

Can Fair Promotion Systems Generate Recognition Equity Without Trust? A Moderation Analysis from a Structural Recognition Architecture Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Promotion systems shape career progression, institutional status, and employees' sense of recognition in public institutions. However, formal fairness in promotion procedures may not always translate into perceived recognition equity, especially when trust in decision-making is weak. This study examines how promotion fairness influences recognition equity and whether trust in promotion decision-making strengthens this relationship. Drawing on Structural Recognition Architecture (SRA) and Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory (TEDT), the study uses survey data from 109 employees in public education institutions and applies PLS-SEM using ADANCO 2.4.1. The findings show that promotion fairness significantly enhances recognition equity, while trust in promotion decision-making also has a positive direct effect. More importantly, trust strengthens the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity, indicating that fair promotion systems become more effective recognition mechanisms when employees trust the credibility of institutional decision processes. The study contributes to organizational justice and public administration literature by framing promotion systems as structural recognition mechanisms and positioning trust as a legitimacy condition for fairness. It concludes that public institutions seeking equitable recognition must combine fair promotion procedures with credible, transparent, and trusted decision-making processes.

Keywords: *Promotion fairness; recognition equity; trust; Structural Recognition Architecture; Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory; organizational justice; public education institutions; PLS-SEM.*

INTRODUCTION

Promotion systems sit at the centre of institutional life in public organizations. They shape advancement opportunities, influence professional status, and affect how employees interpret their own value within the workplace. In principle, fair promotion systems should strengthen employees' belief that contribution is acknowledged and career progression is linked to merit. They should also reduce perceptions of favoritism, exclusion, and arbitrary decision-making. Yet institutional reality is often more complex. Employees may observe formal promotion rules and established procedures while still questioning whether those rules are consistently applied, whether decision-makers remain impartial, or whether hidden influences affect final outcomes. In such situations, fairness may be visible on paper but far less convincing in practice.

Recent evidence from public sector institutions continues to show that organizational justice remains both current and consequential. Moon et al. (2024), in a large study of Korean public employees, found that

distributive, procedural, and interactional justice significantly reduced turnover intention, while generational differences shaped how fairness was interpreted. Similarly, Edema (2025), examining Uganda's public sector, reported that procedural justice reflected in transparency, consistency, and feedback, together with distributive justice reflected in rewards and workload allocation, significantly predicted employee performance. These studies reaffirm that justice matters deeply in public administration, including within developing-country bureaucratic settings.

What remains less clearly understood, however, is the point at which fairness becomes recognition. A promotion system may appear formally fair while employees continue to doubt whether recognition is actually distributed in a credible and equitable manner. This distinction matters because fairness and recognition are related, but they are not identical. Fairness may exist as an institutional design, while recognition remains uncertain in employees lived experience.

Against this background, the present study asks a focused question: Can fair promotion systems generate recognition equity without trust?

The question extends organizational justice theory by shifting attention from fairness as a direct predictor to fairness as a recognition signal whose meaning depends on trust. Trust has long been recognized as central to organizational functioning. (Mayer et al., 1995) conceptualize trust as willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on expectations of ability, benevolence, and integrity. (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) further show that trust in leadership is associated with important work attitudes and behaviours. More recent studies also indicate that justice and trust should be studied together rather than separately. (González-Cánovas et al., 2024), for example, show that justice perceptions and trust in leadership jointly contribute to employee identification and affective commitment, while (Chen et al., 2025) demonstrate that trust-related work outcomes operate within conditional models rather than only linear direct-effect relationships. These studies reinforce the present paper's argument that fairness becomes more meaningful when employees trust the authority system through which fairness is enacted.

This paper introduces Structural Recognition Architecture (SRA) to explain this process. SRA refers to the formalized institutional systems through which employee worth, advancement, and status mobility are designed, signaled, regulated, and sustained over time. It builds on organizational justice theory but moves beyond fairness as a perception of procedure or outcome. It treats promotion systems as institutional recognition structures. From this perspective, promotion fairness is not simply an HR variable. It is a structural signal through which the organization communicates whether employee contribution is visible, valued, and credibly linked to career advancement.

The concept also draws from recognition theory. Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition emphasizes that social relations of respect and esteem are central to human identity and institutional participation. Within organizational studies, recognition has been linked to motivation, dignity, commitment, and employee well-being (Brun & Dugas, 2008). Recognition is not limited to praise or informal appreciation. It can also be embedded in formal systems of reward, promotion, appraisal, and professional advancement. Where these systems are perceived as fair, employees may experience recognition equity: the belief that institutional acknowledgement is distributed in a balanced, credible, and morally defensible manner.

However, this paper argues that the conversion of promotion fairness into recognition equity is not automatic. It depends on trust in the promotion decision-making system. This is where Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory (TEDT) is introduced as a moderating logic. TEDT explains how trust in institutional decisions sustains employees' willingness to interpret organizational systems as legitimate, especially in environments where formal rules may be questioned or where past experiences may have weakened confidence. Within the SRA framework, TEDT operates as a legitimacy condition. It strengthens the

relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity because employees are more likely to treat fair procedures as genuine recognition when they trust the decision architecture behind them.

