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Impression Management Among Municipal Employees as a Barrier to Engagement:

An Explorative Study

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree M. A. Community Psychology

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Wilfrid Laurier University

Waterloo, Ontario

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Abstract

As municipalities adapt to the climate crisis through mitigation and adaptation strategies it is important that all citizens are meaningfully included in local-level planning and decision-making. Authentic, long-term relationships need to be built between municipal actors and citizens so that municipal development benefits all citizens and is informed by a diverse array of perspectives that truly represents the local context and those within it. There are, however, barriers to fostering genuine relationships and meaningful engagement between municipal governments and their citizens; one such barrier is ‘organizational impression management’ – that is, presenting an ideal or overly positive impression of the municipality to the public, especially when this impression is discrepant from reality. This exploratory study used one-on-one semi-structured interviews to examine strategies of organizational impression management used by municipal employees when engaging with the public, as well as to explore their overall perceptions and experiences navigating impressions for their municipal employer. Participants’ perceptions and experiences varied greatly and were influenced by an array of internal or individual factors, as well as the structural operations and features of the municipal institution itself. Findings provide preliminary support to suggest individual acts of impression management between employees and constituents could be a barrier to meaningful engagement, especially when the impression management is disingenuous. Further research is needed to better understand how organizational impression management can be overcome or mitigated, thus removing a potential barrier to meaningful engagement processes.

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Overview

Municipal governments have a considerable impact on Canadians' quality of life by providing and governing services such as intercity transportation, waste disposal, and public health; they continue to operate and provide services in the face of complex and urgent societal challenges, one of which is the global climate crisis.

The climate crisis does not affect everyone equally; vulnerable, historically marginalized, or otherwise disadvantaged citizens disproportionately bear the impacts of climate change on a global and local level. There is growing recognition that municipal governments should prioritize social equity within their planning and operations so the benefits and burdens of climate change are equitably shared among all citizens and that mitigation and adaptation responses to the climate crisis do not cause further inequities (Champagne, 2019; Russo & Pattison, 2016; Schrock et al., 2015), or an 'equity deficit'. The development of long-term, reciprocal relationships between municipalities and their citizens – or processes of meaningful citizen engagement – are necessary for addressing the equity deficit, because the genuine relationships formed through processes of meaningful engagement can facilitate democratic participation (see Holden & Larsen, 2015; Sprain, 2017). This is especially true for equity-deserving/equity-seeking citizens who have historically been underrepresented in and excluded from municipal decision making and operations.

There are, however, major barriers to fostering genuine relationships and meaningful engagement between municipal governments and their citizens. This thesis proposes that one such barrier is 'organizational impression management' – that is, when a municipality constructs and presents an ideal or overly positive impression of itself to its constituents, especially when

this presented impression is discrepant from the realities of its operations. This thesis suggests organizational impression management can manifest through interpersonal interactions between municipal employees and constituents, and that municipal employees knowingly or unknowingly ‘make the city look good’ or ‘make promises the city cannot keep’ through managing positive impressions, which could ultimately hinder sincere employee-constituent relationships.

The purpose of the proposed research is to examine strategies of organizational impression management among municipal employees, specifically in the context of building relationships with citizens and fostering meaningful processes of citizen engagement. Findings from this research can be used to understand how to overcome impression management as a barrier to authentic relationship building and engagement between municipalities and constituents. Findings can inform ongoing resource-sharing networks within the *Towards Equity and Accessibility in Municipal Climate Action (TEAMCA)* project, which includes municipal employees and other relevant stakeholders who would benefit from understanding how impression management may be mitigated or avoided, thus working towards more genuine processes of meaningful citizen engagement. Further, the present study addresses several gaps in existing impression management literature by examining how people perceive and articulate their experiences of individual-level organizational impression management in the context of public (i.e., not private) organizations (see Talbot & Boiral, 2021). The present study used semi-structured interviews with a vignette to explore how municipal employees perceive and navigate organizational impression management as it relates to their occupational role in their municipality. This paper will begin with an overview of literature pertaining to the equity deficit as it relates to fostering meaningful citizen engagement and subsequently developing genuine relationships between citizens and government actors. Next, the theory of ‘impression

management' will be introduced and presented as a potential barrier to the forming of genuine relationships by examining existing literature. Research questions will then be presented, followed by a proposal of the methodology. The results will be presented and interpreted, and limitations and directions for future research will be considered.

