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## THE UNEXPECTED POWER OF NEGATIVE AWARDS

Jérémy Celse, Bruno S. Frey, Gilles Grolleau, and Naoufel Mzoughi\*

**ABSTRACT:** We characterize negative awards. Their pervasiveness in various domains as well as the objectives of their designers and promoters are documented. We discuss the outcomes generated by negative awards and provide some rationales explaining why individuals and organizations may be interested in getting them. Several issues deserve further exploration.

**KEYWORDS:** Incentives, disincentives, humor, negative awards, status.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

While awards have attracted considerable academic attention (English, 2005; Frey, 2005; Gemser et al., 2008; Best, 2011; Gallus & Frey, 2015; Gallus, 2016; Frey & Gallus, 2017a, 2017b; Burtch et al., 2021), negative awards have not received much consideration. This lack of academic attention is surprising as negative awards are pervasive and are increasingly used. Our paper attempts to fill this gap by addressing the following questions: What characterizes negative awards? What motivates the suppliers of negative awards? How do negative awards impact work relationships and affect recipients and non-recipients? Why may individuals and organizations be interested in getting a negative award?

Section 2 conceptualizes negative awards. Section 3 discusses the advantages received by suppliers of negative awards. Section 4 identifies the rationales that can make negative awards attractive for some individuals and entities. Interestingly, negative awards could be bestowed by the organization the recipient works for or in an extra-organizational context with likely interactions between the two spheres (Essl & von Bieberstein, 2017). Section 5 offers practical recommendations for designing negative awards and raises some unexplored issues.

## 2 | CHARACTERIZING NEGATIVE AWARDS

Negative awards, sometimes referred to as anti-awards, negative prices, mock prizes, or parody awards, are attributed to *'people because of their bad performance'* (Frey & Gallus, 2016, p. 264). Negative awards supposedly lead to negative consequences such as reduced revenue or degraded reputation for the recipients. In the business domain, they can even create brand damage and confuse consumers (Rich, 2017). Negative awards are often defined as the opposite of positive awards. Their importance is derived from the legitimacy of the positive counterparts. However, while individuals conventionally desire positive awards and are willing to make considerable efforts to get them even if they do not involve monetary gains (Fernandez-Alles et al., 2006), they usually avoid negative ones. Frequently, negative award winners are not proud of getting the awards, do not claim them, and rarely attend the award ceremony. Yet negative awards are usually attributed to the worst performers while positive ones are bestowed to the best ones.

There are interactions between positive and negative awards on various dimensions. First, negative awards frequently, but not always, parody positive awards. They adopt a selection process (e.g., award nominations, award recipients) and ceremony that mimic those

of positive awards. Second, positive award winners are sometimes involved in the bestowal of negative awards. To some extent, the credibility of some negative awards is related to the identity of those who promote them as well as to the selection process (e.g. only some selected voters or open to everyone) (see for instance Gemser et al., 2008 regarding the differentiated impact of various positive award schemes). Similarly, associating a negative award to a prestigious individual can constitute a way to gain visibility for the awarding institution. Nevertheless, judgments and rankings do not exist in an absolute and objective way, leading to some discretion in the criteria of measurement. Third, while negative awards frequently exist and get significance in reference to positive awards, the opposite can be true. For instance, the *Golden Fleece Awards* bestowed (since 1975) to public officials or administrations for wasteful spending of public money have led to the creation of the *Golden Goose Awards* celebrating (since 2012) odd or obscure research that was federally funded and has generated breakthroughs that are beneficial for the society. Interestingly, the same individual can be the recipient of the positive and negative awards, generally at different point times. For instance, Andre Geim was awarded an Ig Nobel Prize in physics in 2000 and a Nobel Prize in physics in 2010. In a different domain, gastronomy chefs can simultaneously enjoy positive awards (e.g., Michelin stars) and negative ones (worst celebrity chefs in regard to animal suffering and slaughter following from their recipes) (Lamey et al., 2018).

