

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Advancing the common good through business excellence awards: A legitimacy-seeking perspective

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**Abstract**

Competing for and winning business excellence awards (BEAs) is essential for firms' long-term performance. However, the role of these BEAs in inspiring good and generating sustainable business practices has often been overlooked. In this article, we draw on the legitimacy-seeking theory to explore the “socially good” transformations firms go through by competing for BEAs. Data for the inquiry come from semi-structured interviews with managers whose firms competed in two BEAs in the United Kingdom. Providing insight into BEAs as a competitive legitimating frame in organizing, our findings shed light on how BEAs may serve as competitive crucibles that provide opportunities for feedback and learning, potentiality for brand positioning, and a possibility for stimulating excellence in the adoption of good business practices. The implications of these findings for the theory and practice of advancing the “common good” are outlined.

**KEYWORDS**

brand positioning, business excellence awards, good business practices, legitimacy seeking, social validation

**Key Points**

This paper adopts *legitimacy-seeking theory* to identify how the demand for *credible third-party endorsement* drives firms to compete for *business excellence awards* and, by these actions, capture values beyond *competitive leveling up*, as most of them end up being transformed into *socially good business entities* through the award process.

**JEL CLASSIFICATION**

L2, M1, M370

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Business excellence awards (BEA) competitions have become an important means for social validation in today's business organizing

(Chu et al., 2020; Haas & Unkel, 2017; Park et al., 2021). Often regarded as strategic third-party honors, BEAs dominate contemporary conversations on brand impression in competitive and crowded markets (Gidaković et al., 2022; Spear & Roper, 2013). Notably, these competitions have emerged to be a targeted business strategy many firms have capitalized on to gain exposure and credibility (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Toms, 2002). As a symbol of excellence, the visibility

This paper unpacks the role of business excellence awards programmes in shaping firms' behavior toward sustainable and good business practices.

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actions through BEAs fortunes are argued to be effective. Scholars suggest that the outcomes of BEAs emit signals of prestige, capability, and quality, which bring certainty to a product or a firm (Pollock et al., 2010).

At the center of all these developments, BEAs have also earned a reputation as a crucial source of attraction for both individuals seeking career opportunities and organizations seeking top talent (Jones Willness et al., 2014; Theurer et al., 2018). As has been widely observed, individuals who succeed in independent categories utilize their achievements in BEA competitions to enrich their CVs and to prove their qualities and skills to recruiters. Firms, on the other hand, are seen to use their BEA fortunes as an attraction to boost their recruitment metrics. As suggested by Amankwah-Amoah (2020), the need for this has arisen due to the intense rivalry firms encounter in their pursuit of skilled talents across all levels of recruitment. Indeed, even in the face of the current economic challenges, it is projected that the labor market will continue to exhibit a significant number of vacancies (Office for National Statistics, 2022), which gives strong candidates their pick of opportunities (Rehman & Mazhar, 2016).

Notwithstanding the interest in research on BEAs, the dominant narrative in the literature has focussed predominantly on value capture and creation (English, 2005; Frey & Gallus, 2017), with much emphasis on the benefits firms obtain from BEAs for strategic and competitive purposes (Gallus & Frey, 2017; Gemser et al., 2008; Ghicajanu et al., 2015). Perhaps owing to this focus, scholars have overlooked the benefits of the competitions in shaping firms' operations toward good and sustainable practices. In addressing this lacuna, we draw on legitimacy-seeking as a theoretical lens to unpack how the dual demand of competitive pressure and gaining a competitive edge may push firms to seek validation through BEAs for credibility; in the end, they benefit from the competition by improving their overall business practices. Specifically, we ask how BEAs have come to be labeled and identified within the discourse of regulatory onuses and whether the resulting picture of a non-binding industry gatekeeping influences firms positively. In this context, we can account for how the value creation from BEAs goes beyond strategic leveling up into shaping and turning firms into socially responsible entities.