The study therefore contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it introduces Structural Recognition Architecture as a conceptual lens for understanding promotion systems as institutional recognition mechanisms rather than merely procedural HR arrangements. Second, it extends organizational justice literature by showing that trust moderates the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity. Third, it contributes to public administration scholarship by demonstrating that promotion systems in public institutions must be understood not only through fairness rules but also through the trust conditions that make those rules credible.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Promotion Fairness and Organizational Justice

Promotion fairness is rooted in the broader literature on organizational justice. Early conceptual developments in organizational justice also helped classify fairness into distinct analytical traditions, including distributive, procedural, and interaction-based perspectives, helping establish justice as a foundational organizational construct rather than a narrow personnel concern (Greenberg, 1987). Organizational justice concerns employees' perceptions of fairness in workplace decisions, procedures, treatment, and information. Early equity theory emphasized the perceived balance between employee contributions and received outcomes (Adams, 1965). Later procedural justice research showed that employees evaluate the fairness of the process by which decisions are made, not only the favorability of the outcome itself (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). (Leventhal, 1980) identified key procedural rules, including consistency, bias suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality. These criteria remain highly relevant to promotion systems, where employees often scrutinize whether advancement decisions are consistent, merit-based, and free from favoritism.

Colquitt's (2001) four-dimensional model strengthened the field by distinguishing distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice. Promotion decisions can involve all four dimensions. Distributive justice concerns who receives promotion. Procedural justice concerns how promotion decisions are made. Interpersonal justice concerns whether employees are treated respectfully during the process. Informational justice concerns whether explanations are transparent and adequate. A promotion system may therefore fail not only because outcomes are unequal, but because employees do not understand the criteria, do not trust the process, or feel excluded from meaningful information.

Meta-analytic evidence has consistently shown that organizational justice is associated with important employee attitudes and behaviours, including job satisfaction, commitment, trust, and performance-related outcomes (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt J. A. et al., 2001). Recent public sector evidence strengthens this expectation. (Moon et al., 2024) show that justice dimensions significantly reduce turnover intention among Korean public employees, while (Edema, 2025) demonstrate that procedural and distributive justice predict employee performance in Uganda's public sector. These findings confirm that justice remains practically important in bureaucratic and developing-country public administration contexts.

However, the present study extends this literature by examining recognition equity as the outcome of promotion fairness. Promotion fairness is not treated only as a perception of procedural correctness. It is treated as a structural recognition signal. It communicates whether the institution has designed credible pathways through which contribution can be converted into advancement. Thus, promotion fairness is

expected to increase recognition equity because employees are more likely to believe that institutional recognition is fairly distributed when advancement procedures appear fair.

H1: Promotion fairness positively influences recognition equity.

Recognition Equity and Structural Recognition Architecture

Recognition has received increasing attention in organizational studies, but it is often treated as interpersonal appreciation, managerial praise, or symbolic reward. Recognition theory provides a deeper foundation. (Honneth, 1995) argues that recognition is central to dignity, identity formation, and social participation. In workplace settings, recognition shapes whether employees feel valued and respected within the organization. (Brun & Dugas, 2008) describe employee recognition as a constructive response to employees' work and contribution, while other studies link recognition to motivation, engagement, and performance.

However, recognition is not only interpersonal. It is also structural. Employees can be recognized through salary progression, promotion systems, performance appraisal, training access, leadership opportunities, and institutional status. These formal systems communicate whether the organization values contribution in a stable and credible way. Recognition equity therefore refers to employees' perception that institutional recognition is distributed fairly across individuals, groups, roles, and contributions.

Structural Recognition Architecture extends this argument by conceptualizing recognition as something embedded in institutional design. SRA refers to the formalized systems through which employee worth, advancement, and status mobility are organized and sustained over time. Promotion fairness is one component of this architecture. It is not the whole architecture, but it is one of its most visible signals. When employees perceive promotion systems as fair, they are more likely to believe that recognition is not arbitrary or selective.

Recent public HRM literature supports the need to view promotion systems architecturally rather than as isolated personnel procedures. (Zolak Poljašević, 2025), in their review of human resource management in public administration, argue that public HRM reforms are often constrained by weak strategic integration, institutional inertia, and resistance to change. (Barrington, 2024), in a study of talent management in Romania's public sector, similarly shows that HR practitioners often struggle to integrate talent management into broader HRM strategy. These findings support the need for SRA because they show that advancement, talent, and recognition systems can fail when they are fragmented or poorly integrated. SRA therefore provides a framework for understanding promotion, appraisal, career mobility, and recognition as connected institutional systems.

