

Short Communication

The Illusion of Prestige: Pay-and-Take Awards and the Glorified Profile Culture in Contemporary Academia and Professional Fields: A Short Communication and personal statement

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ABSTRACT

In the modern landscape of professional and academic growth, a troubling trend has emerged awards and honors are increasingly being commodified. The phenomenon of pay and take awards, where recognition is exchanged for fees rather than merit, has undermined the foundational principles of academic integrity and professional credibility. This article critically examines the evolving ecosystem of purchasable accolades and glorified profiles within academia and related sectors. Through a comprehensive literature review, real-world case studies, and detailed analysis, we explore the psychological drivers, institutional enablers, and long-term consequences of this superficial form of recognition. This article further identifies the research gap, provides suggestions for policy and cultural reform, and highlights areas needing further exploration. The aim is to foster awareness and encourage a return to authenticity in evaluating academic and professional merit.

KEYWORDS

- Vanity Awards • Academic Integrity • Glorified Profile • Professional Recognition
- Predatory Practices • Digital Identity • Performative Success • Ethical Academia

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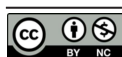
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INTRODUCTION

In today's academic and professional landscape, acknowledgment is vital in influencing careers, obtaining funding, and asserting authority. Historically, awards and accolades have acted as indicators of distinction, attained through merit, creativity, and notable contributions to a specific domain. Nevertheless, the growing commercialization of accolades has led to an alarming trend the widespread occurrence of pay-for-honor awards and the enhancement of professional images through artificial methods. These superficial honors, frequently acquired through monetary exchanges instead of true successes, have warped the realm of academic and professional trustworthiness, diminishing the significance of real accomplishments.

The practice of buying awards and creating impressive profiles is not a recent occurrence. Nevertheless, the digital age has heightened its impact, facilitating individuals to enhance their qualifications via exploitative award programs and unconfirmed accolades more easily than before. Educational organizations, businesses, and even solo practitioners are progressively succumbing to the lure of such misleading tactics, tempted by the supposed benefits of an improved image. These accolades are frequently promoted as exclusive distinctions, esteemed rankings, or elite recognitions, exploiting people's desires for prominence. Institutions, in response, might utilize these questionable honors to present an appearance of superiority, establishing a cycle that favors superficial achievements instead of authentic contributions.

The appeal of these awards originates from various psychological and systemic influences. On a personal level, professionals and scholars frequently experience the urge to set themselves apart in a tough job market, where a strong portfolio can lead to enhanced opportunities. The craving for acknowledgment and outside approval compels them to pursue these awards, providing an easier path to honor without the hard work usually required for true accomplishments. At the institutional level, universities and organizations often aim to improve their global standings and public perception, occasionally using lists of faculty members with these acquired awards as proof of their quality. Moreover, the emergence of digital identity and professional networking platforms has amplified this trend,

as a meticulously crafted online presence can greatly affect hiring choices, partnerships, and research financing.

Although they seem advantageous, the lasting effects of pay-and-take awards are significant and harmful. They undermine the trustworthiness of legitimately obtained honors, rendering it challenging to differentiate between authentic achievement and superficial success. Additionally, they cultivate an immoral academic and professional environment where acknowledgment is not a reflection of contribution but a commodity that can be bought. This change affects not just those who depend on genuine qualifications but also undermines the credibility of whole organizations and professional fields.

This review article thoroughly examines the factors fueling this expanding phenomenon, evaluating practical examples and current literature to grasp its effects. By pointing out research deficits and providing policy suggestions, it seeks to spark an essential discussion about transforming the recognition culture in academic and professional arenas. In taking this approach, this study promotes a return to genuine meritocracy, in which accomplishments are recognized based on real contributions instead of monetary exchanges.

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this article is to critically examine the rise of pay-and-take awards and the glorification of professional profiles in contemporary academia and professional fields. Through an in-depth review of existing literature, real-world case studies, and psychological analyses, this article aims to:

- Investigate the factors contributing to the increasing prevalence of purchasable awards and recognitions, including institutional pressures, digital reputation management, and market-driven academic practices.
- Examine how these awards affect genuine merit-based recognition, erode ethical standards, and create an illusion of prestige that undermines authentic accomplishments.
- Explore the role of academic institutions, corporate organizations, and professional networks in legitimizing or indirectly

supporting this culture of fabricated recognition.

- Understand the motivations behind individuals and organizations seeking such accolades, including professional insecurity, competitive pressures, and the influence of digital branding.
- Identify areas within the study of professional recognition and academic integrity that require further exploration, particularly in policy implementation and long-term consequences.
- Suggest strategies to curb the rise of pay-and-take awards, encourage transparency in professional achievements, and promote ethical recognition practices within academia and professional sectors.