Adopting a multiple case-based approach and an explorative qualitative research design, we developed our contribution in the context of a UK regional and national BEAs program. Data for the inquiry come from 45 semi-structured interviews with managers and owners of firms who had won or had been nominated for an award at one of the BEAs studied. In sharing their experiences with their award process and its outcomes, we found that driven by external competition and the need to stand out in crowded markets, firms with the aim of joining BEAs to distinguish themselves as a competent and credible entity most critically develop competencies and values through these competitions, which helps them to mitigate the pressure to conform to non-binding but critical social standards. Specifically, we find evidence to suggest that BEAs assist firms to improve and implement good business practices through their avenues for feedback and learning.

Our study makes two main contributions to the BEAs literature. First, we extend the research on the promising literature on BEAs from a legitimacy-seeking perspective. In so doing, we offer an alternative interpretation of how firms, in their everyday organizing, come to make sense of BEAs and how the competition itself has evolved to shape firms' approach to good and ethical business practices over time. Essentially, our study indicates that BEA programmes operate as a reliable social validation platform, and firms strive to meet the sustainable standards they set due to the prestige that comes with getting their recognition.

Second, by adopting an explorative qualitative research design, our study provides a rich narrative account of the main actors of BEAs whose understanding of the influence of these competitions on their operations opens new possibilities for rethinking the role of recognition programmes in promoting good standards. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing literature on BEAs to map the landscape of the evolving BEAs literature. Next, we set out our research methodology. Following this, we present our research findings, after which we discuss the findings and present some relevant theoretical and practical implications of the study.

## 2 | UNPACKING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE BEAS LITERATURE

The relevance of BEAs as a means of acknowledging exceptional organizational performance cannot be overstated (Grigg & Mann, 2008; Lasrado & Uzbeck, 2017). As suggested by Lee (2002), these platforms usually utilize rigorous evaluation frameworks to assess various aspects of business excellence. Equally, other recognition mechanisms, such as accreditation, certification, and customer ratings, also play a role in acknowledging exceptional business performances. However, the increasing demand for BEAs by firms in recent decades has caused a stir in management research, influencing scholars' attempts to explore how firms capture value by turning their BEA fortunes into market competitiveness (Asante et al., 2023; Mann et al., 2011).

In aiming to provide insights into this phenomenon, scholars have combined areas such as strategic positioning, process excellence, organizational motivation, and competitive signaling to understand the implications of these competitions in today's business organizing (Gallus, 2017; Jones Scherle et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2022). Interestingly, the scope of the BEAs literature is continually evolving as new awards emerge, and firms' strategic goals of achieving excellence are changing over time. While the landscape of these phenomena keeps changing, the types of BEAs and event criteria have become an important scope of work, and scholars have capitalized on it in spelling out the processes and procedures that constitute BEAs (Mittal et al., 2023). These areas of work cover the components of BEAs and the varying evaluating criteria through which nominees are chosen and winners are selected (Abbas, 2020). Insight from such studies suggests that the fundamental values embedded in this process create a solid framework that drives firms'

actions and thoughts on achieving outstanding performances (Safari et al., 2020; Taouab & Issor, 2019). In contrast, other scholars maintain that the use of vague criteria by some award boards in selecting winners may hinder the values firms could potentially capture from these competitions. They suggest that an unknown criterion in winning an award could be analogous to winning a lottery; hence, there would be nothing to learn from such an endeavor (Lagisz et al., 2023; Minkov et al., 2020).

Also relevant in the BEAs literature is the link between award participation/winning and overall firm performance. In such a context, scholars have drawn inspiration from signaling theory and impression management to analyze the signaling potential of BEAs in showcasing quality and reputational cleansing by firms that may influence public perception of them (Bünning et al., 2022; Zhao & Jia, 2023). Nevertheless, other sources have given contrasting views of BEAs and firm performance. Some scholars maintain that the area is still gray with regard to fully understanding and qualifying the values firms may capture from BEAs fortunes (Li Shi et al., 2022). Equally, others maintain that BEAs come with financial constraints and related challenges for firms (Foerderer et al., 2021; Li Yin et al., 2022). Thus, the cost of competing and the organizing logistics for the events and the challenges of investing more to achieve or exceed the standards to win more awards becomes a cross to bear for firms. On the other hand, other scholars argue that becoming successful in BEA competitions may be accompanied by higher expectations, stiffer competition, and greater scrutiny, which exerts pressure and tension on firms (Barbera et al., 2023). Therefore, the value that firms could potentially capture from BEAs becomes an issue of balancing risk with opportunities (Shao et al., 2022).