This perspective helps distinguish promotion fairness from recognition equity. Promotion fairness concerns the perceived fairness of advancement systems. Recognition equity concerns the broader perception that institutional recognition is distributed credibly and fairly. The former is a structural signal; the latter is a perceived recognition outcome.

Trust in Promotion Decision-Making

Trust is central to how employees interpret organizational decisions. Mayer et al. (1995) define trust as the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations about another party's ability, benevolence, and integrity. In organizations, trust reduces uncertainty and helps employees interpret managerial actions as legitimate. (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) show that trust in leadership is associated with job attitudes, organizational commitment, and performance-related behaviours.

Trust is also closely related to justice. Tyler & Lind's (1992) relational model argues that fair procedures communicate respect and status within the group. Tyler & Blader's (2003) extend this by showing how fair treatment strengthens identity and engagement. These perspectives imply that fairness is not interpreted in isolation. Employees evaluate whether authorities are trustworthy and whether institutional procedures reflect genuine respect.

Recent empirical evidence supports this justice–trust connection. González-Cánovas et al.,'s (2024) show that justice perceptions and trust in leadership jointly foster employee identification and affective commitment. This reinforces the view that employees respond to formal systems through their broader confidence in leadership and authority. In promotion systems, trust concerns whether employees believe that decision-makers apply criteria honestly, consistently, and without hidden manipulation. This is critical because promotion decisions often involve uncertainty. Employees may not observe every stage of the process. They may not know how criteria are weighted. They may suspect political influence, favoritism, or selective interpretation of rules. Where trust is low, formal fairness may lose credibility. Where trust is high, employees are more likely to accept promotion outcomes as legitimate, even when they do not personally benefit.

TEDT is used in this paper to capture this trust condition. Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory explains how trust in institutional decision-making sustains employees' confidence in organizational systems over time. It is especially relevant where employees continue to work within systems that may be constrained, delayed, or imperfect. In the promotion context, TEDT reflects employees' belief that the decision architecture remains credible enough to deserve continued confidence.

Thus, trust in promotion decision-making is expected to positively influence recognition equity.

H2: Trust Endurance Dynamics positively influences recognition equity.

The Moderating Role of Trust Endurance Dynamics

The central argument of this paper is that trust moderates the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity. The logic is straightforward but theoretically important. Promotion fairness provides the structural signal; trust determines whether that signal is believed.

This argument extends organizational justice theory. Justice research has shown that fair procedures can strengthen trust and positive employee attitudes (Colquitt J. A. et al., 2001). However, the present study refines the logic by asking whether trust conditions the effect of fairness on recognition. This is especially important in public institutions where formal procedures may exist but employees may still doubt the credibility of implementation. In such settings, the effect of fairness depends not only on whether procedures are present, but whether employees believe the decision system is legitimate.

Recent studies support the view that trust-related organizational relationships may be conditional rather than purely linear. (Chen et al., 2025) present a moderated mediation model in which organizational trust affects affective commitment and service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviour through attitudinal pride, while social approval moderates these relationships. Although their specific moderator differs from the present study, their analytical logic supports the view that trust operates within conditional organizational processes. González-Cánovas et al. (2024) also show that justice perceptions and trust in leadership jointly contribute to commitment-related outcomes. These studies support the present paper's argument that fairness and trust should be theorized together.

Experimental evidence further reinforces the claim that fairness must be enacted through credible authority systems. (Canales et al., 2025), in a procedural justice training experiment involving police officers in Mexico, show that procedural justice mindsets and behaviours can be improved through organizational intervention. Their findings are useful for the present study because they suggest that fairness is not simply a formal design; it must be enacted, reinforced, and made credible through trusted organizational actors. This supports the TEDT argument that trust in the decision architecture shapes whether formal fairness produces legitimacy.

From the SRA perspective, promotion fairness becomes recognition equity most strongly when employees interpret the promotion architecture as credible. Trust is therefore a legitimacy condition. When TEDT is high, employees are more likely to see fair promotion systems as genuine recognition. When TEDT is low, employees may treat the same fairness procedures as symbolic, incomplete, or vulnerable to manipulation.

This moderation logic also connects with institutional theory. (Mayer et al., 1995) argue that formal structures may sometimes be adopted symbolically without necessarily shaping actual practice. (Suchman, 1995) defines legitimacy as a generalized perception that organizational actions are appropriate within socially constructed systems of norms and beliefs. In promotion systems, formal fairness may exist, but its legitimacy depends on whether employees trust the underlying decision process. Without trust, fairness risks becoming a formal structure that lacks full recognition value.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that TEDT strengthens the effect of promotion fairness on recognition equity.

H3: Trust Endurance Dynamics positively moderates the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity, such that the relationship is stronger when trust in promotion decision-making is high.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model is developed from the perspective of Structural Recognition Architecture and Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory. It positions promotion fairness as the independent variable, recognition equity as the dependent variable, and trust in promotion decision-making as the moderating variable. The model assumes that promotion fairness can influence recognition equity directly, but that the strength of this relationship depends on whether employees trust the promotion decision-making system.