Negative awards can be distinguished on various dimensions. One of the most common criteria used to distinguish negative awards is to categorize them based on the main domain of application such as the artistic and entertainment domain (e.g. Golden Raspberry), sport (e.g. Mr. Irrelevant), business (e.g. Big Brother Award), science (e.g. Ig Nobel Prize), or politics (e.g. Doublespeak Award). Frequently, these negative awards (e.g., NBA anti-awards) have several sub-levels, often in imitation of their positive counterparts. Other criteria that can be used to characterize negative awards are their age, geographic coverage, identity and motivation(s) of award designers and recipients, visibility level, or selection process. A noteworthy dimension is whether the negative award designers and promoters primarily pursue socially desirable goals or self-interest. The intentions of the award designer play, indeed, a major role. For instance, a negative award (e.g., the Ig Nobel Prize) may allow free-riding on the reputation of its positive counterpart. Moreover, the nature of the preexisting relationship between the awarding institution and the awardee (e.g., a principal-agent relationship, incomplete contract and/or symbolic compensation in institutional theory (Fernandez-Alles et al., 2006)) can also shape what is expected from the negative award creation.

A classical distinction frequently found in the literature about positive awards is between *confirmatory* (once a threshold is exceeded or achievement is performed, the award is automatically bestowed) and *discretionary* awards (the awarding entity has some freedom or latitude to select the award winner) (Frey & Gallus, 2017b). Such a distinction also applies to negative awards, although most negative awards tend to be discretionary. For instance, the runner interested in getting the *Lanterne Rouge* in the *Tour de France* knows that he must be the last one on the overall ranking. On the opposite, the winner of the Golden Raspberry Award is selected on a discretionary basis and have less influence on the course of events. Accordingly, Table 1 characterizes negative awards in a 2-dimensional framework and provides illustrative examples.

**TABLE 1** A simple characterization of negative awards

	Undesired by the award winner	Desired by the award winner
Discretionary	Case A Cinema - (Golden Raspberry) Business - America's Top Most-Hated Companies	Case B Science - (Ig Nobel Prize) Law companies – Stella Awards
Confirmatory	Case C Basket - (The Shawn Bradley Award) Business – The Fonolo Worst Companies to Call	Case D Cycling - ( <i>Lanterne Rouge</i> in the <i>Tour de France</i> )

On one hand, negative awards may be either desired or undesired by the winner. On the other hand, they can be either confirmatory or discretionary. We discuss afterward the counterintuitive cases where negative awards are desired by their winners (B and D).

### 3 | THE OBJECTIVES OF NEGATIVE AWARDS SUPPLIERS

Negative awards can provide advantages to their designers or promoters. In the following, six main motivations behind the supply of negative awards are discussed.

#### 3.1 | Negative awards as spotlights

The first immediate and important reason behind the supply of negative awards relates to attracting attention. Positive awards flourish (Best, 2011; Frey & Gallus, 2017b) and may even have reached their limits. Primetime awards are subject to a continuous decline in viewership (Koblin, 2016; Hegedus, 2020). Conversely, negative awards, by their relative scarcity, act like spotlights: they are unique, easily identifiable, and thus a special source of attention (Cialdini & Trost, 1999; Mani et al., 2013; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Negative awards may be

perceived by the public as more innovative, attractive, and unusual than their standard positive counterparts. Because of their singularity (Lee & Feeley, 2017; Santos et al., 1994), they may force people to think about a given situation, quitting their automatic and frugal mode (system 1), which will help them to mobilize more energy to engage in subsequent behaviors.

### **3.2 | Negative awards as a new source for self-definition**

Social comparisons contribute to one's abilities and may affect one's self-evaluation and self-esteem (see Gallus, 2016 for evidence related to positive awards). By introducing negative awards, people have additional possibilities to develop and define self-relevant domains. Being the best-performing employee may be out of range for some employees but being the most supportive employee in case of failure or not being the 'white rabbit' of a company (namely the employee who always arrives late to meetings) can be accessible objectives. Negative awards can thus serve as strategies to generate additional domains of self-relevance, fostering motivation, and promoting specific goals (Grolleau et al., 2012).

