local communities hence influencing their bias toward local business excellence awards competitions.

5.2.1.3 Strengthening local connections

The third social reason identified to influence some of the participant's interest in local award programs is the need to satisfy their desire for social belongingness. According to some participants, participating in local business excellence award programmes offers them the opportunity to meet other small businesses in their local area, which fosters a more meaningful connection than attending a larger awards event.

According to Baker :

> Actually, I am incredibly comfortable networking with our own local businesses because I sometimes feel isolated as a young entrepreneur. So, to get that friendly boost and catch up with like-minded firms, I go to regional awards, where I met people facing comparable issues to mine. Most of them are people you may know already so that also makes it easier to connect". [Baker, Manager]

According to Chris:

> I started not long ago so basically, it is those local ones that I participate. Perhaps, as our company grows, a national award will make more sense to us. It is significant to me because it provides an excellent opportunity to network with people that have extensive experience in what it takes to succeed in this terrain. The majority of them are really pleasant and open to providing informal advice, which is extremely beneficial. [Chris, Manager]

It is noticeable from the above narratives that some of the participants rely substantially on local connections in doing business. So, the chance to have all key local stakeholders under one roof is an opportunity some of these firms would not want to pass up.

5.2.2 Destination appeal and side attractions

The destination appeal of the location where an award event will be held was identified as another underlying basis on which some of the participants chose or selected an award programme over other equally good options available to them. These attractions appear to satisfy the conditions within which these firms enjoy these events, therefore influencing their decision to keep competing for such awards programs (Zhou and Chen, 2021; Wanhill, 2022). The study suggests that some of these attractions may include all forms of natural and artificial resources, culture, location, heritage, history, customs and architectural features (Paroli and Maraschin, 2018). Among these mentioned, Paulino et al. (2021) argued that the ideal destination attractions are those that are rare, inimitable and only available at a particular destination or at very few destinations. During the interviews, the participants gave an account of some elements that makes a location appealing to them in joining an award program. According to Taz,

> Travelling a long distance for an award can be challenging at times, especially when done with a group. He stated: So, although it is not a solid basis for choosing an award to join, we occasionally examine whether or not we can get a comfortable apartment at a fair price to take the majority of the team there. Ideally, you would want to show your presence at these events, but it becomes difficult when you cannot acquire decent accommodation at a reasonable cost for our staff to stay there. So basically, all of these undercurrents are considered when deciding which award to apply for; however, as I previously mentioned, this is not the primary reason for not applying for an award; yet we take into account all of those other factors". [Taz, Manager]

Philip explained:

> Yeah, sometimes we use the opportunity to tour locations together after the event, hence having a good place to stay becomes a critical consideration for selecting which areas to attend an award event. The problem with London, for example, is that you may not be able to reserve a room for the entire team during peak periods, so you may

be forced to split them out among several locations, which will make the entire experience less thrilling. [Philip, Manager]

Inferring from the participants' accounts, the accommodation issue, which includes hotels and restaurants, appears to be a significant concern that weighs heavily on the firms when deciding which business excellence award programmes to participate in. This is especially the case when they are thinking about business excellence award programs located outside their regions and require them to spend the night in such places (Ortaleza and Mangali, 2021). In this light, it appears that the quality, availability, and cost of accommodations in the city that plays host to business excellence award programmes all indirectly influence the decisions that firms make regarding their participation in business excellence award programs (Ching et al., 2019).

In addition to the excitement of experiencing interesting locations through their business excellence awards endeavours, It also emerged from the data that many firms select the award they enter based on the potential side benefits they can capture from an award program. Some of these benefits include designated time for socialisation and networking, the prominence of keynote speakers, the millage of the award publicity and the opportunity for post-award activities. It appears that these additions have potential values these firms leverage to achieve complete satisfaction with their award entry. According to Phil:

> I prefer the traditional in-person award events over the virtual ones. Typically, you want to attend the event to build connections, identify opportunities, and engage with the keynote speakers. You never know who you may meet at these events, so I always go with my business cards, take note of those who are doing well in the industry, and learn from them. So, I pay close attention to the event and consider all of these factors while making my choices. [Phil, Manager]

According to James:

> Some of the award schemes have a huge impact in terms of publicity. Many have their own magazines and huge digital platforms. So, with a programme like that, you have the opportunity to reach a lot of audiences with even a nomination. For instance, Bristol life had a package for winners to go on a media tour after the award, which is nice. Yeah so of course all these opportunities are a push factor to settle on an award programme to join. [James, Manager]

5.2.3 Word-of-mouth recommendations

Again, In this study, it was evident that word-of-mouth recommendations about the venue where an award is hosted had a significant influence on firms' decisions when selecting an award to compete for. The sources of these recommendations appeared to be the shared thrilling experience of members of the decision-making team about the location where the award ceremony will be held or an electronic word-of-mouth advertisement by award organisers through their promotions of previous ceremonies and attractions of the current venue (Kanwel et al., 2019). The study suggests that business excellence awards programmes with a fascinating and successful history create a lasting and memorable experience in the minds of attendees, who in turn encourage others to participate in such programmes (Huang et al., 2012).

> According to Bans:

> "I remember we wanted to join this award programme which was being hosted at Birmingham, which I thought would be nice to go for that one, but one of our I.T guys gave an interesting account on why he thinks the award in York would be wealth, so we gave it a go. Interestingly we won that one and the experience was nice, as he said". [Bans, Manger]

According to Pedro:

"I was not initially interested in that one, but as I saw the images of their previous events, I could not help but be impressed by how well organised and fun it was. So in a way, that played a role in my situation". [Pedro, Manager]

It appears from the participant's accounts that word-of-mouth recommendations also serve as an opportunity for firms to be sure of their expectations in the kind of business excellence awards they choose to enter, especially when the recommendation is from a trusted source (Sweeny et al., 2008).

5.2.4 Matching organisational objectives with the award opportunities

Again, it emerged from the data that most firms make decisions based on specific goals they seek to achieve with their award entry. These sets of goals were identified to determine what kind of awards and categories they chose to enter. Many of the participants during the interview shared such experiences.

5.2.4.1 The opportunity to set a new challenge.

According to Jeff, the opportunity to set a new challenge and gather fresh experience is an ideal appeal for him in choosing the award to compete for. According to him, such adventure exposes his firm to numerous benefits which only come from moving from their comfort zone to meet different competitors in different locations. He narrated :

"for us, we usually look out for something unique and exciting. Competing in the same award programme over and over becomes routine and boring. We yearn for new experiences and challenges outside our comfort zone. We test our strengths with different awards programmes and even categories if it suits our direction. And of course, you get to see new places, meet new people, and get new ideas by attending

different events. Through that, you realise your capabilities, get more energy to face future challenges and build confidence. [Jeff, Manager]

Jeff's account indicates that in some instances, the excitement of seeing new places and testing one's strength to other firms outside their immediate market also entices firms to enter the award programme they select to compete for.

5.2.4.2 learning and capacity auditing.

In similar accounts, Ama shared how the possibility of learning from industry leaders shapes his decisions to enter the awards he selects to enter. For participants like Jan, learning through feedback and engagement with resource persons constituting the award boards exposes her to unique insights and knowledge about current trends in her industry. She narrated:

> "We look very much into the people behind the awards. Most of the awards come with a team with vast experiences, which you can tap into it as a bonus. So preferable, we chose the industry and the technical awards where after the process you do not get only the recognition but also get a deep sense of satisfaction from the insight gained from these experts" [Ama, Managing director].

Ama's insight unveils the potential attraction of key industry figures in influencing firms' choices to compete in such awards. Her story demonstrates that most of these firms use that opportunity to meet these experts and industry role models who may be difficult to reach in everyday life.

5.2.4.3 The thrill of an adventure.

Again, it appeared that conquering new territories is invigorating to some of the participants, which is just another influence of the choices some of these firms make with regard to the kind of award or categories they choose to enter. It appears that such firms have a voracious appetite for novel experiences, and winning new additional awards or categories is more appealing to them than repeating the same categories or an award programme. According to Toby:

> "We look for the potential of the award and, most importantly, if it has something new to add to what we already have. It is an opportunity to see new places and mark an important mark there". [Toby, Manager].

Taken as a whole, It has been evident in this section that many of these firms' award decisions were motivated by socio-environmental antecedents. It was established that these antecedents play a motivational role in influencing firms' choices by providing them with the drive and willingness to expand efforts to achieve such experiences, the purpose for which they entered the award, or the categories they select to compete. The study suggests that aside from the desire these socio-environmental antecedents generate in these firms to pursue those awards and categories, such influences also drive these firms to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills to identify awards with such characteristics and also make successful applications to enable them to compete in those award programs.

5.3.1 The influence of prior experience
5.3.1.2 Weighing the chances of winning: internal analysis of strategic capabilities

It was identified in this study that the majority of participants perform an internal review of their firm's operations to determine which aspects of their activities have a chance of winning an award or a category they seek to compete for. This, the study suggests, is a critical step for these firms to identify how to distribute their scarce resources in the order of priority to maximise the outcome of their business excellence awards endeavour (Khoshnevis and Teirlinck, 2018; Sengul et al., 2019). As identified in this study, many of the participants appeared to conduct this critical review by comparing their current performance to past performances and, if available, utilising feedback from their previous business excellence award submissions to determine how well they have closed the gaps identified by these experts in their previous attempts. The study suggests that this strategy is largely effective due to the fact that business excellence awards programmes and categories are distinct in terms of their eligibility requirements and competitive standards; therefore, evaluating one's strength in a year under review provides a solid starting point for determining which awards and categories a firm may put their hopes in to win (Nguyen et al., 2018). Again, it is argued that such exercises may save firms from wasting scarce but valuable time sifting through numerous business awards programmes only to discover later that they do not meet the qualifying requirements for the award or category (Cho and Lee, 2019). Below are excerpts from the participants' experiences with this approach. According to Jon:

> "It's a highly important exercise for us to know how each unit is doing, what's changing and how best we can utilise our results to stay on top of the game because there is a huge price to pay for ignoring some of these basic details and you may end up being left out of getting pass the nomination level. Usually, it begins with identifying what areas we all agree to look at. Whether it's sales, team development or

another area of growth, you will want to define the activities you are hoping to present in the competition and check where we stand a better chance". [Jon, Financial planner]

Tim also narrated:

"We sit as a team to discuss some of the improvements we have made so far to get a clearer picture of what strategy to adopt to get ahead. In some cases, we may have to drop the categories we have been entering based on the results of the performance and mostly, which is the case here, we keep going or even try something a bit higher than we have previously entered. It is an interesting but time-consuming exercise, if I may say". [Tim, Manager]

In Ama views :

"We do that a lot. We check our current results with our previous data. Usually, after such reviews, we get to know the areas to compete for and determine the monetary allocations for various departments for their own award entries. They are all aware that the competitions are becoming very competitive so the least we can do is to emulate or improve on past performance''. [Ama, Managing director]

The narratives from the participants suggest that an internal assessment of a firm's chances of winning an award or a category is an important exercise that guides them in making initial decisions towards their business excellence awards participation. By accessing their strength internally, they get to find out which categories or an award to drop and which they should be eyeing. It was again identified that these internal reviews facilitate making better decisions and help unit and department heads justify their reasoning in selecting which kind of category or an award they seek to enter. It also appears that these exercises are much associated with businesses with a very complex structure, and the ideal way they use in embarking on this exercise is by relying on previous performances and having clear-cut metrics in identifying where they stand better chances in competing. In many instances, it was identified that during

such exercises, actors involved in these decisions appear to go beyond arguing about performances deserving to go for external awards but also use the occasion to convince the whole team about the cost involved in making entries for their preferred choices.

5.3.2 The boons and burden of choices

The availability of multiple options is typically associated with a flourishing phenomenon (Gast et al., 2019). Likewise, in the context of award competitions, until recently, most business excellence award programmes had few categories for participating firms to choose from. This is evident from the Bristol Life awards programme, which began with 18 categories but extended those categories to 22 over time as more firms expressed interest in competing for their awards. One may assume that as award organisers expand their categories, these firms will have an excellent chance to compete for more awards and have the luxury to select among the many categories that fit their objectives. However, the evidence from the data gives a mixed reaction to the opportunities related to awards with more categories. For instance, according to Jeff: who indicated a preferable interest in business excellence awards with multiple categories, the higher chances of winning an award out of multiple entries informs his choice to enter such award programs. He stated:

> "We usually do multiple entries, so the larger the number of categories, the better for us. With that, we have more options to select from, which obviously boosts the chances of winning something. I think that is better than having to put all your focus on one category and missing out in the end. Every win makes a big difference with awards, so I do not see any reason for being picky or entering with a few categories". [Jeff, Manager]

Carr also made an interesting account similar to this, arguing that entering more categories from a single award programme makes economic sense. He stated:

''The potential of getting more categories from an award category is more interesting for us. With that, you skip the cost of paying different entry fees for different award programs in categories you compete for. If you can get the same categories at one programme, why should we stress ourselves in doing that for a different scheme? It makes economic sense on that level, and even in the end, you do not have to spend much on travelling and booking different programmes as well''. [Carr, Manager]

In contrast to these views, other participants shared different perspectives on business excellence awards with multiple categories. According to most of such narratives, business excellence awards with so many options of categories to select from causes choice overload, which takes a significant amount of time and preparation to think through to make the right decisions on which one to choose which ones to drop. Although not always the case, this study suggests that the more diverse an award scheme's catalogue is, the more complex and less pleasurable it would be for firms to make choices out of the abundant choices. According to Schwartz (2005), such situations make decision-making more challenging and significantly impact decision-makers' affective (emotional) experience. Consequently, this is argued to lessen the level of contentment with their decisions and heightens the likelihood that we will come to regret those decisions in the future if the choices they make do not produce their desired outcomes (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2009; Joseph and Schwartz, 2015). According to the Laura:

"with many choices available, we are always extra careful of which ones to enter because you ideally would not want to enter regret which one you should have entered and not. So, it is very tricky with those kinds of awards programmes". [Laura, Manager]

In Gary's case:

''The more options available to us, the more difficult it is for us to decide. Because of this, the experience feels even more tiring, and it also makes it more likely that we will choose nothing at all and put off making a decision altogether because we feel so overwhelmed by it''. [Gary, Manager]

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This makes an interesting finding because one would expect that with a wider catalogue of categories available to firms, there would be a greater chance that they would find an option that will suit their award strategy and perhaps leverage on that to win more awards as possible. But the reality is that more options only mean firms would have to make more decisions, which requires a substantial amount of time and mental energy, a valuable resource which is finite to stretch (Zaki, 2016). On the other hand, a situation with limited options may not be a concern with this level of stress as there may not be the compulsion to examine each and every one of the options available (Markus and Schwartz, 2010). The study, however, suggests that making decisions in the abundance of award categories to choose from is not inherently negative: it can encourage firms to analyse all of their options more methodically than they otherwise might, which can help them make more informed judgments than picking choosing from a small catalogue.

5.3.3 Influence of past successes or failure on making choices

Again, it appeared from the data that most of the participants made their business excellence award choices based on their experiences from past decisions, which could be seen to influence their tendency toward taking risks. In this study, the data captured different accounts of how participants' moods on experiences of failure or success influenced their decisions of which awards or categories to participate in. According to Phil:

> ''Yeah, we have the confidence now, we will be looking into other awards, but I think we will keep going for this one too. So far we have got positive reviews from the board and we have won a couple of the categories we have been competing for so it makes sense to keep going to this one to sustain this achievement while we explore other programmes as well''. [Phil, Manager]

In a similar account, Jake stated:

> '' It depends, let's say if they increase the entry price or if we do not meet their eligibility criteria, then we may not enter again but so far I have good experience with this award in particular, so I do not see the need not to enter again for now''. [Jake, Manager]

In different circumstances but similar accounts, Nash and Jane, who missed out on an award, shared that they are still keen on competing for an award regardless of their failed attempts.