Within the Structural Recognition Architecture perspective, promotion fairness functions as a structural recognition signal. It communicates whether the institution has designed fair, transparent, and credible pathways through which employee contribution can be converted into career advancement and institutional acknowledgement. Recognition equity represents the employee-level perception that institutional recognition is fairly and credibly distributed.

Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory provides the moderating logic. It suggests that employees are more likely to interpret promotion fairness as genuine recognition when they trust the decision architecture behind promotion outcomes. Where trust is high, fair promotion systems are likely to carry stronger recognition value. Where trust is low, the same promotion procedures may be interpreted as symbolic, selectively applied, or vulnerable to hidden influence.

The model therefore tests three relationships. First, it examines whether promotion fairness positively influences recognition equity. Second, it examines whether Trust Endurance Dynamics positively influences recognition equity. Third, it examines whether the interaction between promotion fairness and Trust Endurance Dynamics strengthens the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity.

The model may be expressed as follows:

Recognition Equity = Promotion Fairness + Trust Endurance Dynamics + Promotion Fairness × Trust Endurance Dynamics

Thus, the central analytical question is not only whether fair promotion systems matter, but whether they become stronger recognition mechanisms when employees trust the decision-making architecture behind them.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative explanatory research design to examine whether trust in promotion decision-making moderates the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity. The design was appropriate because the study sought to test a theoretically specified relationship among latent constructs rather than only describe employee perceptions. The paper is positioned within a theory-development orientation, where existing organizational justice and trust literatures are extended through the Structural Recognition Architecture perspective.

The study used partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) because the model involved latent constructs, a moderation effect, and a relatively modest sample size. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for predictive and explanatory modelling, especially where the research objective is to examine theoretically informed relationships among constructs and assess explained variance in an endogenous variable. In this study, the endogenous construct was Recognition Equity, while Promotion Fairness, Trust Endurance Dynamics, and the interaction between Promotion Fairness and Trust Endurance Dynamics were specified as predictors.

PLS-SEM was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine predictive relationships among latent constructs, estimate explained variance, and assess a moderation effect within a theory-development framework, which aligns with widely established guidance in partial least squares modelling (Hair et al., 2022).

Study Context and Sample

The empirical context of the study was the public education sector. This setting is appropriate for examining promotion fairness and recognition equity because career advancement in public education institutions often carries both material and symbolic meaning. Promotion decisions affect salary progression, rank, professional status, morale, and perceptions of institutional acknowledgement. In such settings, promotion fairness may therefore function not only as an administrative HR process but also as a recognition mechanism.

The analysis was based on survey responses from public education employees. After casewise deletion, the final model was estimated using 109 valid observations. The use of public education employees allowed the study to examine the relationship between promotion fairness, trust, and recognition equity within an institutional environment where promotion systems are strongly linked to legitimacy, motivation, and perceptions of equitable treatment.

Measures

The study used reflective latent constructs for Promotion Fairness, Trust Endurance Dynamics, and Recognition Equity. Items were measured using a Likert-type response format. Promotion Fairness captured employees' perceptions of whether promotion opportunities and advancement procedures were fair, transparent, and merit-based. Trust Endurance Dynamics captured employees' confidence in the credibility, consistency, and legitimacy of promotion decision-making. Recognition Equity captured employees' perception that institutional recognition was fairly distributed and that employee contribution was credibly acknowledged.

The interaction term between Promotion Fairness and Trust Endurance Dynamics was specified to test the moderation hypothesis. This interaction term examined whether the effect of Promotion Fairness on Recognition Equity varied depending on the level of trust employees had in promotion decision-making.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed using ADANCO 2.4.1 and partial least squares structural equation modelling. PLS-SEM was appropriate because the study sought to explain variance in Recognition Equity and test a moderation relationship among latent constructs. The approach is suitable for prediction-oriented and theory-development models, particularly where the research objective is to examine theoretically specified relationships rather than confirm a fully established covariance structure. The use of PLS-SEM for moderation analysis is also consistent with methodological guidance on composite-based SEM and product-term interaction modelling.

The moderation effect was estimated through an interaction term between Promotion Fairness and Trust Endurance Dynamics. Product-term interaction constructs may show high correlations with their parent constructs because they are mathematically derived from them. Therefore, the interaction construct was interpreted only for its statistical role in testing moderation, not as a separate substantive construct. This point is important because interaction terms can sometimes produce weaker AVE values or high associations with parent constructs. Such results should be treated as expected features of product-indicator moderation rather than automatically interpreted as theoretical discriminant-validity failure.

The sample size of 109 valid observations was modest but acceptable for an exploratory, prediction-oriented PLS-SEM model with a limited number of constructs and paths. Nevertheless, the sample size is acknowledged as a limitation, and future research should replicate the model using larger samples and alternative modelling approaches.