Beyond these works, scholars have also offered insights into the marketing potential of BEAs for firms (Han et al., 2019; Makrides et al., 2020). The underlying force driving this new turn in the award literature is the increasing use of BEAs as symbolic souvenirs in various marketing spaces available to firms. Emphasizing the relevance and prestige of BEAs, scholars in this area have endeavored to understand how firms can align their award strategy to their organizational values and mission to impress their target audience (Gupta et al., 2020; Ranaweera et al., 2021).

While scholarly efforts have made advancements in areas such as value capture and competitive signaling in the award literature (Frey & Gallus, 2017; Gubler et al., 2016; Sigala & Stergiou, 2023), we know little about how these competitions have come to shape firms' behavior, and, in particular, how these events inspire firms to pursue sustainable and innovative practices. We contend that exploring this issue is particularly important, as the fundamental logic behind most of these competitions is to improve standards through recognition. In our efforts to extend this line of research, we adopt the legitimacy-seeking theory (Spence, 1973) to explore how firms, by subjecting their activities to scrutiny from credible third parties (BEA boards) for their endorsement, adopt sustainable practices to align their operations within a broader social context to stand the chance of receiving these symbolic tokens (BEAs). In doing this, we intend to unpack how BEA competitions

encourage firms to align their actions with social norms, values, and expectations.

### 3 | FROM LEGITIMACY SEEKING TO GARNERING REPUTATIONAL CAPITAL

Legitimacy-seeking theory is concerned with how maintaining or gaining a positive image and reputation acceptable within society's established standards facilitates obtaining public support (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Scholars of this theory maintain that, by aligning their operations to these socially accepted expectations and values, firms could potentially gain or maintain their stakeholders' approval, trust, and support, which in turn, contributes to their long-term survival and success (Archel et al., 2009; Tilling, 2004). Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) describe legitimacy seeking as an organizational sustaining activity that gives firms the competitive edge in getting access to better resources, attracting skilful talents, and strengthening firms' ties with their partners. In this regard, legitimacy seeking could be argued to be a strategic concern in today's business organizing (Brown, 2012).

As an unfolding phenomenon that presents firms with the opportunity for positive brand positioning, legitimacy-seeking has been transformed into competitive actions that aim to gain a given field of acceptance from credible third-party sources and, by so doing, utilizes such recognitions to forge a strong bond with the public (Ahlstrom et al., 2008). Thus, to gain legitimacy through these actions, firms may have to convince third-party gatekeepers in order to obtain their endorsement as a seal of reassurance to the actors for whom their actions may have implications (Delmar & Shane, 2004). This leads us to follow Reihlen et al. (2022) in arguing that legitimacy-seeking through BEA competitions specifically becomes possible when firms successfully meet the standards set by award boards, which incorporate the established norms and values of the societies in their criteria for the awards. From this perspective, firms' conformity to the high standards set by BEA programs could be argued to influence good business practices positively. Therefore, we maintain that legitimacy-seeking to gain reputational capital gives a nuanced insight into how firms' competitive actions through BEA competitions may influence their good business practices after all. Therefore, by adopting legitimacy seeking as our reflective gaze, we place primacy on how deliberate attempts to utilize BEAs as a measure of common standards may facilitate in shaping firms' attitudes toward a sustainable business. The study contends that this perspective would be of value in responding to and unpacking the numerous underlying benefits BEAs may have beyond recognizing outstanding business performances to influencing these firms to strive for both industry and social performance. We further argue that understanding a firm's legitimacy-seeking tactics via BEA competitions can help explain better the source of change in firms' behavior towards BEAs, leading to the surge in the phenomenon. In this regard, we take account of firms' subjective experience with these competitions to

understand how BEA competitions have come to shape their practices and move them toward a socially responsible way of functioning.