### **3.3 | Negative awards as a source of power**

Negative awards confer to their designer or bestower a specific power that is generally intended to cause trouble to would-be awardees. This power makes sense especially when principals adopt opportunistic behavior, a dimension that has been neglected in traditional analysis (Wagner, 2019). If the negative awards are sufficiently socially endorsed, the bestowing individual or entity increases his/her power. Sometimes, the negative awards create a new source of power for an individual (or entity). Decision makers bestowing negative awards can enjoy power, especially among those who seek to avoid (or sometimes, to get) the negative award in the future (see Frey & Gallus, 2018 for a similar reasoning applied to positive awards). The awarding process can also serve as a political arena and power game with various and conflictual power networks (Bozionelos, 2005). A better understanding of the interactions between power and awards is likely to generate interesting insights.

### **3.4 | Negative awards as punishment devices**

Recipients of negative awards experience them as a kind of non-monetary punishment (see e.g., Johnson, 2016 on the effects of vulgar feedback on behaviors in the lab), frequently applied by award bestowers intending to reduce undesirable behaviors (deterrence effect) or in a retributive fashion. Although punishment is widely used in many real-world settings, it tends to be

stigmatized as a negative technique in management with detrimental effects on employee productivity. In contrast, some labor economists posit beneficial effects on productivity (McNamara et al., 2021). McNamara et al. (2021) explain this divergence by the conceptual perspectives adopted, namely, learning and motivation theories in management, and agency and prospect theories in labor economics. Some distinctions used in the punishment literature related to the workplace can be usefully applied to negative awards. Examples are contingent versus non-contingent administration, formal versus informal rules, just versus unjust punishment or intent ascribed to the punisher (McNamara et al., 2021 and references therein). These issues have clear implications for the analysis of changes induced by negative awards. For instance, it is important to analyze how negative awards are perceived by would-be recipients and fellow employees. How the dimensions upon which the negative award are based have been selected and measured? Is the attribution procedure perceived to be fair? What is the effect of various negative award configurations on employee performance and productivity? Does the conformity effect (increase in expected behavior) exceed the negative reciprocity effect (decline in performance) or the reverse?

### **3.5 | Negative awards as motivators**

Similar to positive awards (Kosfeld & Neckermann, 2011), negative awards can also nudge behaviors. In a Benthamian tradition, their displeasing and painful nature for most potential awardees may discourage people from engaging in negative, counterproductive, or unethical behaviors. Some awards are often used in the workplace to point out undesirable attitudes and behaviors (Pardoe, 2018). Beyond the award recipient, an important issue is related to possible spillovers on non-recipients. Does the creation of a negative award make non-recipients more likely to conform? Such awards are supposed to name and induce shame, serving as a cue to signal undesirable behaviors within a given reference group. Nevertheless, one may object to negative awards based on shaming as people not adhering to the highlighted standards can be mocked, criticized, and can even be a victim of harassment (Dorahy et al., 2013; Lewis, 2004).

Some negative awards are designed to point out undesirable behavior and as a consequence induce people to avoid it. The *Golden Fleece Award* has been considered as ‘*the most successful public relations device in politics*’ by the Washington Post (Mills, 1988). In sports, many negative awards rely on this mechanism (e.g. the Italian ‘*Bidone d’Oro*’ or its French equivalent the ‘*Ballon de Plomb*’). Surprisingly, negative awards can potentially backfire by sending a wrong signal (e.g., pointing out a descriptive norm unaligned with the

pursued goal (Schultz et al., 2017)) or activating a negative reciprocity process and ultimately increase the very behavior they intend to discourage (Fehr & Gächter, 2000). In the same vein, the desire to avoid a negative award bestowal can lead individuals or organizations to circumvent and game the system rather than really change the undesirable behaviors in question.

### **3.6 | Negative awards as learning vehicles**

Negative awards can also attract attention by using humor (Dehaene, 2011) to foster or to enhance critical thinking or learning (such as the Ig-Nobel Prize or the ‘*Wet Gunpowder Award*’ honoring ‘*someone who is against the Islamic Revolution and who against their own wishes performs a service to the revolution*’). Indeed, many major scientific advances have come from research into trivial questions. The foundations of probability theory originate from a question Blaise Pascal received from a French aristocrat (Chevalier Gombaud Antoine de Méré) about how to win at a game of dice. In 2006, the Ig Nobel Prize in biology (Case B in Table 1) was awarded to a study showing that some malaria mosquitoes were attracted equally to the smell of cheese and human feet (Knols, 1996). Based on this study, authorities have developed traps baited with cheese to combat the epidemic of malaria (Knols & De Jong, 1996). Similarly, companies can learn about their services, and improve them by receiving a Fonolo Worst Companies to Call Awards.