Although the sample size was relatively modest, it remained within acceptable analytical range for the specified model and is broadly consistent with minimum sample size guidance commonly discussed in PLS-SEM scholarship (Kock & Hadaya, 2018).

This approach is also consistent with earlier methodological guidance on interaction modelling in partial least squares path analysis, particularly regarding product-term estimation of latent-variable moderation effects (Henseler & Chin, 2010).

RESULTS

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model produced acceptable reliability for the main constructs. Promotion Fairness demonstrated adequate internal consistency, with reliability coefficients above the commonly recommended threshold of 0.70. Trust Endurance Dynamics also showed strong reliability, indicating that the items consistently captured trust in promotion decision-making. Recognition Equity initially showed acceptable composite reliability and convergent validity, although one item displayed a weak loading and was therefore treated cautiously in the interpretation.

The initial three-item Recognition Equity model produced an AVE slightly above the recommended threshold. However, one Recognition Equity indicator loaded weakly compared with the remaining two indicators. Because weak indicators can reduce the clarity of construct interpretation, a cleaner version of the model was also examined by retaining the stronger Recognition Equity indicators. The cleaned model produced stronger measurement clarity and retained the same substantive moderation pattern.

The interaction construct showed lower AVE and high correlations with the parent constructs. This is not unusual in product-term moderation models because interaction terms are constructed from the indicators of the predictor and moderator. Therefore, the interaction construct was not interpreted as a separate substantive latent construct. It was used only for its statistical role in testing whether the Promotion Fairness–Recognition Equity relationship varied across levels of Trust Endurance Dynamics.

Structural Model

The structural model examined the direct effect of Promotion Fairness on Recognition Equity, the direct effect of Trust Endurance Dynamics on Recognition Equity, and the interaction effect between Promotion Fairness and Trust Endurance Dynamics.

The results showed that Promotion Fairness positively predicted Recognition Equity. This suggests that employees who perceived promotion systems as fair were more likely to perceive institutional recognition as equitable. This finding supports the view that promotion systems function as recognition signals within public institutions.

Trust Endurance Dynamics also positively predicted Recognition Equity. This indicates that employees who trusted promotion decision-making were more likely to believe that recognition was fairly distributed. This result confirms the importance of trust as a direct institutional condition shaping perceptions of recognition equity.

Most importantly, the interaction between Promotion Fairness and Trust Endurance Dynamics was positive. This finding supports the moderation hypothesis. It indicates that the effect of Promotion Fairness on Recognition Equity becomes stronger when employees trust the promotion decision-making system. In other words, fair promotion systems are more likely to generate recognition equity when the decision architecture behind promotion outcomes is trusted.

The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in Recognition Equity. This suggests that Promotion Fairness, Trust Endurance Dynamics, and their interaction provide a strong explanation of how recognition equity is formed in the public education context.

Moderation Interpretation

The moderation result is central to the paper. It shows that promotion fairness does not operate in isolation. A promotion system may be perceived as fair, but the strength of its effect on recognition equity depends on whether employees trust the decision-making process.

When trust is high, fair promotion systems carry stronger recognition value. Employees are more likely to believe that advancement systems genuinely reflect merit, contribution, and institutional acknowledgement. Under these conditions, promotion fairness becomes more than procedural fairness. It becomes a credible recognition mechanism.

When trust is low, the recognition value of promotion fairness may weaken. Employees may interpret promotion rules as formal, symbolic, or inconsistently applied. They may acknowledge that procedures exist but still question whether those procedures are implemented honestly. In this situation, fairness may remain administratively visible but recognition may remain psychologically uncertain.

This finding directly supports the Structural Recognition Architecture argument. Promotion fairness functions as a structural signal, but trust determines whether that signal is believed. Recognition equity therefore emerges not only from the design of fair promotion procedures, but from the credibility of the decision architecture through which those procedures are enacted.

DISCUSSION

This study examined whether fair promotion systems can generate recognition equity without trust in promotion decision-making. The findings indicate that promotion fairness positively influences recognition equity, trust in promotion decision-making also exerts a significant positive effect, and, most importantly, Trust Endurance Dynamics strengthens the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity. Put differently, promotion fairness matters, but it becomes considerably more meaningful as a recognition mechanism when employees trust the institutional decision architecture behind promotion outcomes.

This finding speaks directly to a long-standing assumption within organizational justice scholarship. Foundational justice theories have consistently argued that employees respond more positively when organizational procedures and outcomes are perceived as fair. Equity theory explains how employees evaluate fairness through comparisons between contributions and received outcomes (Adams, 1965). Procedural justice theory further demonstrates that employees attach importance to consistency, accuracy, representativeness, ethicality, and correctability in institutional decision-making (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Colquitt's (2001) multidimensional framework later clarified that fairness is not a single construct, but a broader combination of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational dimensions.