Literature Review

The Equity Deficit in Municipal Climate Planning and Action

If the global climate crisis is to be adequately addressed, Canada's governing bodies need to take bold and significant action. Municipal-level response is especially important because municipal governments play a vital role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, controlling approximately 40% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions in sectors such as transportation, building infrastructure, and waste (Guyadeen et al., 2019; Philip & Cohen, 2020). There is a growing interest in municipal-level response to the climate crisis, including municipal-level climate action plans and associated mitigation and adaptation strategies (Guyadeen et al., 2019; Schrock et al., 2015). There is also growing awareness of the 'equity dilemma' or 'equity deficit' in municipal climate planning and action; that is, the burdens and benefits of existing mitigation and adaptation strategies are not equitably distributed among all citizens – in fact, existing strategies often exacerbate inequalities among vulnerable, historically marginalized, or otherwise equity-deserving groups (Agyeman & Evans, 2003; Russo & Pattison, 2016; Schrock et al., 2015). For example, installing a light rail transit system reduces municipal greenhouse gas emissions but contributes to an equity deficit by displacing low-income households as rent prices increase along the transit line through gentrification processes (see Rice et al., 2019). The equity deficit has been linked to municipal strategies that prioritize economic growth over social equity;

therefore, there is growing recognition that social equity and justice should be primary considerations in environmental strategies going forward (Champagne, 2019; Russo & Pattison, 2016; Schrock et al., 2015).

Interpersonal Relationships, Meaningful Engagement, and the Equity Deficit

The equity deficit within municipal planning and action relates to challenges achieving meaningful citizen engagement, especially among vulnerable, historically marginalized, or otherwise equity-deserving citizens, including but not limited to low-income groups, racialized groups, and people with disabilities (Champagne, 2019; Hugel & Davies, 2020). Meaningful citizen engagement can be defined as municipal governments engaging with varied and representative stakeholders (i.e., citizens) over long periods of time, and applying citizens' knowledge and skills to shared plans and actions at the local level (Holden & Larsen, 2015; Sprain, 2017). Authentic meaningful engagement in democratic governments is beneficial for both the state and individuals because:

participation can help ensure that solutions are better adapted to the local context, transform adversarial relationships, lead to ownership of decisions, reduce implementation costs, introduce better information, and include diverse perspectives and ways of knowing, thereby enhancing the quality of assessments or decisions (Sprain, 2017, p. 66)

In contrast, existing methods of engagement often rely on 'consulting' or informing the public and collecting ad-hoc feedback, which does not provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful participation (Dekker, 2018; Guyadeen et al., 2019; Holden & Larsen, 2015; Hugel & Davies, 2020). These typical methods of engagement could be described as 'tokenistic' and 'box-ticking'

at best – or fostering a culture of disengagement at worst – because they do not allocate decision-making power to citizens. This is especially true for citizens of equity-deserving groups who are often underrepresented and disengaged from citizen engagement processes (Dekker, 2018; Hugel & Davies, 2020; Rajkopal, 2014; Sprain, 2017). If municipalities are to truly address the equity deficit, they must commit to developing and implementing meaningful citizen engagement strategies with equity and social justice as core considerations.

A necessary and overlooked component/precursor for meaningful citizen engagement is authentic interpersonal relationships among municipal actors and citizens (see Holden & Larsen, 2015; Poland et al., 2020; Preston et al., 2020; Sprain, 2017). Indeed, meaningful engagement is inherently relationship-oriented because it ultimately relies on sincere interactions and correspondence among individuals (i.e., individual municipal employees and constituents) over long periods of time. It is important for genuine, long-term relationships to be established so that citizens feel connected to and invested in the functioning and development of their community, and so that municipal actors feel a connection to those they are working for (Holden & Larsen, 2015; Sprain, 2017). Authentic relationships in this context also involve engaging diverse citizens from the inception of municipal projects, considering how their social identities and social locations affect their relationship to the city and their experiences in it, and applying their ideas and perspectives by allocating decision-making power (Schiffer, 2018).