According to Nash:

> "We did not successfully win the business of the year awards, but the review was really positive, so we are inspired to give it another shot. We may try our luck in other awards, but that will broadly depend on the potential mileage we can get from their publicities". [Nash, Manager]

With regards to Sarah:

> "It was a tough one, and I was not expecting to win anyway, but I think I may do much better next year because this was my first attempt".[Sarah, Manager]

The participant narratives above show that their earlier successes and failures influenced their decisions to continue participating in a BEA programme or category. For example, Ken's story demonstrated that the experience of winning an award could boost a company's self-esteem, make them feel more competent in their field of work, and encourage them to engage in even more competitive options, unmindful of the difficulties that may come with It (Bazerman and Moore, 2012). As seen from his statements, he appears to be more confident in his forecasts, less attentive to objective signs of the situation, and more vulnerable to delusions of being good enough to win even more awards.

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Failure, however, creates an opposite feeling but an equal effect on decision-making (Crocker and Park, 2004). Thus whiles, while the experience of success may put people in a good mood, the experience of failure generate a bad mood that can influence their decisions (Tice et al., 2001). It appears that as firms are keen on winning business excellence awards for different strategic reasons, they do not appear to give up on such goals easily even if they experience the bitter taste of losing out to corporate rivals but are, however, encouraged to pursue their award goals to redeem their lost pride and investments (Muraven and Slessareva, 2003). As observed from the words of some of the participants who lost out on their awards, they seem to be willing to reinvest and attempt to win the awards on the next occasion. It was also observed that as some firms prefer safer options to boost their chances of winning awards after previous disappointments, others were seen to be more likely to take challenging risks as they have no option but to go all out to reinstate their threatened self-esteem. The study suggests that Such firms may make risky choices in their award attempts because they may have nothing to lose as they have been used to the disappointment of losing awards.

5.3.4 Precedence as a reflective guide to making choices

Past precedents offer a repository of information about how an award is organised and offer a possible hint of how others did to win their awards (Kihlstrom, 2020). Typically, understanding the processes and procedures of an award programme is a bit of a challenge when a firm does not have a personal experience with such programmes. Evidently, it was established from the data that new entrances to the business excellence awards programme count on the internet to watch past proceedings to have a feel of how the programme they seek to join. According to participants that share these views, exclusive reliance on the

published call for the awards alone can needlessly handicap their efforts in getting a good outcome from award competitions.

In the words of Fiona:

> ''Mostly, when it comes to new awards, we check their website to look at some of the past events, which help in knowing their quality and the kind of people that you may potentially meet there. If you are lucky, you may also find some of the judges' feedback on their website. They in a way, help in our preparations because we get to know the task we are up to". [Fiona, Manager]

As observed from the participant accounts, past precedents of award events can be identified as a dependable source where essential information about the nature of an award programme may be accessible to have a sense of how an award programme runs and use that understanding to equip their preparation for the competition.

5.3.5 Managing inefficiencies and the lack of clarity in future entries

Business excellence awards, like any other competition, require a good deal of preparation to pull together every resource that gives one a competitive edge (Scott et., 2020). However, without or with limited insight into the past precedents of the kind of business excellence awards competition a firm would like to enter, the process of preparations may encounter challenges of overlapping and wasteful activities. The study identified that firms without proper insights or experience of past proceedings may be frustrated in their award entry preparations and may also be likely to waste huge amounts of time and other valuable resources. However, It was identified from data that through thorough retrospect of past events, firms are able to curb this challenge by using past experience to identify the right

armoury needed for the campaign. The study argues that with the right experience and insights at their fingertips, firms may coordinate their preparational activities efficiently with the relevant insights at their fingertips, contributing to them making smart choices in a short time. In the words of Frank:

> ''It is less hustle and quicker to file for the awards we have entered before because we usually have past templates and previous feedback which facilitates making quicker and smooth submissions. It is very important because most awards are different in nature and proceedings are different as well so without a proper feel of how things are done you may waste time in providing so many documents the panel may not need. An example I can remember is when we sent a team of five to make a presentation as part of the entry process but in the end, it only required just one person to do the presentation in a short time, so you see we would have saved some time and money if we had that knowledge earlier''. [Frank, Manager]

From the above narrative, the lack of prior insight into the proceedings of an awards programme which comes with the experience of past participation may lead to inefficiencies in their BEAs preparations which may cost them some financial losses and the opportunity of even getting a nomination. Avoiding these pitfalls requires an immense introspection of garnered experience from the past to reduce the inefficiencies that come with trying a new experience.

5.3.6 Individual personal values

It was identified that individual values influence firms' choices in deciding which business excellence awards to enter, especially when faced with many options. It appears that although most of the decisions firms make about their business excellence awards entries are mostly group-based decisions, from the data, it was identified there existed some differences in individuals' preferences of choice, which stem from their personal values. In an ideal situation,

firms should have a well-articulated award strategy in which their shared goals and policies regarding the choice of BEAs and categories to compete for should be clearly stipulated, but as identified from the accounts of some of the firms during the interview, they did not have a clear award strategy which guides their decisions hence contributing to many of such choices being born out of top executives personal preferences and values of what ought to be the right awarding scheme or categories to compete for, which the study suggests drags decision making longer because it may require a lot of compromises to reach consciousness if there are diverse preferences based on individual values.

According to Fiona:

> "Me and my husband make most of these decisions. He does not put much thought into what he thinks is not value for money. He thinks some of them are nice to have but are not worth spending hours of your time filling in the forms. So if I can tell him it is free, or it only costs a tenner, then he is like, yeah, I do not care. But for the more expensive ones, that is going to take some convincing. I do not quite know how I am going to do that, to be honest. I am hoping by that point, we will have some smaller awards and I can say to him, Look, see how much these smaller awards have done for us. So okay, now, let us pay for this bigger award Because it is a justifying investment. But for now, going for expensive awards will be difficult to convince him, especially at the moment". [Fiona, Manager]

From this account, it is evident that people's convictions and sentiments of what they perceive about an award or category, on some occasions, influence the kind of choices firms make in their award decisions. The study suggests that although such preferences may create misunderstandings and possibly slow decision-making when guided by facts and rich experiences, individual values may lead firms to make the right choices.

5.4. Influence of emotions *(fear and hope)* on decision making

It was identified again in this study that fears play a major role in influencing the decisions that firms make on which awards or categories they compete for. As an instinctual response to a perceived threat, fear serves as the brain's warning mechanism about impending unpleasant experiences (Kligyte et al., 2013). For instance, when put in endangering situations, people make prompt decisions in order to protect their lives, such as deciding whether to get ready to fight or flee from that danger. According to Hebb (1946), fear is the brain's way of sending us a warning that something undesirable is about to take place in our lives. As a result, humans are hardwired to pick up on negative signals and attach more weight to them than we would attach to any gains we might receive. People consequently have a natural dread of being left out of something important and even the concern of losing out on a superior option in the process of choosing among alternatives. We are terrified of losing priceless assets and are intimidated by the prospect of having nothing to show when others have such things, even in abundance. The pursuit of business excellence awards, on the other hand, does not present the same dangers and risks that individuals face in their daily lives; however, firms do experience some extent of fear, in varying degrees, in different, non-life-threatening circumstances in their pursuits for recognition (Lee, and Andrade, 2011). It appears that many of these fears are the result of past disappointments; hence many of these firms associate certain situations in their business excellence award pursuit with those negative or unpleasant experiences from the past. In this study, it was identified that, whether instinctive or conditioned, many firms' business excellence awards decisions have been made at the back of this single emotional response. What follows are some of the triggers of fears and their influences that the study identified to affect firms' decision-making on which business excellence programs or categories to enter and compete for.

5.4.1. Negative experience with business excellence awards choices

It was identified from the data that some firms lack the will to enter some award programs due to past unpleasant experiences with such programs. It was identified that many of these firms put emphasis on those awful experiences over the possible good values they may have captured from those competitions to make their future award decisions. In an interview with Steve, he shared an account of how a bad experience with an award programme turned him off from entering that programme ever again.

According to him:

> ''We travel all the way to this award event only for some of us to be refused entry. This was not long ago, it just as the covid restrictions were being lifted. So, what happened was that some of us only had one jab at the time but at the entrance, those in charge of the security requested double proof of vaccination or a covid results within 48 hours to the event. It was unfair treatment because I only had my vaccine not long from the time to the event and there was no chance, I was going to get a second dose within such a short time frame as per the regulation so you would expect any right-thinking person to understand this. Yeah, at the end I was able to enter but it was late and all this back and forth did not let me enjoy the program, which of course I do not see the point of going again". [Steve, Manager]

From such words, it is evidence that the "unfortunate experiences" grab the attention of people, stick to their memories, and, in many cases, influence the decisions and the risk they may be willing to take. The study suggests that these negative biases can limit the motivation for firms to compete in competitive awards because of the fear of being outperformed by corporate rivals or even being treated unfairly in their presence, which may push them to enter different business excellence awards programs to avoid such unfortunate experiences. Therefore, rather than focusing on what they will gain if they keep working toward an achievable target, they may be more likely to dwell on the bad experience they may encounter in the process of achieving that goal.

5.4.2 Loss aversion as an influence on business excellence awards choices

Again, it was identified that in some situations, firms are likely to avoid some business excellence categories due to the repercussions and pain of losing to a corporate rival. Unlike negative bias, which is caused by the fear of past experiences, firms that appear to be influenced by loss aversion seem to be more concerned by the potential consequence of not winning in the category they may choose to compete in. Usually, this happens when firms internally weigh their chances and identify gaps in their performance in an area, they themselves feel it will not be wealth to take the risk of competing as, in such situations, the cost of losing will be very disturbing to their image than the surprise they may pull if they take the risk to win in that category.

According to Gary:

> ''We did not compete last year because the timing was not right. We faced so many challenges due to the covid so the last thing to think about was to be involved in awards and even if we did compete, I do not think we would have stood a better chance of winning the categories we would have competed for because we were not fully in operation for the most part of the year". [Gary, Manager]

Inferring from this account, the study suggests that although he being risk-averse in such circumstances may be logical, the same decision may also have impeded his firm chances of winning an important award due to his intense fear of losing because of what he believed to be underwhelming performance. Perhaps what he perceives to be an underwhelming performance may have been among the best performances in that period.

5.4.3 Emotional attachments on decision making

In this study, it was identified that with time some firms become accustomed to some kind of business excellence awards and categories, which they place much attention and value to. In such situations, these firms appeared to be reluctant to part with such categories or BEA programmes because of the emotional attachment they may have developed to such programmes. While researchers have proposed different reasons for this effect (Heffetz et al., 2014), the study suggests that in the context of firms' BEAs decisions making, the reluctance toward switching to different programmes or categories is mostly born out of the good experiences such firms get from the said award programmes or the fear of the uncertainties in trying new things. This was evident in the interview with some of the participants.

Hill stated:

> ''I prefer to stick with this one for the meantime. The process is flexible, and it is competitive just as I want it to be. There are some awards that it seems almost everyone is given something at the end but that is not the case with the Bristol life; with them, you earn whatever you deserve''. [Hill, owner]

In Eades account:

> ''We came close the last time, so definitely we will put one or two together and see how it will go in our next attempt. When asked whether he would fancy his chance elsewhere, he said Sure, we might look into others as well but it will depend on how well it fits into our budget, the location and most importantly, the criteria we have to meet''. [Eades, Manager]

From the participant's words, it appears that their emotional attachments feeds their bias towards their chosen business excellence regardless of the opportunities that may exist elsewhere. It is evident that due to this effect, the participants place a higher value on those programmes they are already used to than the other equal alternatives that may be available.

5.4.4 Prioritising choices

The complication of selecting between several types of business excellence awards programmes and categories to compete for necessitates regular deliberation on why, which, when, and how firms should go by their BEAs entries. This also means that staff members and teams continually make decisions to find the best answers to these concerns. By setting priorities, firms are argued to be able to cater their resources to the stakes of the decision, thus avoiding wasting time on unrealistic targets and pushing their best efforts in the most efficient way (Kaya, 2020). From their accounts, Prioritisation was observed to be a paramount strategic lens that guides and drives their purpose into a common understanding as to why and how a selected choice may be more appealing (Zamani et al., 2021). The study suggests that by this process, a clearer logic is given to firms' choices which promotes consistency in their decision-making as well as bringing groups to resolution in a fair and participatory manner on the other hand. Despite its additional value of consistency to firms' decision-making, it was identified that certain priorities overlapped others in some circumstances. The following captures some of the decisions firms were identified to put their priorities on during their decision-making processes.

5.4.4.1 Time of essence: Weighing what is urgent versus what is important

It was identified that in some circumstances, firms were faced with the challenge of making an urgent choice to an important one. Although some urgent choices may be important, mostly there seems to be a vast difference between these choices. For instance, It was identified that the deadlines for some BEAs entries might require immediate attention from firms; thus,

when squeezed by time, these firms appear to deliberate on the potential loss to be incurred when not able to enter an award and how possible an entry can be swiftly done to meet such deadlines whiles, on the other hand, such firms may have other awards and categories on their radar which may be of strategic importance to their long-term objectives. It was identified that such a situation happens mostly because firms are not in control of when and where these business excellence awards programmes will happen. So, although firms may have an idea of which awards or categories they would like to enter in a year, the shifts in dates mean, they may have to restructure their priorities to make these difficult choices.

This Jeff explained:

> ''Realistically, there is overlap between the two, but although it Is not always the right thing to do, we tend to give priority to the urgent ones at the expense of those we may say are important on our list. Those deadline messages scream the loudest in our inbox, so naturally, we are tempted to give them the immediate necessary attention. When asked how they are able to work it out in the shortest possible time, he further responded, Yes, many of them are those that we have entered before that's why they get to email us when there have nominations open. So with those ones, since we already know their processes and have feedback from previous participation, it helps to fast-track the process''. [Jeff, Manager]

In the case of Helen:

> ''I am not sure there is an award without any value, almost all those we come across have certain importance to goal but it becomes a problem when we are only focusing on the deadlines and not giving adequate attention to those that may be equally important but offer a flexible space to make entries. For us, we put our priority on getting more time to prepare for the awards than being to make an entry where you may not make any important impact from''. [Helen, Manager]

From these two accounts, it is evident that in both situations (whether being pushed to enter an award just to beat an emergency deadline or to patiently focus on the one on a firm's radar which is of a strategic value), firms rely on their capacity value firms want from the award

they enter. The study suggests that firms with prior experience with an award programme or with the capacity to outsource the business excellence award preparation process to external awards writers can afford to go for awards with sorter deadlines, whereas it may be advisable for firms new to an award programme and without external support to go for awards with flexible deadlines and entries as participating in most award programmes need time and adequate preparations to stand a chance of getting good results from such entries.

5.5 Discussion and conclusions

This chapter expands the understanding of how firms make decisions on the awards and categories they select to enter and some of the processes they go through to arrive at such outcomes. In shedding this light, much emphasis was placed on the skills and competencies many of these firms draw on to make informed choices and proficient award entries. In achieving this, four main themes were identified from the data in relation to the research question and were extensively analysed to get to these findings. First, it was established in this finding that many of these firms have become vulnerable to the risk of selecting what may be classified as fake business excellence awards due to the growing need for external recognition, which has drawn various sources awarding these honours (Kübler and Proppe, 2012). According to the study, such dangers are increasing because the awarding sector is still relatively new and lacks the essential legislation to oversee the actions of awarding bodies. In the absence of regulatory controls over business excellence award activities, the mitigation of fraud and trust issues associated with award entries becomes the entire responsibility of firms. However, evidence in the research suggests that in order to eliminate these risks, most of these firms integrated due diligence and knowledge of their earlier experiences to make informed

decisions on their business excellence award choices. According to the study, the practical consciousness to pick credible awards and master their entry process is an important skill to acquire to be successful in business excellence awards competitions.