## 4 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We develop our contribution in the context of the burgeoning UK BEAs industry. With an increasing appetite among individuals, teams, and organizations to get award recognitions, the industry is reported to have recorded a 45% increase in the number of new applications over the past 3 years (Boost Marketing Consult, 2022), indicating how entrenched BEAs have become in the United Kingdom. For this reason, we consider the UK award industry an interesting context for exploring and developing a theoretical insight into how BEAs have come to shape firms' behavior toward good practices. Given that research into BEAs is in its gray stages (Jones, Scherele, et al., 2014), an explorative qualitative design was found to be relevant and appropriate to extend our understanding of how BEAs serve to shape firms' behavior (Myers, 2019). Adopting a multiple case design (Stewart, 2012), we chose one regional BEA program in the southwest of England, namely, "X-Pac Awards," and a nationwide award program, namely, "Zibit Awards," as platforms from which to recruit our participants. To balance the effects of sectorial differences and facilitate a comparable analysis, we carefully selected these two case study programmes based on the similarity of the background of the firms (SMEs) that compete in their programmes. Again, with similar entry processes and criteria, the selected case study programmes ensured that the recruited participants had the same level of experience and impact from these two programmes. Table 1 presents an overview of our selected case study BEA programmes included in the inquiry.

Given that our selected case study BEA programmes had similar organizational profiles, we employed the following purposive sampling criteria to recruit participants for our empirical enquiry. This also ensured that our data captured a common level of experience and explanations about our participants' inherited insights from their BEA endeavors (Campbell et al., 2020; Qureshi, 2018). In this regard, we set the following criteria to achieve that purpose. First, participants needed to be managers in a firm that had entered the Xpac or Zibit awards in 2021/2022.

**TABLE 1** Summary of BEAs.

	SW award	UK 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 1600 SMEs from all over the UK entered the award in 2022
Award categories	Twenty-two award categories in 2021	Sixteen award categories
Judges	Independent panel of 10 judges	Independent panel of seven judges

Second, participants should have been involved in making the firm's decision to enter the award and have been actively involved in preparing their firm's award entry. Third, participants must have successfully received a nomination or won a category they competed in.

The data for the study were gathered over 12 months through semi-structured interviews involving exclusively 45 managers across various industries. To preserve our participants' identities, we assigned pseudonyms to each of them, reflecting their gender. At the end of the data-gathering process, we had recruited 22 participants from the Xibit awards and 23 from the X-pac awards. This constituted 30 males and 15 females, with ages ranging from 29 to 54 years, with an average age of about 41. Table 2 presents a biographical sketch of our participants. Interviews with our participants lasted an average of over an hour and were predominantly online due to precautions and restrictions at a time when COVID-19 was still prevalent. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed within 24 h. On most occasions, the interviews started with informal conversations to establish a good rapport with the participants, followed by the main interview, where the participants' consent was sought to begin the digital recordings. To ensure consistency and comparability, the questions were phrased and asked consistently throughout the interview, except for follow-up questions and clarification. The participants were then invited to share their accounts on the motivations behind their BEA participation/s and how they collectively make decisions on which awards or categories to compete in. They were also asked about how they prepare for these competitions, the rigor they go through to be selected for an award, and most importantly, how the whole process has influenced how they operate as a firm.

Our gathered data were analyzed and distilled into conceptual frames that shared similar meanings. The process was repeated meticulously and continuously until they formed common themes and saturation was reached (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). The analytical process began with open coding, where we rigorously scanned through our transcribed data to get a detailed understanding of the data (Li & Zhang, 2022; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In doing this, we identified similar recurring phrases whose common relationships were deemed relevant in finding answers to our empirical inquiry. Once this fragment of information was identified, it became possible to track and label these phrases into single categories that explain the various contexts through which BEA competitions could improve a firm's operations. However, these descriptive fragmented data did not provide a concrete depiction of the relationships and emerging patterns within the data. Following this, we moved our analysis a step further to establish causal relationships and intervening contexts within the data. At this stage, our analysis moved from a more abstract level to a higher degree of conceptualisation in generating the second-order theoretical themes (Douglas, 2003; Kendall, 1999). In doing this, we systematically paired the fragments of data identified in the initial coding to generate these relationships (Kelle, 2007). In ensuring consistency, we carefully analyzed the initial codes to determine if they were relevant and fit well within our emerging second-order themes (Hawker & Kerr, 2007). This process was also important to determine whether additional data would be required to enhance or justify the emerging relationships. In the end, our axial coding process helped

TABLE 2 Data structure.