Authentic relationships should also extend beyond traditional ideas of ‘belonging’ and ‘representation’ to challenge dominant cultural politics and structures of municipal planning (Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Schiffer, 2018). That is, even well-intentioned and genuine attempts at inclusionary relationship building can be thwarted by cities’ operations, structures, and socio-political-historical contexts. For example, the hierarchical structure of municipalities affords

status and power to particular social actors (such as those with municipal jobs and ‘technical expertise’) and devalues others. Further, popular conceptualizations of urban development (e.g., ‘green growth’, ‘smart cities’) reflect narrow discourses that remain largely unchallenged (Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Schiffer, 2018). Attempting to build authentic relationships for meaningful citizen engagement without critiquing and questioning the municipal institution itself has led to a valid fear and lack of trust in municipalities among marginal groups (Sprain, 2017; see Hugel & Davies, 2020 for review). To illustrate, one can consider the challenges and contradictions of developing authentic relationships between Indigenous citizens and municipal actors in the context of North American settler colonialism. First, the very existence and ‘advancement’ of a municipality, including attempts to foster inclusive meaningful engagement among diverse arrays of citizens, are in and of themselves acts of colonization, and therefore contribute to the erasure and eradication of Indigenous peoples and their culture (Barry & Agyeman, 2020). Further, municipal planning and development often ignore processes of Truth and Reconciliation such as honouring local territory and treaties. Additionally, Indigenous understandings of the natural world (i.e., its regeneration, maintenance, and humans’ relationship with it/connection to it) contradict dominant notions of municipal development and success, and therefore municipal institutions leave little to no room for their consideration and application (Schiffer, 2018). If dominant notions are not questioned and associated inequitable structures and processes are left unchanged, Indigenous persons and other marginalized groups are not likely to engage in municipal planning, nor develop genuine relationships with municipal actors (Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Schiffer, 2018; Sprain, 2017). It is important to consider whether municipalities are prepared and willing to foster authentic relationships with citizens and engage with them in meaningful ways that challenge the status quo and produce genuine collaboration rather than

perpetuate dominant ‘politics of inclusion and collaboration’ (see Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Curwood et al., 2011).

Municipal Planning and Action in Context – The ‘Hobbled’ Institution

The equity deficit within municipal planning and action is related to larger structures including neoliberalism, capitalism, and the global political economy in which municipal institutions operate (Champagne, 2019; Fieldman, 2011, Kishimoto et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, municipalities often prioritize economic growth over social equity and the environment. Municipal policies and strategies are increasingly rooted in capitalist values of economic growth (i.e., ‘green growth’), profitability, and free-market competition (Champagne, 2019; Fieldman, 2011; Holden & Larsen, 2015; Kishimoto et al., 2020; Rajkopal, 2014; Zavattaro, 2013). These priorities are reinforced through larger structures at the provincial, national, and global level, ultimately pressuring municipalities to operate within dominant frameworks of economic growth and profit accumulation (Fieldman, 2011; Kishimoto et al., 2020).