Moreover, this article seeks to raise awareness about the commodification of prestige and advocate for a return to authenticity in evaluating academic and professional merit.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The proliferation of pay-and-take awards, often referred to as vanity or predatory awards, has become a significant concern in contemporary academia and professional fields. These awards, which are typically obtained through financial transactions rather than genuine merit, pose a substantial threat to the integrity of scholarly recognition systems. Pal, Parmar, and Sharma (2021)¹ delineate several characteristics of such awards, like they are often newly established; require substantial processing fees; bear generic titles like “Young Researcher”; are unsolicited; and are conferred by organizations lacking credible affiliations or transparent selection processes. The emergence of these awards can be attributed to both individual aspirations and institutional pressures. On an individual level, academics and professionals may seek external validation to enhance their profiles, making them susceptible to the allure of easy accolades. Institutionally, organizations aiming to bolster their reputations might inadvertently support or overlook such practices, especially when institutional rankings and public perceptions are at stake. The digital age further exacerbates this trend, as online platforms amplify the visibility of such awards, making them more appealing to individuals and institutions alike. The ramifications of predatory awards extend

beyond individual recipients. They dilute the value of genuinely earned accolades, making it challenging to distinguish between authentic and superficial accomplishments. Moreover, they erode ethical standards by fostering a culture that prioritizes appearances over substantive contributions. This shift not only impacts individuals who rely on authentic credentials but also weakens the integrity of entire institutions and professional sectors. The issue of vanity awards parallels the challenges posed by predatory publishing. Pyne (2017)² highlights that faculty members at certain institutions received greater financial rewards for publications in predatory journals compared to reputable ones, underscoring systemic issues in recognition and reward mechanisms. Similarly, the existence of Beall’s List,³ which cataloged potential predatory publishers, reflects the need for vigilance in discerning credible from dubious platforms in academia. The construction of digital identities has become integral to professional success. However, this has also led to performative behaviors where individuals curate their online presence to project an image of success, sometimes through dubious means. The concept of “Dark Academia” further illustrates how aesthetic representations can sometimes overshadow substantive engagement with academic pursuits. Addressing the challenges posed by vanity awards requires a multifaceted approach. Institutions should educate their members about the characteristics and dangers of predatory awards, fostering a culture of critical evaluation. Establishing clear guidelines that disincentivize engagement with dubious accolades can deter individuals from seeking them. Highlighting and rewarding genuine achievements can shift the focus back to merit-based recognition. Additionally, training individuals to critically assess online platforms and opportunities can mitigate the allure of superficial digital accolades. The commodification of awards in academia and professional fields undermines the foundational principles of meritocracy and integrity. By understanding the drivers, manifestations, and impacts of this phenomenon, stakeholders can work collaboratively to foster an environment where genuine achievements are recognized and celebrated, ensuring the long-term credibility and health of academic and professional communities. Some case references are also listed below.

1. Small Canadian Business School: Financial Incentives for Predatory Publications

A study conducted at a small Canadian business school revealed that a majority of faculty members with research responsibilities had publications in predatory journals. Alarming, these publications yielded greater financial rewards than those in reputable, non-predatory journals. This incentivization structure inadvertently encouraged faculty to prioritize quantity over quality, undermining the institution's academic standards and credibility. The study underscores the need for institutions to critically assess their reward systems to ensure they promote genuine scholarly contributions.²

2. Thompson Rivers University: Backlash from Exposing Predatory Publishing

At Thompson Rivers University in Canada, a faculty member conducted a study revealing that many colleagues were publishing in predatory journals. Instead of prompting institutional reforms, the exposure led to the scholar being banned from campus, highlighting the challenges and potential repercussions faced by whistleblowers. This case emphasizes the complexities that institutions face when addressing internal predatory practices and the potential resistance to acknowledging and rectifying such issues.⁴

3. Education 2.0 Conference USA: Pay-to-Be-Awarded Programs

The Education 2.0 Conference USA has been scrutinized for its pay-to-be-awarded programs, where individuals are required to pay fees to receive accolades. Such practices raise questions about the legitimacy and value of the awards conferred, as they may not be based on merit but rather on the ability to pay. This scenario reflects a broader trend where financial transactions, rather than genuine achievements, determine professional recognition.⁵

4. University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB): Addressing Predatory Journals

Researchers at UAB highlighted the dangers of pay-to-publish journals, describing them as outright scams that undermine legitimate research. The study emphasized the importance of faculty and departments being vigilant and proactive in identifying and avoiding

predatory publishers to maintain the integrity of academic work. This case underscores the need for institutional policies that guide faculty in discerning credible publication avenues.⁶

5. International Association of Advanced Materials (IAAM): Questionable Award Practices

The IAAM has been identified as an organization offering awards and recognitions in exchange for fees. Such practices blur the lines between genuine accolades and those obtained through financial means, potentially misleading stakeholders about an individual's or institution's achievements. This case highlights the necessity for due diligence when accepting awards and the importance of verifying the credibility of awarding bodies.⁷ There are so many organizations like this working as of now. Nominators must be aware of them.