Second, the chapter discussed the influence of some identified socio contextual antecedents that steer the directions of firms' business excellence awards decisions. The evidence suggests that as part of a broad social system, the mental representation of these firms' immediate and afar surroundings frame and influence the kind of choices they make in their award pursuit. What was identified in the study is that in most cases, during the decision-making process, the mind deliberately delivers the most visible and suitable representation of these firms' external environment, which leads firms to classify events into preferences. This study suggests puts decision-makers at risk of over-generalisation and bias. (Patt and Zeckhauser, 2000) The interesting take here is that, depending on which social choices firms make on their award entries, the desire to achieve such objectives was identified to push firms to make the necessary adjustments to meet the criteria for those awards and also learn the processes to make competent entries.

It was further identified that firms respond differently to the complexity of choices. In some opinions, the availability of multiple award categories was argued to be overwhelming due to the time needed to thoroughly review all the available options and the risk that may result from making the wrong choices. In other contrasting opinions, business excellence awards with more categories were identified as appealing to some firms as competing in such programmes was argued by participants to boost their odds of getting their desired outcome from the award programme. In weighing these two opposing arguments, the study suggests that choosing an award programme with multiple categories offers firms superior benefits to

those with limited categories. As a result, firms are encouraged to outsource these duties to award consultants who are argued to have the capacity to make equally competent entries in their stead. Again, there was ample evidence from the data demonstrating that emotions play a significant part in firms' business award decision-making. For a long time, scholars have claimed that emotion hampered effective conduct and rational decision-making (McManus, 2021). Accordingly, Trombetta and Mecacci (2019) argued that emotion impeded productive behaviour and rational action. Equally, the evidence in this study revealed that strong emotions hampered participants' capacity to make rational decisions. For example, extreme emotions, such as fear and disappointment, were identified to prevent decision-makers from being objective while making critical decisions. It was identified that becoming emotionally involved inhibits decision-makers ability to analyse and absorb information accessible to them, lowering their cognitive abilities and reducing the number of alternatives they must choose because these emotions only direct them to a particular end.

CHAPTER SIX

The symbolic value and Outcomes of business excellence awards

This chapter expands on the study's findings and aims to expand the understanding of the values that firms could derive from their business excellence award fortunes and how they turn this into a competitive advantage for themselves. The first objective is to provide a deeper understanding of the values that the participants in the study, by virtue of their experiences, have attained as a result of their participation in the business excellence awards. In doing so, the focus is placed on the discursive practices the case study organisation adopted to make effective use of such valuable signalling assets (BEAs fortunes), as well as the responses they got from both the industry and the public as a result of doing what they did with their award winnings. The second objective of this chapter is to unpack the theoretical underpinnings of these identified values that the participants have attained with their BEAs fortunes and the meanings that they place on such achievements. This is accomplished by drawing on the conceptual parallels that exist between what is identified in this finding as the ultimate outcomes that firms could derive from the guest for business excellence awards and the symbolic meanings that Shove et al. (2012) postulated as the third element of the circuit that links to form practise. The following outline constitutes the organisation of this chapter: The first half of this chapter uses the narratives of the participants to derive conclusions about the social attraction and appreciation that can result from firms' participation in business excellence awards competitions. The second section focuses on the ability of companies to develop a positive brand impression and a unique brand positioning as another benefit that they get from receiving business excellence awards. The chapter reveals, once more, the

prospects for elevating a firm's profile through the use of business excellence awards. The findings are then stretched to cover business excellence awards fortunes as a morale booster for many of these firms. To draw the curtains to the chapter, a brief discussion of the major findings uncovered in the chapter is presented.

6.1 Creating an attractive brand

6.1.1 "Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan."

As the common say goes, "Victory is claimed by all, failure to one alone". Generally, as noted in many dispensations, when things start getting well, it becomes easy to find support, probably and ironically, even when such support may not be really needed (DePaulo et al., 1991). This sad yet sobering thought is a practical cue of how staying relevant and successful in business excellence award competitions has become important to many firms in making their brands and products attractive to their stakeholders (Atkin and McCardle, 2015; Way, 2016). As commonly identified in this study, many participants believed that joining business excellence awards competitions added admirable and positive touch to their brands' image, which as a result, initiated much interest from the public.

According to Phil:

> ''I can not say we get these clients because of the awards we have won. I think it would be stupid to ask if they patronise our services because of the awards we have won, but what we have to realise is the reaction we get when we post these awards online. It is massive; the kind of love and comments people, some familiar and unfamiliar, share about us is encouraging, which also indicates that the award is making us a preferable choice of these people''. [Phil, manager]

In similar accounts to Drew mentioned:

''Most of the clients were proud of it, they asked about the awards, they sent their best wishes, and it was all nice. Even some of our suppliers officially sent their congratulations as well. Even at times, you would look through the door and see people having a look at the award sticker on the door, which is a good feeling knowing people are noticing our good works. So not saying much, I feel the awards make them proud of us, and we will keep pushing to maintain the confidence they have in us''. [Drew, Senior Manager]

From the accounts above, it can be inferred that whiles firms keep trying different strategies to shape public affection towards their brands, those same customers, on the other hand, are constantly searching and aligning themselves for brands they can adore (Bottomley and Holden, 2001; Fournier and Yao, 1997). Evidently, today's customers are not just shoppers but prefer to select brands they can be influencers for within their social circles (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014; Erz and Heeris, 2018). This has become rational considering the fact that customers currently have access to a wide variety of options in the market (Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2007), and they also have a limited amount of time to consider and decide upon their purchase options (Mowen, 1988). Hence from customers perspective, third-party validations and endorsements like BEAs make it much simpler to find brands they can adore and have faith in remaining loyal. This also eliminates the stress of customers having to do further due diligence on a product and the danger of purchasing a product of a lower quality or coping with a longer service waiting time (Perry and Herd, 2004). Fortunately, unlike traditional marketing, which mainly introduces a brand and its product to customers, business excellence awards appear to be the best bet for many of these firms in filling the gap that mainstream advertisement can do in making a brand or product admirable to their customers (Salehi et al., 2012; Yasmin et al., 2015.). How this is achieved is further discussed in the following subsections.

6.1.2 Customer interactions with business excellence award fortunes.

It was identified in this study that through business excellence, firms are able to engage better with their client. Winning or getting a nomination for an award is a piece of exciting news which creates a mutual response between firms and their clients (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Vivek et al., 2012). For many of these firms, this symbolic representation (award plaques, logos, certificates etc.) is valuable content that they leverage to start conversations with their customers (Verhoef et al., 2010). Although it may look like a mere congratulatory message on a billboard or on social media platforms to show the courtesy of their appreciation, firms use their awards to get in touch with their client to reassure them of their quality of service. According to Steve:

> ''We use it as an opportunity to recognise the outstanding accomplishments of our customers and other relevant stakeholders' contributions to making us a better brand. It is satisfying for them to know the brand they patronise is doing well, and I think it boosts their confidence in our brands as well''. [Steve, Manager]

To Jon:

> ''The awards keep our conversations going with our clients. We post everything out from the time we get the nominations, the team we send to the events and the fortune we make from it. Not all the reactions are nice, some people can be mean but it all part of the process, to let them feel part of the journey and associate themselves with every success we achieve''. [Jon, Financial Manager]

Inferring from these statements, most of these firms appear to have the opportunity to show their consumers that they value and acknowledge them when they are nominated for awards or when they win those awards. This, the study suggests, is an essential element in attracting and retaining loyal customers. In the same way as in personal relationships, if people feel they

are given recognition and made to feel valued, it makes it more appealing and rewarding for them to remain as partners.

6.1.3. Staying Relevant

Again, the data evidence suggests that some companies make use of their achievements in business excellence award competitions to demonstrate to their clientele that they are continually striving to be helpful, inventive, and current in their operations. In most instances, when firms achieve fortunes from business excellence award competitions, it indicates to stakeholders and the public that they are performing better than their competitors in delivering precisely to industry standards and satisfying the needs of their clients at all times (Zhao, 2000). Accordingly, these are the measures firms are weighed on even to bag a nomination and stand a chance of winning subsequently (Jemmasi et al., 1994). So for bystanders, award-winning firms are seen as dominant forces in their industry that no one else can compete with, rendering them a favourite and irreplaceable choice for their customers (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). According to Toby:

> ''It is imperative to stay and look competitive in this competitive environment we all find ourselves. For us, it is an opportunity to show our clients we still got it and as ever competent as we have always been. I think it is a sort of reassurance to them that we are current and eliminates doubts about our position in the industry. We may even get clients who may look into some of these factors to make their choices''. [Toby, Manager]

According to Chris :

> ''I think getting shortlisted worked perfectly for me. In a way, I felt that people started taking us a bit more serious. It kind of showed that we are not going away anytime soon. For instance, when I did networking online, people would tell people about the award, and it was Oh, okay. Yeah, you are good. It has that kind of immediate impact

in shaping people's thoughts on how serious we are as a firm, especially when we have only been in business for nine months. There is that kind of, you know, startup, are going to survive that kind of pressure? And it was like you got shortlisted for that before your first year in business. That was quite big. And it did change the way people look, especially potential clients''. [Chris, Manager]

Baker also mentioned:

''Yeah, I do not wholly know the answer to that, actually. I think we were very lucky that as a business, we came into the industry at a time when it was less competitive. And we built a very successful brand during that time. And so we were sort of a bit ahead of the game before our competitors. And even with that, even though we keep getting nominations, people will be like, gosh, when did they start getting recognition? So perhaps our past success in the competitions may classify us as one of the older gents in the industry, you know, we are long in the tooth in comparison to many of our competitors. We are also one of the largest. And I think the fact that year on year, we still contest consistently win awards, both as a business but also on behalf of our customers, I think is, is probably a testament to our consistency and relevance in the industry''. [Baker, Manager]

These accounts suggest that many of these firms cling to their BEA's fortunes to reassure their potential clients of their capacity to provide current standards of services and the potential of being on top among the best for a long time. According to many of these firms, making such statements with their award fortunes is a sure mark that instils confidence in their customers about their operations now and their future prospects as a firm.

6.1.4 Gaining visibility and attention

Many firms operate in markets where they must actively compete for clients' attention (Iyer and Katona, 2016). In spite of the fact that a variety of methods and approaches could be used to accomplish this goal, the data revealed that firms typically use their business excellence award fortunes as non-intrusive content to engage and capture the attention of their clients. To achieve this goal, many of these companies engage in interactions with the general public, employing the values that were added to their brand due to their involvement in business excellence award programmes to generate positive emotional ties and attention to their brands and products.

According to Perry,

> ''The awards present our brand with a sense of identity and meaning. We take great pride in being a sustainable local business; as a result, receiving recognition from a reputable Bristol-based award makes it simpler for us to communicate these values to our customers, and on the other hand, it helps us attract customers who are very committed to supporting local businesses''. [Perry, Manager]

According to Jake:

> ''The award factor does work for us. We get new clients now and then because I think they have got to know what we stand for. People see the social media post we do so having won the same category on a bounce get us more attention and credibility''. [Jake, Manager]

In a different interview, Lucy stated:

> ''Our excellent services alone are insufficient to keep our customers or bring in new customers. Now more than ever, customers want to be associated with brands or certain regard; so, as businesses, we benefit from these awards in providing our customers with something they can be proud of and have confidence in when choosing our service''. [Lucy, Manager]

This narrative illustrates the significance of business excellence awards in developing and maintaining the image that companies wish to project to the general public and, by extension, in attracting the attention of consumers as a result of doing so. This may be of particular assistance to small firms, which may have a more difficult time acquiring the resources and content necessary to effectively communicate their brand image to existing consumers and potential new customers via more conventional methods of marketing communication (Parry et al., 2012; Knight, 2000). According to the participants, their audiences' attention is captivated by deliberately developing clear values and emotional ties with them, which is something that their participation in the business excellence awards has helped facilitate. Again, this finding demonstrates very clearly that although there will still be demand for products that have practical values, the functionality of those products will not be as important as it used to be. Instead, the prestige and moral values of firms and their products play an important role in consumers' minds when deciding whether to make a particular purchase (Wang et al., 2018; Rajagopal, 2007). Consequently, firms look to leverage on business excellence awards to add that value to their brands and products and provide customers with the type of consumption experience they expect from a company and the service/product they offer. This finding is consistent with Polinkevych and Kamiński (2018). arguments, which they suggest that as the focus of customer purchasing decisions continues to shift away from the perceived qualities of a company or its products and toward the firm's corporate visual identity and moral values, business excellence awards fortunes will become an increasingly important and effective marketing tool for getting the attention of these customers to firms that excel in such competitions.

6.1.4.1 Gaining public attention

When the signal is strong enough, people will come to the conclusion of their own free choice in putting faith in a firm and the message they send regarding their qualities (Beverland et al., 2008; Riley, 1975). In analysing the data, there appeared to be many ways that most of these participants adopted to use their business excellence award fortunes to get the necessary attention from their clients. For some participants, the dissemination of this good news was facilitated and achieved through their organisational communication channels. According to Freke:

> ''We usually put both nominations and winnings on our website. I do not know if they have this one there yet, but that is how we do it. We share them on our social media platforms too. That one works fine because you get to monitor the conversations the post has been able to generate from the public''. [Freke, Manager]

According to Ford:

> ''We encourage the staff to post them on their personal social media accounts alongside what we put on our official accounts. I do not know if you saw it when opening the door; we also have a couple of those stickers there''. [Ford, Manager]

Others also stressed that they relied on the free publicity they get through radio interviews after the award events and the commercials award organisers do before the events to get the public's attention.

According to Sarah:

> ''Apart from the attention we get from our own publicity, we do benefit from the radio interviews after the awards. With that, we get the chance to tell our story and convince people about us''. [Sarah, Manager]

6.2 Crafting a positive brand perception

According to the data, some firms appeared to use their business excellence award fortunes to shape customer behaviour and perception of their brands and products. Most of these firms appear to exploit the symbolic value of their award successes to show the quality and distinguished status of their brand and products, which may resonate with customers whose social positions and lifestyles coincide with the firm's symbolic image (Miller, 2007; Japutra et al., 2019). Evidently, these firms appear to stimulate people's attitudes and feelings toward their brands and products by promoting their award nominations and wins (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011). The study suggests that this kind of external impression pushes the needle for the majority of firms. For example, people with comparable interests and lifestyles are more inclined to promote a brand or product that satisfies their tastes and preferences, resulting in a significant increase in market share and sales of such firms. Below are some interesting views the participants shared about using their awards to create a new niche.

6.2.1 Establishing a loyal customer base

The data also identified that some participants' award fortunes were essential in retaining their clients. According to some of the participants, their business excellence award fortunes encourage their clients to associate themselves with their brand and instil in them the confidence that what they offer them meets the required market standards.

According to Carr:

> ''Some clients are only concerned with the quality of our products, but thanks to the accolades, we are able to build a long-lasting relationship with them. Even though there are a lot of other shops in this area, the vast majority of customers still come to us to do their shopping''. [Carr, Manager]

According to Smit:

> ''The awards not only make your target audience notice your brand but also make it possible for them to become familiar with your brand. Trust in the brand typically follows once customers have experienced our services. Fortunately, most of them keep coming back, which suggests it is not only about winning awards, but we walk the talk, which makes them committed to our services''. [Smit, Chief executive]

Inferring from these narratives, the study implies that obtaining brand prestige through business excellence awards may even promote customer loyalty to the point where customers may be willing to accept higher prices for the brand (Atulkar, 2020; Fernandes and Moreira, 2019). Additionally, it appears that when a firm's prestige from awards leads to customer loyalty, such a bond creates strong emotional ties making it difficult for customers to look to other competitors to buy from (Mostafa and Kasamani, 2020). That being said, the study suggests that in other to maintain customers for long periods, firms need to have a clear message with their awards publicity, which their customers can relate to and begin to associate themselves with. As long as the message being delivered to the intended audience is clear and memorable, it acts as a seed that eventually sprouts into an image of the brand in customers' minds and, through that, becomes their personal favourite (Skard and Thorbjørnsen, 2014).