## **4 | INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS MAY BE INTERESTED IN GETTING A NEGATIVE AWARD**

At first glance, desiring a negative award seems counterintuitive. We argue, however, that there are several reasons why individuals or organizations may be interested in getting a negative award, although their strategy is sometimes done at the expense of negative awards suppliers.

### **4.1 | Desiring a negative award to get attention**

The most intuitive rationale regarding the willingness to get negative awards relates to their low-cost ability to attract attention and generate publicity. This publicity corresponds to the instrumentalization of the negativity bias where bad is stronger than good (Baumeister et al., 2011). The publicity based on ‘bad’ performance is valued differently according to the awardees’ situation and objectives. For candidates suffering from an attention deficit, negative awards can be a way to escape the oblivion trap. Some attention is better than no attention at



all. At the same time, receiving a negative award such as being among the most polluting companies in 2020 (Howell, 2021) can generate stigma, bias the company's recruitment by attracting specific employees or partners, degrade the workplace environment and initiate a vicious circle. Other possible candidates for negative awards will consider that this publicity is more likely to harm rather than help them. In a similar vein, some individuals can desire a negative award as an instrument to free ride on the positive awards and advance a given cause for self-interested or altruistic reasons. For instance, these individuals are willing to endure the pain, stigma, or inconvenience associated with the negative award because the process will focus attention and create a space of expression where the considered cause can be promoted.

#### **4.2 | Negative awards as an access gate**

Another rationale consistent with self-interest is the fact that negative awards offer access to otherwise unattainable resources, such as money, status, or power. In contrast to the winner-takes-all outcome (Frank, 1985), some situations follow a different principle where the loser also reaps some benefits, not only the winner. Performers having an in-between position are often disregarded with almost no or few benefits compared to the best and worst performers. When the best performer position seems unattainable, it could be more profitable for an individual to be the worst compared to intermediate positions. An interesting example is given by the *Lanterne Rouge* award that rewards the rider who finishes the *Tour de France* in the last place (Case D in Table 1). Some cyclists devote considerable efforts to be the last one, because of honor considerations but also due to other benefits such as sizable appearance fees to compete in post-Tour criteriums (Raia, 2007).

#### **4.3 | Getting a negative award to leave a legacy**

Getting a negative award can also constitute a way to reach immortality and leave a legacy. Strange as it may seem, in the artistic domain, it has been shown that someone willing to achieve immortality can succeed by making a very bad, bizarre, and inexplicably terrible movie rather than a good one (Lincoln, 2017). Another surprising example is related to the establishment of the Nobel Prizes. In 1888, several French newspapers mistakenly reported the death of Alfred Nobel (instead of his brother). One of them carried a punchy headline: '*The merchant of death*' because Alfred Nobel invented the dynamite. This informal negative award may have triggered the train of reflection that culminated in the Alfred Nobel bequest for the Nobel Prizes (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021).

#### **4.4 | Getting a negative award to establish a new reference point and magnify the winner's progress**

Negative awards frequently frame situations and introduce a new reference point that can transform subsequent moves into gains whereas they were previously considered as losses. In some circumstances, the negative award serves to magnify the achieved progress by the winner, such as an organization that emphasizes its progress in waiting time. When exposing the absolute performance does work, the *progress made* from occupying the worst position and getting the negative awards to reach the current performance can be more impressive and valued, especially by people with a growth mindset (Septianto, 2020).