First-order themes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Benefitting from constructive feedback</li> <li>- Learning from other's success stories</li> <li>- Getting clarity on how to implement new regulations</li> <li>- Catching up with current trends</li> </ul>	Valuable insights from experts and peers	Feedback and learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Matching organisational values with award strategy</li> <li>- Opportunity to reassure the public of a firm's quality</li> <li>- Creating a sustainable identity through BEAs</li> <li>- Getting a message to connect with customers</li> </ul>	Affirming a firm sustainable efforts	The opportunity to prove good and sustainable practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improving team bonding through BEAs</li> <li>- The opportunity to prove support to staff</li> <li>- The opportunity to boost staff morale</li> <li>- Making a firm attractive</li> </ul>	Creating a positive Work atmosphere	Promoting organisational excellence and culture

refine our respondents' direct meanings of the influence of BEAs on their operations into theoretical constructs upon which we make a meaningful theoretical understanding of our data (Dey, 2004).

In our attempt to develop a coherent and comprehensive theoretical background from our empirical inquiry to find answers to our research questions, we merged our second-order categories under overarching themes that capture the core essence of the data (Holton, 2007). We did this by continuously comparing the second-order themes and linking them into similar and meaningful concepts until the themes became saturated and recurrent (Belgrave & Seide, 2019; Wang et al., 2012). Following a comprehensive and meticulous data extraction process from the bulk transcript, this study employs the sensemaking approach as an interpretive genre to ascribe significance to the emotions and experiences of the participants regarding their legitimacy tactics through BEA competitions. Given that accounts of social realities are inherently ambiguous, the sense-making approach provides an opportunity for this study to offer reasonable explanations for these accounts based on the various possible interpretations. In order to accomplish this, the study employed a connected and repetitive process of observation and interpretation. The study identified specific data gathered from the initial data analysis procedure as cues for further conscious processing of the participants' experiences related to their BEAs participation/s. The final step in the interpretation involved utilizing data to construct a framework of references, through which the significance of participants' experiences is conveyed in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of BEAs.

## 5 | RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 5.1 | Feedback and learning

Our findings suggest that BEA competitions have become an important source of constructive feedback and learning where firms draw on the insight from renowned judges and experts to improve their operations. We found that although they intended to be successful in

winning the award (Tatalovich & Frensdreis, 2019), most of the firms interviewed appeared to appreciate the valuable insights the panel of experts or judges gave them regarding their shortfalls and the areas in which they require necessary improvements. To many of them, this feedback becomes a catalyst for their continual improvement in their operations.

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]

I can boldly say that 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]

It was also interesting to note that, besides their effective feedback systems, BEA competitions appeared to provide firms with the opportunity to learn from the best practices of other high-performing firms and apply them to their own operations (Gleich et al., 2008). Accordingly, some participants suggested they draw inspiration and motivation from the success stories of other competitors to improve in areas where they may be lagging behind industry standards. This led us to suggest that, by analyzing the success stories of BEA winners, other competing firms get the chance to identify the strategies and techniques that worked for those firms and to then implement them (Erdril & Erbiyik, 2019). In this context, we find the success stories of past BEA winners to be a viable roadmap that many other firms could follow in their efforts to continuously improve (Nawaz & Koç, 2019).