6.2.2 Achieving customer satisfaction

According to the data, many of the participants appear to recognise that customers' satisfaction with their brand and products is influenced not only by the quality of the service or product they provide but also by the status that the service and product bestow upon their customers as they patronise their products and services. As a result, a number of these

companies mentioned that they use their business excellence award-winnings as a perfect instrument to strengthen their brand to fulfil the expectations of prestige-oriented clients who like showy and lavish consumption. In sharing his account of how his firm's post-consumption review has improved recently due to his firm's business excellence award participation, Helen stated:

> ''I must say the awards inspire trust in our consumers, especially the new ones. People frequently point out to us that our services are comparable to the honours that we have been winning. This indicates that what we provide is of a higher quality as our awards suggest''. [Helen, Manager]

In similar accounts, Alen narrated that:

> ''The awards provide us with the leverage to convince our clients of the values we have as a firm, and the good thing about it is that we do not need to say a thousand words to convince them about this. The only problem with that is that the accolades drive customers to have higher expectations from us because everyone believes that an award-winning company should be able to deliver the kind of service that the award suggests, but fortunately, we have not come across a client who has claimed that they did not have a positive experience despite the fact that we have been given an award''. [Alen, Accountant]

According to these narratives, business excellence awards can be argued to add Luxurious attributes to a brand and its products/services, which firms appear to utilise to serve the demands of customers who are primarily drawn to the brand's distinctiveness and prestige (Kim et al., 2019). Many of these lavish customers are said to view a company's award fortunes as a quality and prestige label, which contributes psychologically to their expectations being exceeded even before they experience the product services (Nysveen and Pedersen, 2014). The study suggests that the award fortunes of firms are very likely to shape their perception of their encounter with a firm's product and services, contributing to excellent satisfaction and evaluation of their experience with a brand and its product/services (McAlexander et al.,

2003). In addition to signalling excellence, the narratives show that firms use their award fortunes to stimulate purchases and decrease risk concerns about their brand and products. From a strategic standpoint, when businesses can capitalise on this level of customer pleasure, they may expect recurring patronage from their customer base, resulting in stronger customer connections and loyalty (Rather et al., 2019).

6.2.3 Staking out territories

Similar to how winners celebrate their victories by "capturing the flags of their enemies," "staking out territories" refers, in its purest form, to some of the participants' attempts to become famous by using their business excellence award fortunes to create or keep social boundaries that reinforce their real or perceived status distinctions (Daloz, 2013). To get to this end, some of these firms appear to leverage their fortunes from business excellence awards as a form of stake to ringfence some of the industry-specific organising competencies that make them look and feel "better"—esteemed and competent than their rivals. As observed in this study, this fortress building often starts to play out in the discursive practice of delivering award acceptance speeches, often lurking behind these celebratory speeches, which the study suggests are dark inequities and widespread discontent among rivals.

As suggested by Smart:

> ''It takes a great deal of time and effort to get these awards. The competition for it is fierce and we are not about to back down just yet…. I trust we do a great job and as such we will keep competing for more awards subsequently''. [Smart, Director]

Dani also, on the stomp, warns darkly of the near hypercompetitive nature of BEAs, its potential ramification for value capture, and how his organisation managed to beat the pack to win:

> ''The interesting thing about these competitions is that now many firms are aware of awards and their impact on raising a brand profile—this drive the competition to be very stiff. In essence, it is now literally like the survival of the fittest. In other to stay ahead of the pack, we have to enter for categories to stand the chance of at least winning one of two''. [Dani, Marketing manager]

The data also reveals that the staking of territories, as expressed in many participants' narratives, was ingrained in their unwavering emphasis on how competitive business excellence awards have recently become, as well as the time they put into preparing, entering, and competing for the award. According to the study, this is a long-term practice of making aggressive comments to the market, which sometimes appears as a (un)conscious attempt to mock rivals and competitors. For example, Perry and Lucy's musings on their individual business excellence award riches were a less-than-subtle dig at their corporate rivals.

According to Perry:

> ''It was a shocker. I think many people were sceptical about our chances, but anyway, that made it even better''. [Perry, Manager]

According to Lucy:

> ''Yeah, it was important to let people know we are still in business, and there is no other way to make such a statement better than getting a nomination for an award''. [Lucy, Manager]

Direct taunting, which was regularly audible during the award ceremonies, generally took the form of digs and side-swiping at high-profile competitors. They may appear as coded messages intended to drive competitiveness and performance, but they are more likely used

to reinforce the award-winning organisation's position with respect to their competitors. this, the study suggests, could lead to unethical behaviour because targets are especially driven to see their opponent lose as well (Yip et al., 2018). It was also shown that some organisations inadvertently encourage others to tease their target by adopting a hilarious and tongue-in cheek attitude, frequently releasing -narratives about their business excellence award fortunes that appear cheeky and well-aimed jab at rivals. A clear example is an account by Barnes:

> ''They should know we are better than all them lot. You don't play games with us….we win them! Yes, we keep winning year in, year out, and they are not very pleased. Pleasing everyone is impossible but p***sing all the other nominees off is a piece of cake'' [Barnes, Manager]

As was observed, some of these indirect taunts can take a more aggressive turn to antagonise competitors, sometimes not to the taunters' own economic advantage. The instinct of the need for punchier efforts to flooring rivals was as normative as empirical in many participants' narratives. According to Ford:

> ''Obviously, I think our competitors may get jealous of the kind of coverage we received. It was important to us to let people know we stand out from the rest''. [Ford, Manager]

According to Hill:

> ''Winning this award means we don't need to spend a lot of money to get one over our bloody competitors. Expect us to stick to the undisputable facts that won us the award to finish them off. It's a knockout for them''. [Hill, Owner]

A casual perusal of the organisational websites of these two participants, in particular, reveals triumphant declarations and narratives on how they have surpassed themselves to win their business excellence award fortunes. On social media platforms, narratives about Business

Excellence Awards podium finishing were found to be a troll or provocation to competitors when organisations consciously signal their standings in their industry to the public when talking about their BEAs fortunes.

As stated by Steve:

> ''We are going to put it on all of our social media platforms and tell the world we are leading the pack when it comes to choosing a place to work. I'm not sure our competitors will love to hear that, but who cares? We are already poaching their staffs…hang on, it is not our fault for being the best, is it ?'' [Steve, Manager].

While such subtle dig at competitors or rivals in social media messaging about their win may not align with and echo many organisations' brand values, backfire or lead to a series of counter-attacks, anecdotal evidence from the data suggests many of the award-winning organisations are very much aware of the need to navigate this bind could result in significant audience engagement across many social media platforms. Such bravery and Dutch courage could easily get customers and onlookers talking, which could potentially generate large amounts of publicity that reap visibility rewards.

6.3 Boosting organisational profile

Staying attractive is a hard-to-earn achievement and profile many firms jealously protect. Interestingly among many strategies firms may utilise to create such an enviable profile, it emerged from the data that many of the participants relied on their achievements in business excellence awards to further boost this profile and establish a solid case for their firm's trustworthiness and credibility for business engagement. The sections below capture some of these salient values identified from the data that most of the firms appeared to capitalise on their business excellence award fortunes to boost their corporate profile.

6.3.1 Gaining public trust and respect through business excellence awards

Trust in a brand is about the confidence that customers have that a firm will do or provide the services or product satisfaction they promise (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2005). In a world full of empty promises and exaggerations, customers have learned that due diligence helps protect them against bad deals and scam firms (Wu and Yuan, 2014). With this idea in mind, many firms leverage their business excellence award fortunes to instil confidence in the public about their brand and boost their profile in that regard. Business excellence award fortunes, specifically ones displayed on a product's label, add a level of certainty and quality assurance during the consumer's selection and purchasing process. For instance, given the current emphasis placed on the safeguarding of the environment, providing evidence in support of sustainability claims is essential to the growth of consumer trust and the profile of firms that get nominations or wins for business sustainability awards or categories. When consumers see a third-party certification displayed or visible on a product, customers believe that specific standards have been met because an outside

organisation has verified the activities of firms through rigorous scrutiny of their operations

and processes (Cook and Luo, 2003).

According to Pedro:

> ''One of the things that I found working in this industry is that some of these marketing agencies bill you for literally everything. Mostly they do not disclose these charges to their clients until when they send them an invoice….. And so there is that kind of distress. People think that marketing agencies are up there to rip them off. They think that they are going to get an invoice at the end of the month, and then it is going to shock them. So there is not a huge amount of trust. So when people come to me, they kind of expect the same service. And I do not do that. I have learned from the horrible agencies….. After getting nominated, there is that kind of, Okay, you have been shortlisted, then you must be good at what you do. And it kind of reinforces all those messages that we put out there that is, you know, honesty and transparency. So, yeah, it is vital to compete in those competitions because it makes it easy for clients to trust you''. [Pedro, Manager]

Intriguingly, this finding reveals that the majority of the issues that some companies encounter

with customer impressions are not unique to the operations of individual companies but

rather to the industry in which they operate. However, the study reveals that many of these

companies use their business excellence awards as a visual language to communicate to their

clientele their unobservable attributes. Customers feel confident in a company's services and

secure in their reliance on them when they receive these signs of dependability on a regular

basis. Business excellence awards promote feelings of safety, reduce anxiety, and increase

brand confidence. Customers appear to be more receptive to establishing a relationship with

companies that have won business excellence awards because they know they can rely on

(trust) the brand. On the other side, the evidence reveals that companies may also utilise their

business excellence award fortunes to persuade clients to believe and trust that they are

providing a benefit to many by purchasing their services or products. It is essential for these

businesses to demonstrate to their clients and consumers that they are asking a fair price for their products and services. Therefore, they employ their business excellence award-winnings to dispel doubts or suspicions regarding their quality and justify why they should not switch to cheaper competitors.

BEAs recognise outstanding companies for their accomplishments (Grigg and Mann, 2008). This symbolic recognition boosts a company's prestige, draws public attention, and helps to mould public and industry perceptions favourably (Gemser and Wijnberg, 2002). Again, being rated positively by criteria that many others fail to fulfil entitles one to high regard.

Because of its symbolic value, many organisations attempt to utilise the physical and aesthetic characteristics of their business excellence awards winnings to generate a good impression and ultimately acquire public and industry admiration for their brand and products (Beer and Leider, 2022). They appear to incorporate these symbolic ideals into their products and profiles on their websites and in public locations. This exhibition of their accolades and nominations, whether subconsciously or intentionally, appears to register clearly in the minds of the public how respectable the firm or product may be (Loureiro et al., 2019).

According to Taz:

> ''Yeah, the intention was to garner a great deal of attention from it... I was quite fortunate to find an expert who led us through the process of publicising it.... Whether it had an impact on sales, I am not sure yet, but I feel it was worthwhile''. [Taz, Manager]

According to Chloe:

> ''So, we only got the nomination, unfortunately, we did not win…. I remember we did a cool video on YouTube to thank our customers for the nomination. I hope that would encourage them to support us even further to win some awards going forward''. [Chloe, Manager]

For Philip:

> ''We have entered this category; I think three years now. Surprisingly we won on our first attempt, but we have not had luck on other subsequent attempts. we have been considering other categories now, but it is a general belief in the group to keep going for this one. I believe it makes marketing much easier when you focus on a specific one. for us even the two we did not win, we posted them as successful nominees in that category… With this, I think customers get to know what we stand for''. [Philip, Manager]

Elsewhere, Frank also observed:

> ''The plan is to utilise the awards as a recognisable feature in our social media ads. Hopefully, if we are able to keep this consistency, with time, people will get to know us by the awards we have won, which in a way creates an awareness of how good we are''. [Frank, manager]

In a related development, Jon had this to say:

> ''Most people are more sceptical now than ever. With these nominations, we have been able to build that strong, lasting relationships with our customers, and for future clients, I believe when they do come across our posts, at least they can find something reassuring to meet their expectations''. [Jon, Financial planner]

The above extracts exhibit the significance of most of the participant's BEA's in giving their brands the attention and respect they aspire for. The important take from these narratives is how these firms make good use of the platforms and channels available to them to project these fortunes to the public, which in turn yields them such outcomes. The study argues that without the good use of such platforms, these symbolic fortunes they have achieved would become just a white elephant which use would be limited to just internal decoration purposes.

6.3.2 Boosting organisational credibility

Credibility is a crucial currency for business. It is the glue that binds companies to their customers and to the communities where they operate (Balluchi et al., 2021). Evidently, customers are more likely to buy products from a company they trust, and citizens are more likely to support business operations within their community if they trust the company (Rifi and Mostafa, 2022). Hence, firms interested in lasting for the long term understand that maintaining credibility translates to a stronger brand reputation, a more reliable social license to operate, and an ability to attract and retain talent and capital (Baier et al., 2022). To many of our respondents, winning business excellence awards gives greater credibility in the eyes of customers and investors, which in turn yields financial rewards that create an incentive for firms with such prestigious status to protect and enhance their standing (Podolny, 1994). This protective desire becomes particularly imminent when a status order is unstable. In situations like this, high-status actors, in particular, remain unsure that their status will endure due to competitive pressures (Yogev, 2010). Interestingly, this resounding theme emerged from the data: our respondents described how the fear of losing out to close competitors on the prestige and related outcomes of winning business awards induces them to partake in BEA competitions incessantly. Two of our respondents, Baker and Kane, explained:

> ''It is a very competitive industry, so I literally feel gutted losing to our competitors…. It is more devastating when you won the same category a year before or did not participate or get a nomination at all. It is a sort of an indicator to the market that you are underperforming''. [Kane, manager]

> ''I am really competitive, like really, really, really competitive. To the point that is probably bad…. I mean, in our category, the winner was a wedding dress shop. And their story was amazing. So you know, I can see why the judges chose them. Had it been another Pub, I would be a bit annoyed, which is probably a bad thing to say. I would have been questioning, like, why did they win? What have they done that I have not, you know, is their story as good as mine? And yeah, I would have struggled

with that a little bit, I think…… Yeah, it is a fear of missing out because that is good marketing for them. So, I just did not want that to happen''. [Baker, Manager]

What is striking about the narrated experience by our respondents is that no firm possesses an initial overwhelming advantage in winning an award ahead of their competitors. Thus although larger firms, to some extent, have the resource to win more BEAs, the competitions offer an equal platform for firms to compete, and as such, a firm's status as a previous winner or an industry leader is always at risk due to intense pressure from competitors who stand an equal chance for attaining such status through awards competitions. In this case, firms with prestigious status are compelled to compete for BEAs continually as the distress of losing a position to firms with less public expectations exceeds the pleasure of gaining a superior position before (Bothner et al. 2007: 214). On the other hand, firms with low status, in a bid to improve their image, allocate more resources and attention to compete in BEA competitions to improve public perception of them. A simple act of announcing an award nomination or winning the ultimate is a signal whose meaning is easily grasped both within the industry a firm operates and by the general public. The fact that a firm has gone through strict scrutiny by independent actors and beaten other competitors to back a nomination or a win gives the firm a higher level of credibility. Hence competing in business awards has become a useful strategy firms utilise to change public perception about them.