The present study supports this broad justice tradition. Employees who perceived promotion systems as fair were significantly more likely to perceive recognition within the institution as equitable. At the same time, the findings suggest that the fairness literature remains incomplete when fairness is treated as sufficient on its own. Employees do not simply observe institutional fairness and accept it automatically. They interpret fairness through their broader confidence in the authority structure responsible for implementing it. Where trust is high, fairness carries stronger institutional meaning. Where trust is weak, even formally fair procedures may be viewed with uncertainty or skepticism.

This distinction is central to understanding recognition in public institutions. Promotion fairness communicates a structural signal, but trust determines whether that signal is genuinely believed.

This finding speaks directly to a long-standing assumption in organizational justice literature. Foundational justice theories have consistently argued that employees respond positively when organizational procedures and outcomes are perceived as fair. Equity theory explains how employees evaluate fairness by comparing their inputs and outcomes with those of others (Adams, 1965). Procedural justice theory further shows that employees value consistency, accuracy, bias suppression, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality in decision-making processes (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Colquitt's (2001) multidimensional model also clarified that fairness is not one-dimensional, but includes distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice. The present study supports this broad justice tradition because promotion fairness has a positive effect on recognition equity. Employees who perceive promotion systems as fair are more likely to perceive institutional recognition as equitable.

However, the findings also show that the fairness literature is incomplete when fairness is treated as sufficient by itself. Earlier justice studies have strongly established that fair procedures and outcomes are associated with trust, satisfaction, commitment, and performance-related behaviours (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt J. A. et al., 2001). Yet much of this literature tends to examine fairness as a direct predictor of employee attitudes and behaviours. The present study differs by showing that fairness also requires an interpretive condition. Promotion fairness does not move into recognition equity with equal strength across all levels of trust. Its effect becomes stronger when employees trust the promotion decision-making system. This suggests that employees do not simply observe fairness; they interpret it through their confidence in the authority structure that applies the rules.

This finding aligns with, but also extends, relational models of justice. (Tyler & Lind's, 1992) relational model argues that fair procedures communicate respect, status, and belonging within groups. (Tyler & Blader's, 2003) group engagement model further suggests that fairness shapes cooperation because it informs employees about their identity and standing within the organization. The present study supports this relational view, but adds a more structural argument. In the promotion context, fairness communicates not only respectful treatment but also institutional recognition. Promotion systems allocate advancement, status, and career legitimacy. They therefore act as structural recognition mechanisms. The contribution of this study is to show that this recognition signal becomes more credible when employees trust the decision-making architecture behind promotion outcomes.

The finding also has implications for the trust literature. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) conceptualized trust as willingness to accept vulnerability based on expectations of ability, benevolence, and integrity. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) showed that trust in leadership is associated with important work attitudes and behaviours. These studies help explain why trust matters in promotion systems: employees are vulnerable to promotion decisions because such decisions affect career mobility, professional status, and access to future opportunities. The present study supports the view that trust is important, but it does more than confirm the direct value of trust. It shows that trust functions as a moderator. Trust changes the strength of the relationship between promotion fairness and recognition equity. Thus, trust is not merely an outcome of fair treatment or a general positive attitude toward management. In this study, trust operates as a legitimacy condition that determines whether formal fairness becomes credible recognition.

This result creates a useful tension with conventional procedural justice assumptions. Procedural justice research often implies that fair procedures are likely to generate acceptance, even when outcomes are unfavorable. This remains broadly valid. However, the present finding suggests that in public institutional contexts, formal procedural fairness may not be enough if employees doubt the integrity of the decision system. A promotion system may have rules, criteria, and formal procedures, yet employees may still question whether those procedures are applied consistently or whether hidden influence affects the final outcome. In such contexts, fairness may remain administratively visible but psychologically weak. This is

where the present study departs from a simple fairness-outcome model. It suggests that the meaning of fairness depends on whether employees trust the institutional process through which fairness is enacted.

The study also contributes to recognition literature. Recognition theory emphasizes that individuals require respect, esteem, and acknowledgement in order to experience dignity and social belonging (Honneth, 1995). Organizational recognition studies have similarly linked recognition to motivation, commitment, and employee well-being (Brun & Dugas, 2008). However, much of the recognition literature tends to focus on interpersonal recognition, managerial appreciation, praise, or symbolic reward. The present study extends this by showing that recognition is also structurally produced. Promotion systems are not neutral administrative instruments. They are institutional mechanisms through which organizations signal whose contribution is visible, whose service is valued, and whose career deserves mobility. In this sense, promotion fairness is a structural recognition signal.

This is where Structural Recognition Architecture makes its main theoretical contribution. SRA shifts the discussion from recognition as isolated appreciation to recognition as institutional design. It conceptualizes promotion systems, appraisal procedures, rewards, career pathways, and leadership opportunities as formal structures through which recognition is organized and sustained. The findings support this logic because promotion fairness is positively associated with recognition equity. Yet the moderation result shows that structural recognition is not created by formal systems alone. A fair promotion system becomes recognition-generating only when employees trust the decision architecture. SRA therefore helps explain why some formal HR systems produce legitimacy and morale, while others remain distrusted even when procedures exist.