6. Institute of Scholars (InSc): Self-Nomination and Fee-Based Awards

Operating from Bangalore, India, the Institute of Scholars allows individuals to self-nominate for awards, which are then conferred upon payment of a fee. Such models raise ethical concerns about the authenticity of the recognition and the potential for misleading representations of one's credentials. This case illustrates the challenges posed by organizations that exploit the desire for recognition for financial gain.⁸

7. Faculty Publishing in Predatory Journals: Institutional Complicity

An investigation revealed that when a significant portion of faculty members publish in predatory journals, the institution may become complicit, especially if such publications are considered in tenure and promotion decisions. This situation can perpetuate a cycle where dubious research practices are normalized, ultimately affecting the institution's academic standing and the value of its degrees.⁹

8. Predatory Publishers' Financial Gains

A study found that predatory publishers collectively earned approximately \$75 million in a single year, publishing nearly half a million articles. This financial success indicates a widespread issue where researchers, possibly

under pressure to publish, resort to these outlets, thereby compromising the quality and reliability of academic literature.¹⁰

Moreover, these case studies from various business schools and academic contexts underscore the pervasive nature of predatory practices in academia. They highlight the multifaceted challenges institutions face, from internal resistance to reform to the complexities of addressing external organizations that exploit the academic reward system. To uphold academic integrity, it is imperative for institutions to critically evaluate their reward structures, educate faculty and students about predatory practices, and establish clear guidelines that prioritize quality over quantity in scholarly contributions. Apart from these case references, there are so many existing to date, and day by day they are increasing.

PERSONAL STATEMENT & FURTHER SCOPE OF RESEARCH

As an educator dedicated to maintaining the utmost standards of integrity, I am profoundly troubled by the erosion of the fundamental principles of academia due to exploitative organizations that exploit recognition and achievement. The rise of pay-and-take honors and deceptive recognitions is not merely a small ethical breach—it is a direct assault on the values of merit, diligence, and authentic academic contribution. These fraudulent tactics take advantage of the ambitions of academics and experts, fostering a false sense of prestige while detracting from the authenticity of genuine accomplishments.

Regrettably, I have firsthand encountered the deceptive qualities of these exploitative entities. I, as well, have fallen victim to these deceptive schemes—promised distinguished awards and accolades, only to discover that they were merely intricate scams intended to siphon money without delivering any real worth. The emotional and professional impact of succumbing to these pitfalls is significant. They generate unrealistic expectations, deceive the public, and, most importantly, undermine the genuine accomplishments of those who have rightfully gained acknowledgment through hard work and commitment.

This rising trend is not merely a coincidental event; it represents a deliberate and systemic corruption of academia. If we do not assert

ourselves, we jeopardize establishing a culture where acknowledgment is not merited but purchased. Organizations, governing agencies, and independent researchers should diligently uncover these deceptive practices, enforce stricter assessment standards, and emphasize true merit over superficial credentials.

In my upcoming article, I will elaborate on how this occurrence goes beyond mere vanity awards and influences the fundamental framework of Indian academia. The NAAC grading framework, NIRF rankings, and institutional evaluations have turned into instruments of superficial display, where financial backing, connections, and monetary investments frequently influence rankings rather than genuine educational quality. These so-called quality assurance systems, similar to exploitative awards, are now filled with pay-for-play practices, undermining true institutional integrity.

The potential for additional research in this field is extensive. We need to thoroughly examine how these ranking and grading systems operate, pinpoint their weaknesses, and explore the degree to which financial exchanges affect results. Additionally, there is a pressing requirement to investigate alternative, clear, and impartial assessment methods that genuinely represent the quality of education, research, and institutional integrity. Without careful examination and change, academia risks turning into a sector of deceit instead of a stronghold of knowledge and creativity.

This is not merely a plea for awareness—it is a call for action. The quest for academic integrity requires steadfast determination, and I am dedicated to uncovering and dismantling these deceitful practices before they entirely compromise the core values of education and professional acknowledgment.

CONCLUSION

The increase in pay-and-take awards and the elevation of professional profiles indicate a more profound issue in modern academia and professional fields, where image frequently overshadows genuine merit, and trivial accomplishments take priority over meaningful contributions. This culture undermines the integrity of merit-based acknowledgment and endangers the fundamental values that

support academic and professional excellence. The commercialization of prestige, facilitated by digital platforms, institutional complicity, and market-driven pressures, has obscured the distinction between true achievement and performative success.

To regain trust and secure a future founded on ethical principles, a comprehensive reform is crucial for encompassing more stringent organizational policies, clear acknowledgment systems, educational initiatives, and a cultural transition towards prioritizing integrity over reputation. The issue, although systemic, is not beyond repair. It requires a shared consciousness and practical action from people, organizations, and authorities. We can protect the integrity of academic honor and professional credibility in the future solely by reaffirming our dedication to genuine merit.

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