6.3.3 Capturing value from 'halo effect'

 The "halo effect", as used in organising this findings section, refers to a consumer's preference for a line of products due to the consumer's previous favourable experiences with other items produced by the same manufacturer (Chernev and Blair, 2021). Evidently, halo effect has been

proven to have a good influence on brand strength and loyalty, and it also contributes to brand equity as well (Kundu et al., 2022). As identified in the data, firms appear to reap the benefits of halo effects on their other lines of operations and production as a direct result of the fortunes they have achieved with their other products and services. Thus as a direct result of the conscious marketing efforts firms make to project their business excellence award fortunes, the firm's visibility and trustworthiness increase. The study suggests that when customers start using award-winning products and services and have a good experience as a result of using them, they cognitively develop a brand loyalty bias in favour of the company and its products and services. The reasoning is that they come to assume that if a firm is extraordinarily good at one thing, it will almost certainly be outstanding at something else. According to Toby:

> ''Quite often than not we get to see an increase in sales of other products after the awards but to suggest its solely due to the awards it can be difficult to measure. But you could argue that it probably would have a positive impact anyway. And I have seen in a handful of cases when you are in a competitive bid, and you are down to a shortlist of one or two suppliers, it certainly helped tilt tip the decision in their favour. Yeah, the person that is got more awards and more accreditations, yeah, sometimes your level pegging and is difficult to choose. It is difficult to choose between the two. And I think, like I said, there are other industries where it can be far more tangible. And there is, but it is probably not a great b2b example. But I am into cyclin. And within the last week, one of the firms announced their bike of the year award, and all the bikes were sold out straightaway, within 24 hours, people got to buy even the other bikes. So you have got other tangible cases like that there. Yes, absolutely. And, you know, it forms part of the business strategy, they will build that into the marketing and the sales strategy and the budget for that year''. [Toby, Manager]

according to James:

> ''Yeah, the awards work magic. Just because it is almost like Someone else saying, yeah this product is good. You know, we can put out all the marketing, we want saying we are amazing, we are great. But it is the things that other people have said that work. So word of mouth client or good news, and that little stamp there. So, you know, it is

kind of vital. And it is something that I think when it comes to choosing between two marketing agencies. I think the award would be the differentiator because it is, you know if one's got one and one has not, you ask, why have they not got one? And they have that kind of thing. So it makes them think even if they did not go with the awardwinning one, it would make them think for a second. That kind of trust also makes people put much interest in our other lines''. [James, Manager]

Inferring from the above narratives, the study suggests that most of these firms may use the halo effect to establish themselves as leaders in their industries. When one product positively imprints in the minds of consumers, the success of that product infectiously affects other products. Ultimately, businesses can gain a larger market and increase profits thanks to the halo effect, even protecting consumers from purchasing from competitors.

6.3.4 Elite status identity

Elite status identity, in the context of this finding, refers to organisational anxieties about being devalued as a result of valuable, weakly coupled actors, such as partners, suppliers, and customers, questioning the organisation's elite identity and reputation (Gill, 2016; Jensen, 2006). The case organisations that were analysed appeared to place a significant emphasis on achieving organisational prestige and prominence through their business excellence awards participation (Shenkar and Yuchtman-Yaar, 1997; Podolny, 1994). In particular, it was identified that their efforts to achieve elite status identity played out in a number of well-established patterns of reflections on what their Business excellence awards fortunes signify for both themselves and the general public. According to Vera:

''We will Yeah. So ideally, we would want to win, we would be entering awards that are aimed at marketing. So there is a couple out there, and obviously, they are really expensive ones, which, which are like, you know, marketing agency of the year, marketing copywriter the year, something like that, again, even getting shortlisted for

that just been able to put that on our website and say, Look, we were good enough to get shortlisted for this award, therefore, we must be good. The businesswoman of the year, those kind of ones, they are more personal, I think, see, we would use them for marketing, but I think it is more of an ego thing. You know, it is almost like, you know, there is a piece of paper saying, look, you are good at what you do when that imposter syndrome kicks in? Look, here is your proof. You are good. You have won an award. So they will I will do them. But the priority is obviously going to be you know, getting those service certificates''. [Vera, Manager]

According to Jeff:

''Developing a positive reputation is vital in the type of business we do... We have established a strong enough reputation with a couple of accolades already under our belt. Even though other competitors have also received a couple of awards, I believe we still stand out''. [Jeff, Manager].

Further, Ama said:

''Once you get to win more awards, people start to see you as a powerful and successful brand…. We believe we do a decent job to deserve some recognition, but people have their own way of interpreting this''. [Ama, Managing, Director]

It can be inferred from these narratives that, to many of our participants, winning business excellence awards gives a greater reputation in the eyes of customers and investors, which in turn yields financial rewards that create an incentive for firms with such prestigious status to protect and enhance their standing (Podolny, 1994). This protective desire becomes particularly imminent when a status order is unstable. In situations like that, high-status actors, in particular, remain unsure that their status will endure due to competitive pressures from their cooperative rivals, who also keenly would like to enjoy that prestigious status (Yogev, 2010). In addition to this macho rhetoric of legitimacy (Sarpong and Hartman, 2018) about their award fortunes, there appears to be an emphasis on avoiding being perceived as "underperforming" by bystanders. While the social implications of status comparison

prompted many organisations to participate in business excellence awards, the role of business excellence awards fortunes in shaping public perception of their brand and product/service appeared to also be interesting outcomes firms use their awards fortunes to achieve. Thus, the potential discomfort of losing public affection for their firm or product and services makes business excellence awards an ideal instrument for these companies to make their brands more endearing to the public than competitor brands.

Beyond the intensification of competition for BEAs in general, these awards have become an obsession, not only for status reasons but also as a means of gaining bragging rights about reputation superiority, which the study identified that it kept all competing organisations concerned about their relative position in the status hierarchies of their respective industries. The data evidence also suggests the presence of what could be inferred to be reputation cleansing,' in which organisations concerned about their reputations or credibility use BEAs as a smoke screen to clean up their image or alter the public's impression of them. According to Tim:

> ''Well, I think so, you know, obviously is important to us. In the hard-nosed reality of business, to a certain extent, it does not matter how good you are, your customer service, whether you are big or whether you are ethical. But I must say the integrity of the award is as important as the award itself. So, like our clients, they might well be happy that we have won that award. But actually, what they are going to care about also is the relationship they have with us, as the award is very nice to have, and it does help build your profile within the local community. Yet again, it is going to be very important that the relationship we have with the local community or with the community, in general, is realistic. I am trying to say that you can get an award, but that does not mean anything. It is your relationship with the local community and the local councils and things like that. I think that goes together to get a robust public impression''. [Tim, Manager]

Like flying under a flag of convenience, the participants point out how many BEAs-dependent organisations tend to think about themselves and how others see them. They also say that

they hope that winning the BEA will help their organisations build a unique image for themselves (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Some organisations do not seem to care that the awards they are competing for might not be very credible. Instead, they see them as a way to show that they are better than their competitors and get ahead of them. This way of thinking is based on the idea that getting a BEA from a recognised third party, no matter what it is, builds trust and shows that their strategies and values are good (Yoo and Pae, 2016; Bovaird and Loffler, 2009). In this way, "splashing the award" as much as possible is thought to build credibility and trust, which in turn raises their status as leaders in their field.

6.3.5 Improving and enhancing product or service labelling and packaging

The significance of product labels is often overlooked (D'souza et al., 2006). They provide an essential visibility function in today's product marketing as they make it easier for customers to recognise a product while also providing vital information that makes it possible for sceptical customers and members of the public to be informed regarding the requirements that a product has fulfilled in order to be passed on to the market (Furlow and Knott, 2009). In most cases, this involves displaying vital and law-binding information about a product (Mackey and Metz, 2009). Other than the product's name and brand, some firms, as it has become increasingly common in recent years, affix certifications, customer reviews, and business excellence award logos to their labels to make them more appealing to customers and influence their purchasing decisions (Tong et al., 2014). As identified from the data, many of the participants discussed the importance of their business excellence awards as an essential marketing arsenal in the process of improving their product packaging and labelling in order to draw the attention of customers and the general public. Many people believe that the

business excellence award fortunes placed on a company's products play an important part in promoting that company's brand visibility and customer loyalty and love. However, most crucially, it seemed to assist in increasing the demand for their product in the market. Displaying such fortunes on the packaging gives the impression that the product is of high quality to potential new buyers and potential new markets (Swahn et al., 2012).

According to Perry:

> ''We look more than just colours and phrases when conceptualising the branding of our products and packaging. It is obviously the first point of contact with the market we sell to, so we put in adequate efforts to give an effective impression and the values we have, and I can say that the awards help in facilitating that, especially with regard to Strengthening our Brand Identity. Since it is the first point of contact, we put in adequate effort to give an effective impression and the values we have. The award logos give the packaging design a bit of panache and respect, which in turn helps to strengthen our brand identification and the product we put out into the world. If this is done correctly, it will be much simpler for consumers to choose our product over other competing items. This is because many people check into certain marks and logos before purchasing a product, and our product will have these. I have also come to the realisation that maintaining a consistent record of award recognitions makes it simpler for customers to place a higher level of faith in our products. I do not believe that simply having one to show on your product is enough to convince customers of its value; rather, I believe that showing them that you have won it over and over again is more likely to convince customers of the value of your product and, in the long run, will make it easier to build a strong brand and product recognition''. [Perry, Manager]

According to James,

> ''The use of award logos as part of our product branding is quite important. It is important to us how we present our products to the market because, ideally, you would like to make use of your product design to raise awareness about the quality of the product and, as a result, make it more desirable to the general public. This is why how we present our products to the market is important to us. However, this does not make it any simpler, as it has been stated, because the general design and colour selections have to sink down to the logo that is being attached to the packaging, and there is not always enough room to make this adjustment. We do not want to change the design of the product just to add a few award logos to it, so we encourage the technicians to sometimes reduce the fonts to accommodate those logos in a heavily modified photo element. I am not particularly involved in that aspect of it, but we do not want to change the design of the product just to add a few award logos to it. This

not only saves money and time when making over a new design, but it also gives it a more professional appearance, which helps our consumers feel more confident that they are purchasing the same quality they have come to expect from us''. [James, Manager]

In Jane's view:

''Our brand's visibility is improved thanks to the award label, which also helps to solidify our customers' commitment to our business. Therefore, gaining praise for your product is an effective way to increase sales. In a sea of uninteresting packaging, our goods will be easier to spot thanks to a famous award emblem that features vibrant colours. In addition to this, it provides a memorable product label that is immediately recognisable to customers, which fosters a relationship of trust among us, the producers, and the people who buy our goods''. [Jane, Director]

Market shelves are clogged with comparable products from various manufacturers. At the same time, if you type a product name into the internet search bar, you can get hundreds of identical things from various manufacturers. We know that the product is from a different firm and has different features than the rest. Customers examine numerous products before making a purchase decision. They would always choose the one with the most specs that met their needs. Hence Using, eye-catching packaging with third-party logos and labels to define products has been shown in this study to boost the likelihood of successful sales. With the rise of social media and digital marketing, brands are investing a significant portion of their time and financial resources in competing for business excellence award recognitions to give their product packages an appealing look as a plus point to boost product confidence and increase sales and revenue. According to the participants, their business excellence award fortunes increase the appeal of their product packaging. In Alex's case, his company uses its award triumphs to indicate to customers and the public about the quality of their product. In other words, attaching award labels and logos to a product gives it a professional appearance,

making it more appealing to first-time buyers and so enhancing the product's success rate in competitive markets.

6.4. A boost to firms morale

6.4.1 Feeling appreciated

According to the findings, in addition to achieving monetary gains, the majority of businesses' primary objective is to be recognised for the excellent work that they do. Therefore, as members of industry associations, communities, and stakeholders of private award bodies, the majority of companies hope that their contributions will be fairly appreciated and that their sacrifices will be valued by the regulatory bodies and award-giving organisations that they are a part of. Again, prior studies have demonstrated that when businesses have the impression that their work is appreciated, they put in much effort to improve their performance (Azasu, 2009). Meanwhile, It was discovered through the analysis of the data that when businesses are appropriately recognised for their efforts and contributions, they experience a sense of gratitude. This gratitude, in turn, influences the responsiveness of these businesses to the stakeholder that recognises them for the awards. This was predominately the case of firms that joined a professional association that also embarked on award programmes as part of their dispensation as an association. Based on the responses of some of the participants, it was established that the Feeling of being passed over by these associations for recognition contributes to participants' consideration of severing their ties with these associations. Accordingly, it appears that making members feel appreciated through the presentation of awards for business performance may strengthen the connection between a professional group and its members. It should not come as a surprise that many

associations have capitalised on this link and the desire of their members to be acknowledged by including member obligations as a standard and criteria in order to have a chance of contending for their business excellence award programmes. The subsection below further discusses the outcomes some of the participants shared about feeling a sense of appreciation through the awards and nominations they received.

6.4.1.1 Feeling valued by third-party actors

Some of the participants view their good fortune in receiving an award or nomination for business excellence as a positive response from reliable third parties confirming their hard-earned qualities. For this reason, the recognition these firms receive from the award boards is seen as a sign of gratitude for their outstanding performance and attained value in the eyes of the award organisers and the industry they are a part of. This study suggests most of these firms thrive on these external recognitions to reinforce a positive sense of organisational esteem (Brooks and Wallace, 2006).

According to Claire:

> ''It was definitely a morale booster. For instance, Someone I respected much gave me a pat on the back and said I had done really well. It was a shock to start with that we have got shortlisted. And then once it kind of settled down, it was, it was really nice. So it really came at a time when I needed that boost, as well. So it really helped. I feel valued when we get this kind of recognition for our qualities and contributions. It feels good when Someone could recognise our work ethic or positive attitude''. [Claire, Manager]

Claire's account demonstrates that for some firms being rewarded means more than applause to them; they see it as being valued by the experts and organisations they esteem so highly, which the study suggest is a good boost and motivator more many of such firms to even do more exploits.

6.4.1.2 Standing out of the crowd

While it is exciting to get recognition from credible independent sources, the high demand for these levels of recognition is more than mirrored by the increased number of firms putting in much effort to get hold of these valuable and prestigious accolades, making it more of a challenge for many among the competition to get noticed by various award board which gives out these honours. To many of the participants, this kind of attention feels good, as their qualities have been seen and appreciated by such credible sources. According to Eades:

> ''Getting the nomination alone meant a lot to me. It was good to know we have been noticed among the many businesses that made the entry. It felt good for our efforts to be appreciated in such a manner''. [Eades, Manager]

In a similar but different twist, Nash explained:

> ''I was gratified that one of her business excellence award nominations was a recommendation by a client to the award board. This kind of recognition to him suggests that her good work is being loved and appreciated even by the public''. [Nash, Manager]

Nash went on to argue that they have often been nominated for categories whereby people have suggested them as candidates to the various award boards and with the support of other stakeholders.

> ''Some even contacted the firm to encourage them to go for specific award categories us they would like us to compete in accordingly''.

6.5 Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter expands the understanding of how firms create value through their participation in business excellence awards. In order to accomplish this, four major themes were found from the data in relation to the study question and were thoroughly analysed to provide insight into how these meanings and potential outcomes motivate organisations to continuously compete for business excellence awards. The first theme elucidated how some companies capitalise on their business excellence award fortunes to stimulate public interest and build a desirable brand. The participants in the study acknowledged that their business excellence awards fortunes that distinguish them from other competitors and motivate clients to purchase from them rather than their rivals. According to several, their business excellence award fortunes are exciting news they use to initiate a conversation with their customers and to demonstrate their distinctive value to their customers. According to the study, the benefit of utilising business award fortunes to achieve such results is that it enables companies to do so in an attractive and clear corporate manner. Furthermore, the use of business excellence awards fortunes to symbolise the relevance of firms in their respective industries was also discussed.

The second theme discussed how businesses make the most of the opportunities presented by business excellence awards to carve out new markets for their wares and improve consumers' attitudes about their brands. It was discovered in this chapter that because of the intense market competition, companies worldwide are pondering how they might differentiate their brands from those of their competitors. According to the quotes provided by the participants, a good number of them appear to be making the most of the good fortune they have received as a result of winning business excellence awards in order to create those distinctive positions

that attract customers who cannot resist purchasing their goods and services and, as a result, increase their company's profitability. Once more, it was found that the outcomes of business excellence awards could allow companies to forge an emotional bond between themselves and their customers. This emotional bond can be seen when customers are willing to engage with and repeatedly patronise a company's product and services because of the emotional connection that has been forged between the two parties. Once again, it was discovered that the formation of these steadfast ties with customers also resonates from the byproduct of good customer experiences and customer satisfaction, which firms enjoy due to the perception of trust and high standards that customers perceive as award-winning firms to operate under.