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 toward getting there eventually because we knew we were not that far. [Drew, senior manager]

Our findings imply that BEAs play a critical role in turning firms' operations toward the right direction. As commonly observed from the participants' narratives, although there may be a strong desire to win the categories they compete in, most of these firms end up learning different things that add value to them and potentially transform their practices for good reasons (Khan et al., 2021). It has been evinced that although there is a conscious effort at the industry level to champion good practices and sustainability, some firms struggle to understand such regulations and lack the technical know-how to implement them. From our discussions with many of them, the feedback from these competitions provides a flexible form of advice on adapting to these changes and learning how to modify their practices to align with good practices. To many of these firms, testing their performance through BEAs gives them clarity in adopting and catching up with current standards (Lapide, 2005). Therefore, we argue that such feedback becomes an important tool in their toolbox, especially in an era where standards and regulatory requirements keep evolving (Ruiz & Sirvent, 2019). As one participant explained:

We had a goal for the New Business of the Year, for 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. Specifically, I think we can do better on areas on sustainability, as we now have a clarity on how to go about it. If we are able to achieve those targets, I believe we can sweep more awards next year. [Chris, Manager]

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]

Looking through the data, it became apparent that BEA competitions inspire firms to make responsible decisions, which brings a balance between their bottom-line expectations and their moral obligations. To many of the participants, learning from current trends from industry experts inspires a proactive response to developing new responsible practices that meet current market demands. In this regard, we argue that firms that actively compete for BEAs may potentially have a competitive edge over those that miss out on the competition (Jarrar & Zairi, 2001).

## 6 | GRABBING THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROVE TO BE GOOD

Our findings further identified that beyond the glitz and glamor lies a conscious effort by many industry experts and gatekeepers, who use the attractiveness of BEAs to set the path for good business practices. It follows that the best way to persuade firms to engage in sustainable practices is to set specific good business standards which align with BEAs criteria. It appeared in this study that associating good business practices with business excellence entices most firms to compete for BEAs with the intention of defining themselves as socially responsible firms. By having these sustainable targets in mind, we identified that many of these firms push themselves to the limit to reach the standards relevant to the award categories they compete for. According to many of these firms, the process begins with identifying an award or category that fits their award strategy, which mostly transpires to be underlined by sustainable reasons.

Looking into the future, we hope to win these national 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]

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. [Claire manager]

The above narratives imply a shift in trend from the well-known competitive awards categories toward sustainable ones, whereby firms may have to prove their commitment to good business practices. The study contends that setting this positive agenda becomes highly effective, as it benefits competing firms by giving them the opportunity to convince their stakeholders, who may use such values and standards to make their purchasing decisions (Roxas, 2021). Relatedly, it was evident from our enquiry that the role of BEA platforms as a credible measure of excellence (Mann et al., 2011) presents the opportunity for firms to prove and affirm their commitment toward good practices to their consumers. Benefiting from the public goodwill toward these symbols of excellence, many of our interviewed firms suggested that nothing speaks louder about a firm's values and

commitment to good practices than an award or even a nomination. Below are some interesting views the participants shared about using their awards to prove their commitment to good practices:

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]

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]

These narratives elaborate on the role of BEAs in building trust between firms and their targeted audience (Mal & Davies, 2023). Specifically, in the case of the SMEs we interviewed, this opportunity levels the playing field in creating a positive brand identity with big brands (Odoom & Mensah, 2019). Typically, most of them may not have the rich history or the marketing resources to develop such an image. Hence, choosing a responsible path and being rewarded for it becomes a much easier choice in order to stay competitive. From the customers' perspective, we suggest that seeing these award logos on products and other firms' marketing spaces reassures them about the product or services they are patronizing. Again, this could make purchasing decisions a bit easier for them when choosing an outstanding product or firm from the many good ones available.

## 6.1 | Fostering a culture of excellence within firms

It was evident in the study that in addition to guiding firms to adopt responsible and best practices, BEA programmes also contributed to the raising of the overall morale of firms by acknowledging their exemplary performance (Larasati & Martono, 2020). This symbolic expression of gratitude, the study contends, improves the relationship between award organizers as emerging third-party gatekeepers and firms. According to many of these firms, being recognized for their outstanding efforts means they do not feel left out in their struggle for survival in competitive markets. This, we suggest, makes firms more connected to recognition programmes than to regulators, who may only come in to check standards or even "crack the whip" when standards are not met.