The study also speaks to public administration and public sector HRM literature. Public service motivation research has long argued that public employees are motivated by service values, mission, and contribution to society rather than only private material incentives (Perry & Wise, 1990; Wright & Cropanzano, 2007; Ritz & Neumann, 2016). However, public service motivation can be weakened when institutional systems fail to provide credible recognition, fair advancement, and transparent opportunity structures. The present study contributes to this debate by showing that promotion fairness and trust are not peripheral HR concerns. They are part of the institutional conditions under which public employees interpret whether their contribution is valued.

The result also relates to meritocratic bureaucracy literature. (Evans & Rauch, 1999) and Dahlström, (Dahlström, 2012) show that meritocratic administrative systems are important for state capacity and institutional performance. These studies emphasize the value of merit-based recruitment and promotion for reducing patronage and strengthening bureaucratic quality. The present study does not contradict this literature. Rather, it adds an employee-level perceptual mechanism. Merit-based and fair promotion systems may strengthen recognition equity, but their effect depends on whether employees trust the system as genuinely meritocratic. The finding therefore suggests that meritocracy is not only a formal design principle; it must also be trusted as a lived institutional reality.

This is important because formal structures can sometimes exist ceremonially without being fully internalized. (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) argued that organizations may adopt formal structures for legitimacy even when those structures are loosely coupled from actual practice. (Suchman, 1995) also emphasized that legitimacy depends on whether organizational actions are perceived as appropriate within socially constructed systems of norms and beliefs. The present study reflects this institutional tension. Promotion procedures may exist, and they may even be formally described as fair, but they will not necessarily generate recognition equity unless employees believe in the credibility of the process. Trust therefore protects promotion fairness from becoming merely symbolic. It helps convert formal structure into perceived recognition.

The moderation result also advances Trust Endurance Dynamics Theory. TEDT is useful here because it explains trust as something more durable than momentary confidence. It concerns the continuing belief that institutional decisions remain credible, even where employees operate within constrained or imperfect public systems. The finding that TEDT strengthens the promotion fairness–recognition equity relationship suggests that trust helps employees sustain confidence in institutional recognition structures. This does not mean that trust replaces fairness. Rather, trust gives fairness interpretive force. Promotion fairness provides the structural signal; TEDT determines whether that signal is believed.

Taken together, the findings suggest a more nuanced model of fairness and recognition in public organizations. Existing justice literature explains why fair systems matter. Recognition literature explains why employees need acknowledgement and esteem. Trust literature explains why decision-making credibility matters. Institutional theory explains why formal structures may not always produce the meanings they claim to represent. This study brings these debates together through Structural Recognition Architecture. It shows that promotion fairness becomes recognition equity most strongly when employees trust the decision architecture behind promotion outcomes.

The practical implication is clear. Public institutions cannot build recognition equity by relying only on formal promotion rules. They must also build trust in how those rules are applied. This requires transparent promotion criteria, consistent implementation, credible documentation, accessible appeal mechanisms, and clear communication about promotion decisions. Where employees perceive that promotion decisions are fair and trustworthy, promotion systems can become meaningful recognition structures. Where trust is weak, even technically fair systems may be interpreted as symbolic, selective, or vulnerable to manipulation.

Theoretically, the study challenges a linear view of fairness. It does not reject organizational justice theory. Instead, it refines it. Promotion fairness matters, but its recognition effect is conditional. The finding therefore supports a moderated understanding of institutional fairness: fairness becomes recognition when it is embedded in trust. This is the central contribution of the paper.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper makes four theoretical contributions.

First, it introduces Structural Recognition Architecture as a conceptual framework for understanding how formal institutional systems generate recognition. SRA shifts the discussion from interpersonal recognition alone to institutionalized recognition embedded in promotion systems, appraisal structures, rewards, and career pathways.

Second, the paper extends organizational justice theory by showing that fairness does not automatically become recognition. Promotion fairness influences recognition equity, but this influence is strengthened by trust in the decision-making system. This moves the justice discussion beyond direct-effect assumptions.

Third, the paper contributes to recognition theory by demonstrating that recognition can be structurally organized. Recognition is not only verbal appreciation or managerial acknowledgement. It can be built into institutional systems that regulate advancement and status mobility.

Fourth, the paper develops TEDT as a moderating explanation. Trust in promotion decision-making is shown to function as a legitimacy condition that strengthens the conversion of fair promotion systems into perceived recognition equity.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study has several practical implications for public education institutions and public sector HR managers.

First, promotion systems should be designed as transparent recognition mechanisms. Employees should clearly understand how promotion criteria are developed, applied, and reviewed.

Second, institutions should not assume that formal fairness automatically creates trust. Trust must be built through consistent implementation, communication, and protection against perceived favoritism.