The third theme gathered the responses of participants regarding how they felt their participation in business excellence awards helped raise the profile of their respective companies. It was revealed that in order to accomplish this purpose, the participants discussed the ways in which the business excellence awards they have won have contributed to an increased level of public trust for their respective brands. Some of the participants also discussed the value of their award participation in terms of gaining respect within the industry and the broader public. It also became clear that many of these companies reap the benefits of the halo effect as a direct result of their participation in business excellence award programmes. It was identified that most of the firms with other lines or ranges of products/services enjoy from other parts of their operations that get recognised. The participant explained that the reputation and trust other lines gain from their award-winnings trickle down to their other products and services, which greatly boosts sales and revenue. Aside from these interesting outcomes, It was revealed that in the bid to create a distinct corporate profile, most of these firms get caught up in battling elite status anxiety, whereby

most of these firms enviably endeavour to grab the bragging right as a distinguished brand within a market. The final theme put light on business excellence awards as a means to renew organisations' drive in what they enjoy doing. It was clear from the participants' responses that when they received recognition from outside sources, it made them feel appreciated, which in turn boosted both their desire and confidence in pushing themselves to achieve higher levels. The satisfaction that other participants get from knowing that the general public thinks highly enough of them to nominate them for prizes is a positive indication that they are carrying out the activities appropriately.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

This study began with the observation that there has been a mammoth surge in the number of firms competing for business excellence awards in recent years, indicating how valuable these symbolic tokens have become to firms in achieving competitiveness. Identified as a powerful symbol that signifies excellence, firms display their award-winnings across their websites, email signatures, social media accounts, newspapers, and billboards (Gallus and Frey, 2017). This study suggests that the general acceptance of business excellence awards as an indicator of competence and prestige globally presents a considerable setback to firms that miss out on these competitions. For many firms that lose out on these awards, the effect is not just a potential threat of losing out on their market share and deterioration of customer trust but is also a dent in their pride (Ghobadian and Hong, 1996). In this study, it is argued that conceptualised as a social practice, the surge in the competition for business excellence awards is a by-product of the connections between three key elements (materiality, competence and means), which link together to form, sustain, and reinvent the practice.

The focus of this study was to explore why and how business excellence awards have come to dominate contemporary organising. In so doing, the study has endeavoured to investigate the motivations that push many of these firms to compete fiercely for these accolades, their decisions in selecting the awards or categories they compete for, and the potential values they capture from their business excellence award endeavours. Three main research questions guided this empirical enquiry: How have business excellence awards come to be labelled and identified in accreditation and certification programmes in organising? How do firms come to select the kind of awards or categories they compete for? And lastly, what are the potential

values firms capture from business excellence awards? To develop a meaningful interpretive account from the participants' subjective answers to these questions, the study adopted the explorative qualitative research method capitalising on open-ended interviews with 40 managers of firms in the UK that have taken part in these competitions.

In this concluding chapter, the study highlights the major findings and the theoretical contribution of this thesis and identifies areas for future research. In the first section, the main findings of the thesis are re-stated under the broad rubric of a summary of the main findings. Following this is a discussion of the theoretical contributions the study has added to shaping the growing literature on business excellence awards. In the next section, the study presents some practical insights into firms and managers on making the best out of the potential values they could derive from their business excellence awards endeavours. In the section after that, the study discusses the limitations and examines the implications of this study for future research. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of what the study has done to fill the identified gaps in knowledge in this area of study.

7.1 Summary of the main findings

7.1.1 The motivations underscoring why firms enter and compete for business excellence awards

The first findings of the study delineate the logic behind firms' increasing appetite for business excellence awards and further set the tone to explain and understand why and how such ambitions motivate these firms to undertake this competitive venture. At its core, the first finding underscores the instrumental role of the psychological influences that drive firms into these competitions (Kilduff et al., 2010; Garcia et al., 2013). The findings suggest that business excellence awards competitions evoke strong emotions that energetically drive and inspire firms to greater excellence compared to other recognition programmes (Diener et al., 2020). These inspiring attributes were shown to drive most of these firms to mobilise themselves to come back to compete again in BEAs (Fisk, 2010). Again it was evident that some of these firms enter business excellence awards to get third-party endorsements and validations for their products or services, which come in the form of recognition from industry experts and credible figures in society, suggesting a firm stands tall among its peers in the market (Gaspart and Seki, 2003; Tortoriello et al., 2011). That high level of recognition and sometimes feedback from the award boards to firms were identified in this study to be the learning curve for many of these firms to realise their full potential. This suggests that aside from the competitive struggles for prestige in winning awards, most of these firms capitalise on business excellence awards competitions as a benchmark by which to measure their performance.

The study also found that the ambition to increase their power positions in their industry and the desire for greater dominance and a larger market share fuel their drive to compete in business excellence awards (Danilova and Karetnikova, 2016; Gavetti et al., 2005). This

suggests that business excellence award participation has become a viable status-seeking strategy being utilised by firms who may preferably rely upon personal prestige as a dominant vehicle for establishing their relevance in their industries and securing a larger share of their markets (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). The study found that firms' status seeking strategy manifests as a symbolic act of showcasing their success in business excellence awards as a demonstration of dominance over their corporate rivals (Suessenbach et al., 2019). By engaging in such acts, these companies strive to create an impression of dominant power positions in their industries while reaping the rewards of brand prestige to increase their chances of market survival (Shamsie, 2003; Pollock et al., 2010). In this regard, the study conceptualises status-seeking through BEAs as socially constructed, as it depends on subjective perceptions instead of objective measurements (Vij and Bedi, 2016). One cannot acquire status without the willingness of other relevant stakeholders to endorse such performance. Again, the finding reveals a political logic behind the seemingly imprudent acts of status assertions by firms, courtesy of their business excellence award fortunes.

In this regard, the finding helps solve a set of puzzles as to why firms undertake such acts at the risk of escalating conflict with other corporate rivals, which could breed unnecessary tensions within an industry (Guo et al., 2020; Yang and Meyer, 2020). It was further identified that firms take competitive steps to hold their territories in their reactions to new power rising (Sauder, 2006). A potential determinant of taking these steps is their perceived standing relative to other rivals seeking to challenge the status quo (Wohlforth, 2009). Thus, if that rival is a close competitor, this could drive them to enter more awards to overturn the emerging order. This suggests that the power struggles among firms for recognition via business excellence awards are, to some extent, is an influence of onlookers' perception of the ranks

and positioning order of competing firms in an industry (Gamson, 2004). In this circumstance, firms are motivated to win more business excellence awards to assert their status claims by showcasing their external recognition as a symbol of prestige and power. Doing so helps to impress the public with the kind of superiority the firm seeks to enjoy. This finding helps to establish that firms often aspire to favourable comparisons with one another in various realms of social activities (Kim and Tsai, 2012; Nickerson and Zenger, 2008). Because one's preeminence means a comparative advantage over others, status tends to be a "relative gain" rather than an absolute one (Powell, 1991). In brief, the study considers status acquisition through business excellence awards competitions to be a relative, perceptual, and social good for firms (Kanji, 2012).

Again, the study revealed that the decision to participate in business excellence awards is also influenced by some of these firms' preferences for their current state of affairs. A clear manifestation of this is the default effect, where most of these firms were seen to be accustomed to the procedures and processes of business excellence awards, making it rationally difficult for such firms to forgo these already established structures and competencies developed through their long-experience in these competitions for an alternative (Ortoleva, 2010). For instance, many of these firms were identified as having a long history of business excellence award participation, whereby they have already developed competencies and structures facilitating subsequent entries (Bekir and Doss, 2020). Hence, the decision to maintain this status quo appears to be regretted less for many of these firms than to change to other alternatives, which time and further resources may be required to establish the necessary competencies and structures to attain appreciable outcomes from such endeavours. In similar circumstances, the findings further established that to avoid being a

direct cause of a break in the firm's successful participation in business excellence award entries, newly appointed top management members prefer to allow these cycles to flow than bearing the responsibility for breaking the wheel to the strong drive among other members who prefer the firm to continue participating in the awards. Equally, it was also discovered that due to the investment in time and other resources most of these firms have invested in their business excellence award participation, many managers prefer to keep going with the BEAs entries until they potentially get a preferable outcome to justify such investments (Harrison et al., 2005).

7.1.2 The decision to enter and compete for business excellence awards

The second finding brings a sharp focus on what firms consider when making their choices for the kind of business excellence awards or category(ies) they choose to compete for and also sheds light on some of the procedures that these companies follow to arrive at these conclusions. Decision-making was proven to be integral to business excellence award processes and activities (Pimentel et al., 2018). It entails the responsibility to choose which business excellence awards to enter, the category(ies) to compete for, whether or not to enter an award internally or outsource those functions to external award writers to make submissions on behalf of a firm, and how to use a positive award outcome from the competition. As an important stage in their quest for recognition, firms appear to be very careful with the course of action they take regarding their business excellence awards entries mostly due to the risks and uncertainties associated with these competitions (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). It was evident that, given the absence of regulators to set out standardised rules and procedures regarding the competitions, there remains a big vacuum in establishing

the authenticity and fairness of these competitions, thus exposing participants to fake award schemes and scammers in their quest for recognition (Lundqvist, 2019; Lowenthal, 1992).

The findings indicated that to be sure of what they are dealing with, most of these firms embark on rigorous checks on the award scheme they are thinking of entering. Participants suggested they do this due diligence to ensure they are not denting their hard-earned image by being associated with a fake award scheme (Perry and Herd, 2004). Although the whole purpose of their award participation may be an exercise to strengthen their reputation, the decision-making process, in turn, becomes a reputational risk management activity (Trostianska and Semencha, 2019). This suggests that the ability of a firm to identify the right choice of awards to enter is a competence that could set them apart from their corporate rivals in getting the most value from business excellence awards competitions (Bierstaker et al., 2006; Sadler, 2013; Shanteau, 1992).

Aside from the need for due diligence in selecting a genuine business excellence award programme, the findings suggest that most of these firms select their award programmes and categories strategically to align with public opinion (Gottschalg and Zollo, 2007). Most of the firms suggest patronising local award programmes to support the local economy, connection, and competition, but on the flip side, this study suggests they mostly do this to rally local audiences around their brand and operations in such a way as to become the locals' favourite (Gilmore et al., 2001). In this regard, the study suggests firms look not only for the potential benefits they can derive from these competitions but they also appear to care about the normative judgements their audiences make about why and how their recognition and prestigious status have been conferred on them (Laufer, 2003; Miles, 2016). This suggests that

public opinion strongly influences the decisions that firms make on their business excellence award endeavours (Davenport et al., 2011).

Additionally, it was evident that some socio-environmental antecedents (distance, locational appeal and side attractions) had a significant role in shaping firms' decisions on the award to compete for. It was established that some of these antecedents do not only present an attraction or constraints for firms in entering an award competition, but rather, the subjective biases attached to them contribute to how firms appreciate certain kinds of business excellence award programmes (Anholt, 2007). For instance, not only are award competitions from far locations considered in this study to be unfavourable due to logistical and financial constraints but to varying degrees, local award programmes are also suggested to be too familiar and mundane to serve the needs associated with external organisations' interactions and networking.

Again, given the remarkable number and range of diverse business excellence awards and categories to choose from, it appears that having this unparalleled plethora of categories to choose from is a significant problem for some firms resulting in high levels of stress due to analysing the many options in an attempt to make the right bid for an entry (Schwartz, 2004; Oakland, 2005). While on the surface, the plethora of options might appear to be a wonderful opportunity to win more awards, the study suggests that gauging the value of an award that fits a firm's strategic requirements may result in choice overload, which could lead firms to become dissatisfied with the choice they eventually make (Slaughter et al., 2011; Oulasvirta et al., 2009).

Lastly, it was evident that business excellence award decisions could be influenced by the experiences and memories firms have accumulated through their past pursuits of awards. The

knowledge accumulated from their previous experiences is transformed into the needed intelligibility that significantly helps firms in making subsequent entries smoothly and efficiently (Dionysus and Arifin, 2020). On the other hand, it became apparent that using past experience when making future decisions raises extreme emotions (disappointment, fear, and overconfidence) that could hamper decision-makers judgement in making rational decisions (Ghattas et al., 2014; Amador-Hidalgo et al., 2021). The study suggests these emotions lead to subjective biases that direct their interest to or from only one particular end.

7.1.3 The perceived value and outcomes from business excellence awards

This study has shown that the values from business excellence awards competitions go beyond credible third-party endorsement in the form of decorated award logos, plaques, and award citations. Instead, these symbolic tokens have been identified in this study to be utilised by firms in creating respected identities and personalities for their brands or products (He et al., 2012; Batra, 2019). To be regarded as competent and credible, BEAs' fortunes have been proven in this study to be an important attestation to the values firms project to their stakeholders. In essence, getting this badge attached to their brand positions firms in a good place to attract prestige-seeking customers and promote trust between firms and their stakeholders (Choi and Burnham, 2020; Moorse et al., 2021; Roggeveen et al., 2021).

Again, business excellence award fortunes are established in this study to be a mark of firms' resilience and market dominance (Pradhan and Bhattacharyya, 2018; Hawkins and Hoon, 2019). The study proves that to convince customers about their long-term outlook, firms utilise their award fortunes to suggest to stakeholders that they are on track and, as a result, remove any doubt that may surround their relevance and future survival. Likewise, business

excellence award fortunes are also proven in this study to be an emerging indicator of industrial status positionings (Hallberg et al., 2018; Smith, 2015). As a result, the study suggests many firms seize this opportunity to accumulate more awards fortunes to prove their dominant status in this grand style (Bhatt et al., 2022).

Further, the study finds evidence suggesting that firms benefit from the diverse streams of publicity that stem from their participation in business excellence awards. The study identified that such spotlights improve firms' engagement with their customers. The study suggests that excelling in BEA competitions could be a piece of good news firms utilise to engage with their customers and partners. Beyond the prestige and impression signalling, it was evident in this study that firms leverage their business excellence awards for competitive signalling, whereby these firms throw shades and taunt corporate rivals on their award exploits (Herbig, 1996). Aside from this, free publicity benefits and improves engagement between firms and their customers; it was further evinced in this study that although it may look like an ordinary message celebrating a firm's excellence and achievements, the actions and intentions behind this seemingly harmless publicity in the view of bystanders covertly signal different meanings to competitors who evaluate and decipher these activities by their corporate rivals to be a boost to their market positions (Morgan and Piercy, 1996). The study suggests that although competitors may seem to understand these covert signals, it may take a repeated accumulation of business excellence awards nominations and success for a firm to signal its resilience and domination explicitly to corporate rivals. Although achieving this may seem to take a long time to achieve and be ambiguous in meaning, the study suggests a display of success in business excellence awards by a firm may have a lasting and powerful effect on

an industry's status ladder hence leading to the possibility of counter-attacks by competitors who may aim to reclaim their lost positions (Nalebuff and Stiglitz, 1983).

7.2 Contribution to knowledge and theory

7.2.1 Award fortunes on display: The use of business excellence awards as a competitive signal

Consistent with differing views as to why firms may enter and compete for business excellence awards, the findings of this study offer competing theoretical knowledge and contributions that informed research on the subject. Occupying analogous intellectual space with concepts such as business certification and accreditation, the findings suggest that business excellence awards have come to dominate the contemporary discourse on creating and capturing sustainable value from firm visibility to customers, partners, and stakeholders (Safari et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2018). Again, as an emerging benchmark to measure firms' position in terms of the status and prestige of elite group belongingness, the findings offer an insight into why so many firms participate in BEAs to achieve this goal. In support of Frey (2007), Frey and Neckermann's (2010) arguments on business excellence awards as an important signalling function to firms, this current study further argues that for an award to be considered strong and genuine, it should meet a certain level of standards. First, as a competitive signal indicating firms' status in their industries, the nature of the business excellence award programme and the ways in which firms utilise their success to send signals to the market must have the ability to alter the nature of the competition and status order (Wells et al., 2011). This argument is against the backdrop that, for the first instance, not all business excellence programmes are genuine, and again, not all of them are of the same

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pedigree. Hence, to transmit a signal that can cause fear in the boardrooms of corporate rivals, a firm's choice of which award and category to enter should be as competitive as the intention behind the signal (Mavlanova et al., 2012). This also stresses the critical role of decision-making in the business excellence awards process.