According to Claire:

It was a morale booster. Someone I respect much gave me a pat on the back and said I had done well. It was a shock to start with that we have got shortlisted. And then once it kind of settled down, it was nice. It really came at a time that 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]

Being nominated 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]

These accounts show that for some firms, being rewarded means more than just a pat on the back; they see it as being valued by the experts and organizations they hold in high regard. We suggest this is a nice boost and motivator for many such firms to strive for excellence.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considering the varied and sometimes contested conceptualisation of BEAs in contemporary organizing (Tickle et al., 2016; Frey, 2007), our study has provided insights into the implications of these competitions for firms, specifically in shaping their processes and behavior toward good business practices. Identified as being a socially accepted standard for excellence and prestige (Neckermann et al., 2014), we have unpacked BEA competitions as a legitimacy-seeking platform, where through the process of getting recognized for their good works, firms receive the necessary guidance to transform and implement sustainable practices, which then leads to them gaining competitive advantage.

Unpacking the mechanisms through which volatile consumer behavior and societal demands for sustainability leave firms no option but to seek third-party endorsement (BEAs) (Govindan et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2022), our findings identify three important avenues; feedback and learning, the opportunity to prove good and sustainable practices, and creating a positive work atmosphere are key areas firms could potentially capture value from BEA competitions in meeting their competitive targets through good business practices. The study's findings shed further insight into the value of BEAs as a means to gain public trust and justify a firm's activities as appropriate. While this area has not received much attention since Berrone et al.'s (2009) suggestion that displaying symbols of conformity is enough to gain legitimacy, this research provides further evidence of the significance of BEAs as credible third-party endorsements that provide justification and act as a basis for organizational action (Truong et al., 2021). Overall, our study shows that BEA competitions are not only about the

glamorous dinners and champagne toasts onlookers may associate with BEAs but are also an important exercise that offers opportunities for adopting good business practices and gaining a competitive edge.

## 8 | IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The findings from our empirical inquiry contribute to the existing literature on BEAs (Foerderer et al., 2021; Frey, 2019) by explaining how legitimacy-seeking through BEAs could influence good business practices. Specifically, we have identified the avenues through which the competitions stimulate and orient firms' consciousness for good business practices. We suggest that the competition for BEAs presents values beyond prestige and competitive value capture, which are commonly captured in the prior literature (Beer et al., 2022; Sugden, 2019). Second, our legitimacy-seeking approach to BEAs explains the role of social evaluation mechanisms such as BEA platforms in safeguarding society's interests through a competitive measure of excellence (Li, Yin, et al., 2022). To this end, we suggest that BEAs boards and experts are metamorphosing into shadow regulatory agencies whose influence as rewarders of excellence allows them to point firms' actions in a positive direction.

Our research also has implications for managers, especially those whose firms are missing out on the benefits these competitions have to offer. We encourage those managers to develop the courage to subject their operations to BEAs scrutiny. We suggest that, in doing this, they could benefit from identifying their operational deficiencies compared to industrial benchmarks and could also benefit from the strategic opportunities the competitions present (Dattakumar & Jagadeesh, 2003). Second, we encourage managers to be selective in the award competitions they enter. We suggest that when seeking a credible signal of competence and quality (Moussa & Touzani, 2008), selecting a less credible award to compete in may not reflect the core values of the attributes mentioned above. Moreover, competing in such award schemes may backfire and even worsen a firm's image in the eyes of the public.

## 9 | LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although our study offers several insights into how taken-for-granted BEA competitions may contribute to good organizational practices, it also has limitations, which indicate promising directions for future research. First, given that our empirical enquiry focused on in-depth interviews with a few selected managers whose firms have experienced BEA processes and successes, we cannot claim that the impact of BEAs on these firms is common to other firms in general (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In this case, our study proposes a quantitative analysis with a broad data to capture further insights into how BEAs could be used to shape good business practices. Lastly, our study failed to capture how firms prepare to enter these competitions. Given that this phenomenon has become an important item in firms' calendars, we

suggest there may be some sort of strategic reasoning behind the kind of BEAs and categories firms select to compete for. Hence, we encourage further studies to investigate the processes and signals that influence firms to make their BEAs participation decisions. We contend that such studies may unlock a flow of insight into the drivers that push firms to subject their operations to third-party scrutiny, and our study represents a small step in this direction.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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