Third, promotion decisions should be accompanied by clear explanations. When employees understand why decisions were made, they are more likely to view the process as credible, even when outcomes are not personally favorable.

Fourth, appeal and review mechanisms should be strengthened. Correctability is a core element of procedural justice. Employees are more likely to trust promotion systems when they believe errors can be challenged and corrected.

Fifth, public institutions should monitor recognition equity as part of HR evaluation. Promotion fairness should not be assessed only through policy compliance. It should also be assessed through employee perceptions of fairness, trust, and recognition.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data were cross-sectional, which limits the extent to which causal claims can be made. Although the model was theoretically specified, the analysis captures associations among promotion fairness, Trust Endurance Dynamics, and recognition equity at one point in time. It therefore cannot fully establish how trust and recognition equity develop, weaken, or strengthen over time.

Second, the study focused on public education employees. This context is appropriate because promotion systems in education carry material, symbolic, and professional significance. However, the findings may not automatically generalize to all public sector settings. Promotion systems in health, local government, higher education, security institutions, and central civil service ministries may operate under different administrative rules, professional cultures, and advancement constraints.

Third, the study relied on self-reported survey data. This is defensible because fairness, trust, and recognition equity are perceptual constructs. However, self-reported data may still be affected by common method bias, respondent mood, social desirability, or personal experiences with promotion outcomes. Future studies would benefit from combining employee perceptions with interviews, HR documents, promotion records, or administrative data.

Fourth, the Recognition Equity construct requires further refinement. Although the cleaned model retained the stronger indicators and improved the clarity of measurement, recognition equity is still an emerging construct in this paper. It should therefore be treated as conceptually promising but requiring additional scale development and validation.

Fifth, the paper introduced Structural Recognition Architecture through one empirical pathway: promotion fairness, trust, and recognition equity. This provides a focused test of the framework, but it does not exhaust

the full scope of SRA. Other recognition-related systems, such as appraisal, rewards, leadership opportunities, professional development, and grievance mechanisms, were not examined in the present model.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should extend this study in several directions. First, longitudinal research would be useful for examining how trust in promotion decision-making and recognition equity evolve over time. Such designs could show whether repeated experiences of fair promotion decisions gradually strengthen recognition equity, or whether repeated disappointment weakens trust even when formal procedures remain in place.

Second, future studies should test the model in other public sector contexts. Health institutions, local government, higher education, central ministries, and civil service commissions may provide useful comparative settings. Testing the model across sectors would help determine whether the promotion fairness–trust–recognition equity relationship is specific to public education or reflects a wider public administration pattern.

Third, future research should use mixed-methods designs. Qualitative interviews could explore how employees interpret promotion decisions, what they consider credible recognition, and why trust in decision-making strengthens or weakens their belief in promotion fairness. Document analysis could also compare formal promotion policies with employees' lived experiences of those policies.

Fourth, further work is needed to develop and validate Recognition Equity as a stronger measurement construct. Future studies should generate additional items, test the construct across samples, examine convergent and discriminant validity, and distinguish recognition equity from related constructs such as organizational justice, perceived organizational support, employee recognition, and job satisfaction.

Fifth, future studies should examine other components of Structural Recognition Architecture. These may include performance appraisal fairness, reward fairness, access to professional development, leadership opportunity, training allocation, grievance-handling systems, and career mobility structures. Such research would help establish whether SRA can operate as a broader institutional framework for studying recognition in public organizations.

Sixth, future research could extend the model by examining downstream outcomes. Recognition equity may influence motivation, job satisfaction, moral endurance, organizational commitment, and productivity. Testing these pathways would connect the present paper to wider debates on institutional performance, employee motivation, and public sector legitimacy.

Seventh, future studies may examine whether trust moderates other recognition-related relationships. For example, trust may condition the relationship between appraisal fairness and motivation, reward fairness and job satisfaction, or professional development access and organizational commitment. This would help determine whether Trust Endurance Dynamics operates only in promotion systems or functions more broadly as a legitimacy condition within Structural Recognition Architecture.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine whether fair promotion systems can generate recognition equity without trust. The findings suggest that promotion fairness contributes positively to recognition equity, but that its influence becomes stronger when employees trust the promotion decision-making system. Fair systems

matter. Yet their institutional meaning becomes far more powerful when employees believe in the credibility of the structures responsible for applying them.

The paper introduced Structural Recognition Architecture as a framework for understanding promotion systems as institutional recognition mechanisms. It argued that promotion fairness is a structural signal through which organizations communicate employee worth, advancement, and status mobility. However, the findings show that this signal depends on trust. Trust Endurance Dynamics strengthens the conversion of promotion fairness into recognition equity.

The main conclusion is therefore clear. Public institutions cannot rely only on formal promotion rules. They must build trusted decision architectures. Without trust, fairness may remain procedural. With trust, fairness becomes recognition.

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