This study has identified that using fortunes to send strong signals does not happen by chance, but it takes proper planning and excellent decision-making when evaluating trends and relevant awards and categories to shake an industry's status quo. Secondly, the study establishes that business excellence awards are a cost-effective means to achieve important quality signals. To add extra spice to the original firms or product branding, business excellence awards have become extrinsic information cues to a firm or product quality that the public can easily seek out and process with minimal effort (Yan et al., 2019; Idemen et al., 2021). Lastly, as a strong marketing signal, BEAs fortunes have been established in this study to form inferences concerning a product's quality and value. For this reason, the study supports the assertion that customers and the public may accommodate a higher price for a product or service with success in BEAs rather than taking the risk of choosing options that do not demonstrate any external validation (Döpper et al., 2022; Baumert et al., 2021).

Taken as a whole, this study conceptualises competitive signalling of success in BEAs to be a deliberate activity taken by firms to directly or indirectly declare their intentions, motives, and commitments and distinguish themselves in the eyes of the public in terms of their status, prestige, and quality (Barnett et al., 2020). The study maintains that the magnitude of the signal, and thus the reputation and credibility of the firm has award won or been nominated for, can help firms pursue an aggressive strategy of market penetration, especially in

situations where the firm competitor controlling that market loses out on the same award (Jacob et al., 2004).

7.2.2 Gaining legitimacy

The study's findings also provide a welcome focus on the growing use of business excellence awards as a stamp for public approval and justification of firms' activities as appropriate, which has received scant attention since Berrone et al.'s (2009) suggestions that symbolic display rather the fact of conformity are sufficient for the attainment of legitimacy. The most significant contribution to this literature is the evidence that credible third-party endorsements and the display of business excellence awards fortunes give justification and a basis for organisational action (Tyler, 2006). As identified in this study, most of the firms that engage in a symbolic display of their award fortunes do so to influence public perception of their brand by employing visual actions to achieve this goal (Kerfoot et al., 2003). Under this view, business excellence awards fortunes appear to be an effective response to the doubts and mistrust surrounding a brand (Mazzola et al., 2006). Consequently, many of these firms appeared to favour symbolic actions in displaying their award fortunes in marketing spaces rather than substantive practices in ticking the boxes to be certified or accredited (Berrone et al., 2009; Armeneikis, 1995). This suggests an interesting interplay between what is regarded as doing good, thus getting accredited or certified, and what is regarded as doing better in deriving benefits from business excellence award competitions.

What is interesting about these distinct sources of achieving legitimacy is that accreditations and certification badges appear too very technical for the public to understand their meanings; as a result, although they may command some extent of trust and confidence in the public,

their relevance is properly understood only by experts and the industry. This is compared to business excellence awards, which bear a hallmark of brilliance and higher achievement, which at the individual level, people celebrate and for which they have respect (Scott and Vigar-Ellis, 2014; Frey and Gallus, 2014). This makes business excellence awards resonate more easily with the public than accreditation and certification programmes. However, the study does not seek to overestimate the influence of business excellence awards in instilling public trust over other sources of organisational legitimacy (certification and accreditation programmes). The study findings suggest that all these sources can be reasonably explored and utilised by firms to attain a greater influence of trust and credibility (Keh and Xie, 2009). For the legitimacy literature, this research rings a warning bell for the more comprehensive arguments on the sources from which firms attain their legitimacy. This is so because over-emphasising symbolic means of achieving legitimacy over substantive action of actually achieving may present a dangerous strategy for legitimacy pursuit. The study provides the explanation that if firms rely exclusively on symbolic awards, these actions may, over time, be seen as untruthful, calculative, and manipulative, leading to a lower legitimacy in the end. There is a likelihood that symbolic actions may be seen as easy to achieve and as cosmetic when not blended with substantive sources of legitimacy, which require much rigour and scrutiny to achieve (Brown, 1994).

7.2.3 Shaping public perceptions

This study has brought clarity and understanding to firms' use of business excellence awards fortunes as powerful symbols that can attract public attention and equally shatter the status positions of corporate rivals (Rindova et al., 2006; Hooley et al., 2001). The study has established that the fierce competition for these awards has meanings that are fundamental to contemporary business survival besides the external validation that these firms enter the awards to attain. The findings help to explain why the fortunes from business excellence awards displayed in marketing spaces can so easily stimulate positive impressions about a brand or product and can mitigate the issue of bad feelings associated with it (Gustafson and Chabot, 2007; Jones and Murrell, 2001). The study identified that these duelling emotions function side-by-side, as they inspire different aspects of our evolved social cognition that operate according to two differing orientations. First, in line with Larkin's (1994) emphasis on symbolic representations, symbolic displays evoke cognitive support for outstanding performance and excellence. Second, symbolic displays evoke a cognitive frame associated with social contexts of rank and supreme dominance, which Fiske and Taylor (1991) label "authority ranking.". Bringing this back to the business excellence awards context, the study identifies that, as a symbolic token received by firms for their outstanding achievements, these external validations create a convincing identity about firms (Bosch et al., 2005). Notably, most award winners have achieved wide publicity through their nominations and have gained significant respect in the business community through this accomplishment. The study identifies that winning business excellence awards gives firms a reliable third-party endorsement; hence, depending on the prestigious nature of the award, it may serve as an endorsement for the firm as a reputable brand (Suchman, 1995). In recent times, many firms

have employed business excellence awards as an impression management strategy to cement their reputation as a reliable brand that acts correctly and in a way that is appropriate to societal set standards (Hawarna et al., 2020). This is in parallel with Diouf and Boiral's (2017) suggestions that business excellence awards are a valuable impression management technique that firms utilise to improve their clients' and other relevant stakeholders' perceptions of them.

This study implies that award-winning companies are regularly perceived as more credible and honest, even if consumers are not consciously aware of this perception (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999). The study maintains that success in business excellence awards can act as a natural symbol that shapes the public's opinion about the quality and competence of a firm in doing things correctly and appropriately (Nenonen et al., 2019). They also function as natural signs of rank and prestige by communicating the hierarchical positions of firms within an industry to the public (Zeitlyn and Hook, 2019). The study found this attributed some sort of respect to firms that are highly successful with their business excellence awards endeavours. As they are associated with prestige and with high regard as an industry elite, the public expects such firms to be acting correctly and, as such, do not scrutinise them with much rigour when patronising their products or services (Ferrell et al., 2019).

### 7.2.4 Business excellence awards as social practice.

Business excellence awards represent new, complex, and often challenging potentialities for firms to create and capture sustainable value. In unpacking and exploring the phenomenon in detail, the study shed light on the organising logic of BEAs. In visualising business excellence awards through the circuit of practice, the study has added a new perspective to theorising about how the interactions between the material elements, competence and meanings have generated, sustained and may regenerate the phenomena. In so doing, the study contributes to existing research on the theory of practice(Schatzki et al., 2001; Shove et al., 2012) and the taken-for-granted self-evaluation motives that guide organisations to consider BEAs as opportunities that may otherwise be overlooked by their competitors (Capponi et al., 2019; Gallus & Frey, 2017). The findings offer a new conceptual link for understanding the mad rush for success at business excellence award as a routinised social activity consisting of forms of physical activities (materiality), forms of mental activities (competence), and motivational knowledge combining to drive this phenomenon. Breaking this down, the findings demonstrated that most participants were induced to participate in awards by the prestige and symbolic significance of winning an award plaque, citation, and logo. Based on this, the study conceptualises the material elements of business excellence awards as the driving force that, in the first instance, attracts firms into joining these competitions.

At the same time, the background knowledge in the form of understanding, intelligibility, and practical consciousness demonstrated by participants as part of the processes and choices in their decision-making supports the notion that practice exists as performance (Reckwitz, 2002).

Thus, through their outstanding performances over a reference period, the ability to select the right award competition and categories and, most importantly, to make excellent submissions on time, the action of doing is formed (Schatzki, 1996). The study has demonstrated that it is only through outstanding performances in successive entries that the interdependencies between elements which constitute business excellence awards as social practice are sustained over time. In simple terms, without firms performing well and applying to enter business excellence awards, there would be no competition, and the phenomenon would not exist (Shove et al., 2007). Further, the study findings have made it known that the meanings firms attach to their competitive actions are central to understanding how and what firms utilise their success in business excellence awards to achieve (Heil and Robertson, 1991). This elaborates on the point that firms' actions and outstanding competence and performance in winning or getting a nomination for awards are motivated by emotions, history, and future aspirations; hence, giving meaning to social actions like BEAs cannot be treated as an element outside the components that forms practice but rather functions with the other two elements in forming, sustaining, and regenerating social practices (Røpke, 2009). The figure below captures how the elements mentioned above interlink to form BEAs as a social practice.

Fig 7.0 Visualising BEAs through the circuit of practice

The antecedent that draw firms to compete for BEAs . Thus:

▪ Entering BEAs to boost organisational confidence

▪ Entering BEAs to secure market dominance and alasting presence both in industry and the public Award

▪The financial motivations behind firms business excellence award

Material

Meaning

BEAs

Competence

The possible outcomes /values firms could capture from BEAs furtune. Thus:

▪ Creating an attractive brand and getting social praise (Stratergic signalling)

▪ An oppurtunty to create a new niche and positive brand perception(Impress -ion management)

▪BEAs as a means to boost corporarate profile(legitamcy seeking)

The competence and know how in chosing the right award/cathegory to compete for. Thus:

▪ Embacking on due diligence to make informed decisions.

▪ Emotions (fear) and their influence on firms decision making

7.3 Implication for practice

7.3.1 Making the most out of business excellence awards possibilities and potentialities for potentials

At a time when competition is very tight in the open market, and consumers are spoiled for options, the research holds implications for managers in their efforts to attract the attention of their customers and stand tall in competition (Gowrisankaran and Rysman, 2012). As is well documented in this study, business excellence awards have been proven to be an excellent way to shine the spotlight on firms, increase awareness, and promote firms' products and services (Dehkordi et al., 2012). The study encourages firms to overlook the time-consuming nature and efforts of going through the award process and the fear of the risk of losing out to competitors; as a win or lose, simply getting a nomination alone gives access to many marketing opportunities. Again, participation in business excellence awards competitions gives greater kudos and credibility, which the study suggests is the cheapest way to achieve a positive competitive edge, help stand out in a crowded market, and impress customers (Ihalainen, 2011). For firms to make the most of the opportunities presented by business excellence awards, the study suggests that every step of the award process should be taken with a clear strategy to make an outstanding entry and get the right award to suit the preference of the public (Gogoi and Jyoti, 2020). For instance, public preferences currently are more for sustainable practices and a safer environment (Yue et al., 2016). Although quality of service remains relevant in attracting customers, the public preference for environmentally and socially responsible firms is ever-growing. Hence, the study encourages firms to consider social and environmental categories to make a good impression with their efforts to improve the environment and society (Carter et al., 2021). Blending the fortunes of flagship categories

and these taken-for-granted community-championing categories can evoke powerful and effective connections between firms and their customers. The study also calls for managers to know their audience when using their success at business excellence awards as a marketing strategy. The study suggests that getting attention from award success should not always be taken as an all-around approach whereby firms, as identified, get any kind of awards and give them significant publicity on any marketing spaces available. For instance, most firms appear to mentally construct an idea of their audience without real or complete insight into who that may actually be. Thus, they imagine and perceive that multitudes of people enthusiastically listen to or monitor their award exploits through the 'buzz,' they make from getting a nomination or winning an award (Heller, 2022).

Additionally, thinking of themself as the centre of attention, most of these firms come to believe that they are under constant and close observation by competitors and the public. Hence, to show off to competitors and look appealing to new clients, most firms utilise any available avenue to send messages about award exploits. The study suggests that by understanding their audience and what they require from them, firms can build a distinct context for interaction with them and, through that, potentially avoid or minimise this kind of mistake and instead develop context-specific goals and expectations for signalling their success as business excellence awards (Forrest, 2019).

7.3.2 Benchmarking and learning

As this study has demonstrated, competitive reasons predominantly fuel the motivation for competing for business excellence awards. However, the study suggests that managers should not pursue business excellence awards just for the thrill of accomplishment. Instead, they should look at the value of these medals through the lens of "Olympic greed," where participation is sometimes more important than victory (Frey, 2007; Robinson et al., 2021). In this regard, the study advises managers to utilise their business excellence award entries to collect feedback on how their competitors may be better than them from industry experts who serve as award judges (Angell and Corbett, 2009). As popularly suggested, if a firm is stuck for ideas, they should check to see what their peers are doing instead of trying something new. As demeaning as this may sound, benchmarking against best practices occurs for a good reason. For instance, industries with limited formal regulations and certification controls may lack focus, coordination, and credibility. However, getting these awards schemes as a benchmarking platform will aid these industries in gathering collective knowledge of what worked previously and how best the industry can potentially develop (Rastogi, 2000). Simply put, the study suggests that, over time, best practices emerge based on the experience of what actions led to successful outcomes. For managers who seek to introduce new products to the markets, the study suggests that business excellence award competitions will offer an excellent opportunity to test the strengths of the product at the early stages of the product cycle and also get professional insights on how to address areas for improvement through expert advice. Although new products and services may suffer an unexpected defeat when paired with already-established ones that may have the most effective and efficient methods of delivery, the study suggests this should not discourage firms from doing taking this course of action. The study also suggests that benchmarking their product to the best of the best

through award competitions can expose them to ideas that can support their product or service in improving and developing effectively and efficiently (Lai et al., 2011). Again it has been proven in this study that getting feedback from business excellence awards competitions aids firms in setting clearer goals for their future endeavours.

Drawing from this insight, the study recommends that as firms monitor their strengths and weaknesses through business excellence awards competitions, they should make adjustments when necessary to accommodate changes to take account of trends and best practices. The study suggests that getting an understanding of why other firms are successful is not enough to develop; rather, firms are encouraged to implement their newfound insights, develop innovative strategies inspired by these insights, create measurable goals, and effectively monitor their progress towards each set goal (Drew, 1997). That said, the study further suggests that to get quality feedback and successful firms to benchmark their products and services with, firms should consider entering credible and prestigious award schemes where top industry experts and successful companies are likely to join.

7.3.3 Fostering invaluable organisational culture and building relational ties

The study further encourages managers to make use of their participation in business awards as a means to promote a strong workplace environment. As highlighted by the study's findings, the nature of the award entry process and the event and post-event activities ignite a sense of belongingness in an organisation. Coupled with this is the desire to show off to their colleagues in other corporate entities and also to prove to top managers how well they are performing. The award competition creates an urgency for commonly shared values, belief

systems, and the right attitude towards work and each other (Bansal and DesJardine, 2014). These are essential values the study wishes to draw to managers' attention, as they could exploit them to improve team bonding, raise organisational morale, increase productivity and efficiency, and even improve workforce retention (Besley and Ghatak,2005). Aside from these internal benefits, the study further argues for the need for managers to capitalise on these award competitions to strengthen their external relationships with industry peers and gatekeepers. As identified and observed from the case study events, these award competitions present a platform where multiple professionals and industry experts can connect, discuss relevant industry issues, and exchange ideas under one roof (Ford and Mouzas, 2013). These interactions can go beyond those experienced during the events by forging a bond that lasts longer through exchanging contact details and holding post-event meetups. The study further encourages managers to make use of the business contacts they get from these interactions as an excellent resource for fulfilling their firm's needs, such as getting an ideal candidate for an open position.