#### **4.5 | Negative awards as a way to signal hidden qualities**

Similar to positive awards that can generate gaming and crowding out costs which will affect other activities and ultimately lead to counterproductive outcomes (Gubler et al., 2016; Li et al., 2020), negative awards can be sometimes diverted from the designer's original intentions. They can serve to signal some specific abilities or opportunities. For instance, some awards (e.g., the Teddy Awards or Golden Fleece Awards) are bestowed to administrations or public servants for wasteful spending. Similarly, the Plagiarius award is bestowed annually to manufacturers and/or distributors that are found guilty of making or selling 'the most flagrant' or boldest imitations of genuine products. Unfortunately, these awards can involuntarily provide relevant information on dimensions that are almost hidden to interested parties. For instance, the previously mentioned awards can involuntarily reduce transaction costs, by facilitating the identification of complacent individuals or skillful counterfeiters (e.g., identifying the best hackers to hire them afterwards).

#### **4.6 | Negative awards as self-fulfilling prophecies**

Last but not least, when a negative award is bestowed to an individual, it can have a labeling function. According to the labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Warren & Laufer, 2009), the terms that are selected by a given group (e.g., the award committee, the media that publicizes this award) to describe an individual (e.g., the worst performer, polluter award) can activate a self-fulfilling function. These terms push the concerned individual to behave and identify in ways that are consistent with the labels that have been ascribed to him/her. In short, according to this theory, people are not deviant *per se* but they become deviant as the result of the label effect. This theory suggests that negative labeling can backfire by encouraging rather than curbing undesirable behavior. Once labeled, the individual can be interested in reinforcing his/her

identity by getting, again and again, negative awards. As a result, the respective individuals (or entities) can develop a worst-performance-based identity. This selective focus on identities related to remarkable worst-performance or undesirable behavior could yield valuable insights into how these individuals experience their subsequent activities.

## **5 | CONCLUSION**

Negative awards constitute a fascinating topic. Our paper addresses some important issues such as their complex relationships with positive counterparts and the motivations of their designers and promoters. Our analysis allows us to draw some practical insights for negative award suppliers. First, it makes sense to establish a mapping of positive and negative awards around the considered negative award to examine beneficial or detrimental interactions. Second, it is important to delineate and rank the pursued goals (e.g., attracting attention, discouraging some behaviors), investigate whether they have neutral, synergistic, or conflictual relationships, and check whether and how bestowing a negative award will serve these goals. For instance, bestowing a negative award to a high-profile individual (or entity) can be a well-thought-out strategy to exploit his/her fame to attract media attention. Third, suppliers must anticipate the likely counterstrategies of would-be negative award winners who may be tempted to divert the award from its intended use and ultimately makes it backfire. A surprising insight is that negative awards can be sometimes desired by their winners. Consequently, a clear understanding of potential awardees' motivations and award uses can inform suppliers to prevent some side effects. Even with the best intentions, negative awards can be manipulated or led to ends that were not initially scheduled.

Beyond the apparent logic behind negative awards, they perform unexpected functions and deserve more academic attention. Several important issues remain unaddressed. Let us emphasize four directions that require further investigation. First, gathering reliable data on negative awards and comparing them with positive counterparts will feed future research endeavors. Interestingly, there is an inflation of positive awards which may question their attractiveness, power, and value. As the number of negative awards increases, it is logical to investigate whether they will follow a similar trajectory. An interesting extension would be to design experiments with negative (and positive) awards to get study more rigorously causal relationships. Second, we only scratched the surface, notably regarding the effects and consequences of negative awards on recipients and non-recipients. How does the introduction of negative awards affect the performance of individuals and groups? Do negative awards have

a credible deterrent power? Are nominees and non-recipients more likely to engage in risky behaviors to avoid receiving negative awards? Are negative awards more effective in some areas? Given that some negative awards are clearly related to the workplace while others pertain to other kinds of social relationships (e.g., the gamer community), exploring their interactions and consequences in social and occupational life seems promising. Third, comparing negative awards to other instruments that pursue similar goals, such as monetary or social sanctions, can be promising. Are they substitutes or complements? They can constitute a low-cost instrument and enrich the toolbox of influencers such as regulators, executives, and managers or non-profit organizations. Fourth, it is appealing to consider the refusal of positive awards as the counterpart of the desired obtainment of negative awards. The positive award refusal is frequently used to protest and can even undermine the award's credibility. When a negative award becomes desired by the recipient, what does it mean for the negative award supply? We expect our contribution will offer a starting point that will encourage further research on negative awards.

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