Again, these sorts of events give access to new opportunities firms might not be able to find on their own. For instance, these interactions could provide managers with insight into new sales techniques, information on a competitor's marketing strategies, or advice on how they can improve professionally. This study also encourages firms to explore utilising their interactions at these events to generate important business leads (Gillin and Schwartzman, 2010). The study suggests that capitalising on the networking opportunities the events present can help managers to identify new sales opportunities. This may be especially relevant for business-to-business (B2B) companies, as they rely on the patronage of other companies to increase profits. Again, managers are encouraged to use their interactions with peers to learn

about new industry standards. This, the study argues, becomes relevant because such interaction can expose managers to common industry strategies and best practices. For instance, a new grocery store might learn which vendors supply the most popular fresh produce in a local area. Again, with the motive to increase brand awareness, the study encourages managers to use these networking platforms to share ideas and strategies with other professionals and experts to help them understand better a business's mission and values (Österle et al., 2001). This may be especially relevant for creative professionals advertising their work to potential new clients, as they may rely on their marketing efforts to find new projects. Hence, by bonding with these individuals, they can receive expert advice on how to grow a company and perform essential tasks.

7.3.4 'Walking the walk' to bridge the gap between recognition and deliverables

Recognition through winning business excellence awards has been evinced to be regarded as a promise to the public about the quality, credibility, and genuineness of a firm or its products or services (Weng et al., 2009). In this regard, this study encourages managers to embrace the demanding expectations from the public as a result of the trust mark in the form of the award successes they pride themselves with. This study encourages managers to keep pace with these potential increases in public expectations with actual deliverables to bridge what may become a gap between customer expectations and actual deliverables (Mukarromah et al., 2021). The study suggests that if the perceived expectation does not match the actual deliverables, there could be a potential dent in the credibility of the source from which the firm received the recognition (Özkan et al., 2019). To business excellence award nominees or winners, the study suggests a potential loss in trust and credibility could break the chain of

repeated buying from customers. In bridging this potential gap in customer expectations and actual deliverables influenced by their award fortunes, this study recommends that managers build a culture that focuses on relentlessly maintaining the quality that gave them recognition.

The study suggests that maintaining such standards ensures continued improvement not just in the company's offerings but also in continually enhancing the service they provide to their customers, which will help narrow this gap (Bandy, 2003). Again the study recommends that managers should keep monitoring and measuring service quality levels to ensure a constant high level of customer satisfaction. Monitoring customer feedback post-awards will help managers identify problems early and fix certain standard procedures before they reach the point at which they are beyond repair (Dean and Kiu, 2002).

7.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study has limitations that suggest several promising directions for future research. First, the focus on middle and top managers experience from BEAs as the main source of data leaves out the rich insight of employees whose hard work and efforts may have contributed to the success of a firms' BEAs participation. Capturing the employees insight would have benefited this study in understanding their emotions post and after the competitions. Through this, the study could have been in a better position to uncover the morale benefits of BEAs on firms and also understand what winning or getting nominations from BEAs means to these employees.

Second, this study failed to cover the views of customers on the influence of BEAs fortunes on their purchasing decisions. Hence, another fruitful avenue for future research would be to

extend the scope of analyses of the value of competing in BEAs by incorporating consumers' views on how BEAs influence their decision-making with regard to choosing a product or a service and the meanings employees attach to BEA competitions and the related value firms capture from them. Collecting such dyadic data could enable scholars to investigate BEAs more evocatively to uncover the drivers that encourage customers and employees to value or, alternatively, despise BEAs.

Again, this study encourages further investigation into the value-creation potentialities of business excellence awards. The current study was able only to scratch the surface of how firms utilise their success at business excellence awards. However, a much better understanding and concrete results of the economic value firms can capture from business excellence award competitions could help firms to have a clearer picture of the strategic significance of competing in business excellence award competitions. In this regard, a quantitative research design could enable further studies to develop a general understanding of the economic values and outcomes of business excellence awards across wider settings and populations (Kang and Evans, 2020). Again, the structure of the quantitative approach could present further studies with the opportunity to get faster and more relatable results, thus enabling better accuracy in the attempt to generalise the economic impacts of business excellence awards on firms (King et al., 2021).

Lastly, this thesis was a cross-sectional study at a particular point in time of the subjective experience of firms that competed for a selected award programme in the UK within a small timeframe. Within this group of participants, there were some that had never won an award before. Similarly, a few of them suggested it was their first attempt. These, the study suggests, pose a significant limitation to the cross-sectional approach to this study. Thus, participation

in these competitions and even subsequent success could change such groups' views and perceptions of their BEA experience over time, making it a problematic approach to establish long-term trends and developments regarding this phenomenon. Hence, the study calls for further studies to explore the use of longitudinal research techniques, which could potentially aid in tracking the long-term performance of firms after winning or getting nominations for business excellence awards (Wang et al., 2017). In addition, further study can benefit from a longitudinal approach to ascertain how time and further experience in BEA endeavour can shape firms' approach to the type of awards and the categories they choose to enter and compete for.

7.5 Chapter conclusion

With growing competition in today's marketplace, many firms face multiple challenges in maintaining or attracting new customers (Lei and Slocum, 2005). To mitigate some of these challenges, many of these firms resort to explorative strategies such as competing in BEAs to strengthen consumer trust and, on the other hand, send various signals to their corporate targets (Gavetti, 2012). On the other hand, this study represents a pioneering exploration into what these award competitions entail, the drivers that steer firms into joining these competitions, the justifications for firms' business excellence award choices, and the values and meanings firms make from their success in business excellence awards. The study has argued that BEAs offer numerous opportunities for firms to leverage to gain or maintain positions of esteem (Patriotta et al., 2011). The study maintains that as firms compete among themselves to climb higher the envious ladder of prestige and reputation through BEAs, some firms utilise such achievements and make conscious efforts to taunt and destabilise their corporate rivals' reputations (O'Connell, 2006). The study presented a unique perspective in conceptualising this phenomenon through the lens of discursive practices with much emphasis on the web of elements forming social practice (Shove et al., 2012).

The study finds evidence that success in BEAs can generate meanings beyond celebrating corporate excellence. The study suggests that motivated by the symbolic tokens given to winners and even nominees as a form of external validation and recognition for outstanding excellence, firms do their utmost to beat their rivals to these external endorsements (De Bodt et al., 2020). This, coupled with the fun and the benefit of socialising at award events, can put business excellence awards high on the list of firms when it comes to finding validation and third-party endorsement. Further, the findings establish the role of experience, due diligence,

and collective decision-making as competencies that put firms in a position to flourish in their BEA endeavours. In addition, insight has been put into the meanings firm make from their award fortunes. The findings suggest that BEAs present an effective strategy for firms to prove their dominance in their market (Smith, 2015). In the case of contemporary competitions in open markets, the study has unpacked and brought to light the signalling behaviour in B2B environments, specifically between firms, their competitors, and consumers (Jean and Kim, 2021).

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Appendix 1

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study title:

The gold rush of business awards: a discursive practice approach

Invitation Paragraph:

You are invited to take part in an interview-based research study. Before you make a decision, it's important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will entail. Please take the time to read the following details carefully and, if you wish, discuss them with others. Ask me if there's something that isn't obvious or if you'd like more details. Take the time to decide whether or not you want to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study explores why many firms enter and compete for business awards and their implication for competitiveness. It is notable that, despite the increase in business awards, there is relative brevity of research regarding these phenomena. Existing research into business awards focuses mainly on internal organisation awards, such as employee recognition programs, and the impact these programs may have on employee behaviour, motivation, and performance. However, the explanation of the exponential increase in business awards and how firms come to benefit from them is limited. We know very little as to why many firms enter and compete for these business awards. Thus, the study takes a step towards addressing these lacunae in the existing literature by articulating the mechanisms through which the dual demands for managing competitive pressures and achieving competitive advantage may influence a firm's decision to enter and compete for a business award.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You have been chosen to participate as you have met the criteria for inclusion to take part in the study. Thus, you are 18 years and above and holding a managerial position in a firm based in the UK. Again, your firm has entered or won an award.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to participate in this interview, as participation is voluntary. You will be asked to keep this information sheet and to sign the consent document if you agree to proceed. It is important to note that you will be allowed to withdraw from this interview freely even if you decide to take part in the interview and later decide to quit without any excuse.

What will happen to me if I take part?

An interview will be held via an online platform you are acquainted with after attaining your consent. The interview is estimated to last for about 15-30 minutes at any time and date at your convenience. I will adequately brief you on the interview protocols and your rights concerning your participation in the interview. You will be given a debriefing sheet after the end of the interview, of which you can channel any concerns you had about the interviewer during the interview. Contact details of the researcher and supervisor will be found on the debrief sheet for further discussion or information.

The information provided in the interviews will only be used for research purposes in this study at Brunel Business School. The information is provided in confidence– no information will be disclosed about any individual, and all original interviews will be destroyed upon the completion of transcription. The data analysis will be anonymous – no names will be used in the data analysis, and all data will be aggregated. The audio from the interview will be recorded on a voice recorder, saved stored on a secure, password-protected server and transcribed after that.

What do I have to do?

You would be required to give your consent to participate in the interview. It is important to note that you can unreservedly express yourself as you wish to during the interview. Again, there are no lifestyle constraints that would prohibit you from participating, and as mentioned, you have met the inclusion requirements to participate in the interview.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there would be any danger from your participation. Nevertheless, you are encouraged to refuse to answer questions you are not interested in or not comfortable about. Always remember you can quit the interview at any point you want.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

In assisting this project, you will be able to receive a copy of the research findings along with a discussion of how these findings can help improve value creation and capture from Business Awards.

What if something goes wrong?

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for it. Should you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch with me using my contact details (please see contact information under the contact for further information and complaints heading).

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which leaves the University/hospital/surgery/local authority premises, etc., will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be identified from it.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The result of the study will be available to stakeholders on request. But you are rest assured that only the interviewer will have access to the actual raw data, which will be destroyed after the results of the study is published.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The researcher is organising and funding this research.

What are the indemnity arrangements?

Your participation in this research will not affect your health-related insurance.

Who has reviewed the study?

The College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has reviewed the study and granted the interviewer permission to conduct it.

Research Integrity:

'Brunel University is committed to compliance with the Universities UK Research Integrity Concordat. You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from our researchers during the course of their research. Further information can be found on the Brunel University London research integrity webpage.'

Contact for further information:

Researcher: Shadrack Asante, Management Studies PhD Student, Brunel Business School, Brunel University

Contact Email: Shadrack.asante@brunel.ac.uk

Supervisor: David Sarpong, Reader in Strategic Management, Brunel Business School, Brunel University

Contact Email: david.sarpong@brunel.ac.uk

Contact for complaints:

Contact Chair of Research Ethics Committee: Dr Derek Healy

Contact Email: res-ethics@brunel.ac.uk.

Please also note you will be given a copy of this information sheet and consent form for yourself to keep. Thank you once again for taking the time to read this through - please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further queries. Lastly, please let me know whether or not you would like to participate via email

Appendix 2

CONSENT FORM

STUDY TITLE

The gold rush for business awards: a discursive practice approach

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Shadrack Asante

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 14/07/2021 AND 13/06/2022

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Who have you spoken to about the study?		
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that:		
You are free to withdraw from this study at any time	☐	☐
	☐	☐
You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing	☐	☐

	☐	☐
Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your future care?		
I agree to my interview being audio recorded	☐	☐
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐	☐

Signature of research participant:	
Print name:	Date:
Witness Statement	
I am satisfied that the above-named has given informed consent.	
Witness signature:	
Print name:	Date:

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF FORM

Research Project Title:

 The gold rush for business awards: a discursive practice approach

Purpose/Background to study:

Over the years, there has been a proliferation of business awards, and the number of organisations entering and winning such awards is on the increase. However, scholarly work examining these business awards remains scarce, with the dominant narrative on business awards focusing on the intensive, even obsession with award entry preparation. This thesis seeks to map the expanding landscape of the business awards, highlighting the conditions under which organisations are likely to enter business awards and their implication for competitiveness. The thesis adopts the discursive practice approach as a theoretical lens to provide nuanced insight into an organisation's propensity to compete for business awards. An integrative framework is further developed to show how the interactions between various contextual factors may induce a firm to enter a business award, and its potential outcomes for organisations. A qualitative approach would be used to collect data through semi-structured interviews.

Confidentiality:

Personal information about participants will be kept confidential in the following ways:

Participants asked not to repeat what was said within the interview publicly.

The participant's interview that has been recorded will be stored on a computer that is password protected. These recordings will be destroyed on a later date upon completion of the interview transcriptions.

Pseudonyms will be also given to participants and no actual names or other identifying information will be used in the written report.

Contact:

If you are interested in knowing more information about the study or have any queries about it – please do not hesitate to ask my authorised supervisor or me. Below are our contact details:

Shadrack Asante (Shadrack.asante@brunel.ac.uk) Dr
David Sarpong (david.sarpong@brunel.ac.uk)

Thank you for participating in my study.

Appendix 4

Interview questions

Respondent background

I would like to start by asking you to introduce yourself (your name, age, your role in the company, years of service with the company and your experience with other companies if applicable)

How firms select the award category to enter

I understand your company recently entered/won an award (s), which award is it? And what category (s) did your firm enter.

Can you tell me about these award(s)? And why your company decided to enter?

What other award(s) has your firm entered or won in the past three years?

Are there some award categories special to your firm?

With your experience in award entering(s), can you explain to me if some award categories very competitive than others?

Can you please explain to me what influences your firm's decision on what awards and categories to enter?

Do you position your firm's operations to stand favourite to winning an award category you seek to enter or entered?

Am I right to assume you took part in your firm's decision to enter awards? How do you convince the team involved to concur with your suggestions?

Who else is involved in discussing an award entering? Are there third parties(consultants) involved? If so, can you explain their role in your firm's award entering process?

How are decisions taken to enter an award or a category influenced by previous precedents and experiences?

How does your firm get to know upcoming awards and their respective deadlines?

Can you explain to me how your firm prepare for award competition?

How business awards labelled and identified within the discourse of certification and accreditation in contemporary organising?

1. Can you tell me the standard criteria your firm has to meet to qualify for an award entry?

2. Can you describe to me how award organisers validate your entry requirements?

3. Am I right to presume your firm has authorities that certify or accredit your operations? How thorough are these bodies in invalidating your operations as compared to business award boards?

4. In your view, does award entry or winnings impact your firm's standards?

5. Can you explain to me how consumers trust is important in your firm's operations?

6. Can you explain if the status of awards impacts consumer trust in your view?

7. In achieving legitimacy, how does business award entering or winnings compare to other accreditation and certification programs?

8. Can you explain how your firm uses award entry or winnings to boost customer trust?

9. what signals do your competitor's awards exploits convey to you?

10. On the other hand, what signals does your award entering send to your competitors? Do you purposefully enter awards to make these statement(s)?

11. how do you channel your award entering or winnings signals to competitors?

The perceived values organisations capture from entering or winning a business award

1. Can you describe how competitive the industry you operate has evolved over the past years?

2. Can you explain how staying competitive in your industry is for your firm?

3. With your experience in award entry or winnings, can you describe how awards impact your firm's competitiveness?

4. Can you describe how your firm publicised your award nominations or winnings?

5. Can you describe how effective the publicity was for your company?

6. Can you explain how the award you entered or won impacted your firm's financial operations?

7. Did the award you entered or won had an impact on your firm's credibility? How useful was the credibility you enjoyed from the award you entered or won in your firm's operations?

8. Can you explain how you select employees to represent you at the award ceremony(ies)?

9. Does your firm use award events as a networking platform to connect with other players within your industry? How important are such interactions with industry players on your operations?

10. Can you describe how an award entry or winnings impact your staff motivation?

11. How will you describe your experience with award entries or winnings?

12. Base on your experience, will you continue to enter business award competitions?

Thank you for making time for this interview