On a global scale, beginning in the 1970s many powerful countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada implemented neoliberal policies and reforms characterized by international free trade, free marketplace competition, and privatization. These policies reinforce inequitable conditions of economic growth on a global scale (Fieldman, 2011; see Harvey, 2005). Organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization – which may be described as “transnational private interest governments” (Cerny, 1999, as cited in Fieldman, 2011, p. 161) – continue to reinforce neoliberal policies globally. This results in intense global competition as countries compete for private investments

and associated economic benefits (Fieldman, 2011; Zavattaro, 2013). On a national level, countries are pressured to align their policies and frameworks with global neoliberal capitalism because being ‘competitive on the world stage’ is incentivized through investments in human, social, and political resources. Federal governments and their subsidiaries are increasingly turning to partnerships with the private sector (i.e., for-profit businesses/companies) and other forms of privatization to guarantee a ‘competitive edge’ in the global economy (Fieldman, 2011; Kishimoto et al., 2020; North et al., 2017; Zavattaro, 2013). The Canadian government is not immune to these global pressures (i.e., simultaneously being subjected to them and contributing to them) and is increasingly adopting various forms of privatization at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels (Ramsay, 2020). For example, public-private partnerships are increasingly common for delivering federal and provincial infrastructure and services such as health care and post-secondary education (see Siemiatycki, 2015). In another example, ‘pay-for-performance’ programs are increasingly popular in the Canadian health care system despite a lack of evidence conclusively proving they increase quality of care (see Kyeremanteng et al., 2019). As Canadian governments allow further privatization of the public sphere under the pressure of global marketplace competition, more public services are being viewed as opportunities for economic growth and operated as mechanisms of profit accumulation for private stakeholders (Ramsay, 2020).

There is evidence suggesting the equity deficit in Canadian municipal planning and action is related to prioritizing economic growth and profitability over social equity and the environment. First, public initiatives delivered exclusively through the public sector are more economically efficient and provide higher-quality services than those with involvement from the private sector (Ramsay, 2020). Privatization may divert profits generated through public services

to private investors rather than being reinvested in public infrastructure and services. A long-term consequence of privatization and associated neoliberal policies is reduced public funds at all levels of government, including the municipal level (Fieldman, 2011; North et al., 2017; Ramsay, 2020; Wamsler et al., 2019). As public funds shrink, so do governments' capacities to provide public infrastructure and services for taxpayers. Municipal governments acknowledge that dwindling financial resources are a barrier to implementing quality initiatives and services, creating constraints such as poor-quality working conditions and insufficient human resources (Fieldman, 2011; North et al., 2017; Wamsler et al., 2019). Limited financial resources also pressure local governments to adopt policies that align with priorities of economic growth and privatization; if they do not comply with these ideals, they may be 'disciplined' by the global political economy through further budget restraints or being denied access to private investors (Fieldman, 2011; North et al., 2017; Rajkopal, 2014).

Priorities of economic growth and profitability are in direct conflict with addressing the equity deficit in municipal planning and action. As cities prioritize privatization and competition, public services become less about providing a high quality of life for residents and more about attracting stakeholders (i.e., private investors and potential resident-consumers), maintaining a competitive edge on the national or global stage, and ensuring returns on private investments (Zavattaro, 2013). In addition to the perspective that it is morally reprehensible to seek profit from public services that are intended to help people in society (Ramsay, 2020), this situation fosters conditions that limit municipalities' abilities to encourage meaningful citizen engagement in climate change or any other area of democratic participation. That is, if municipal governments decided they wanted to increase capacities for meaningful citizen engagement, they may not have the internal capacity, nor institutional support at the national or international levels

to help achieve this transformation (see Fieldman, 2011; Talbot & Boiral, 2021; Wamsler et al., 2019). Instead, the ubiquitous pressure to prioritize economic growth would remain unchallenged and municipalities would be more concerned with fulfilling dominant discourses of ‘success’ than ensuring authentic public engagement and fostering genuine relationships (Barry & Agyeman, 2020). Historically, marginalized groups have a valid mistrust in municipal institutions due to the aforementioned situation and associated experiences of exclusion, erasure, co-option, and further marginalization (Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Hugel & Davies, 2020; Sprain, 2017). To provide an example, we can again turn to patterns of relations between Indigenous peoples and municipal actors in the context of North American settler colonialism: Dominant notions of successful cities include perpetual economic growth and exploitation of land and resources for commercial and residential development, which is in direct conflict with Indigenous understandings of humans’ relationship with land and our obligations to the natural world, such as preservation of biodiversity (Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Schiffer, 2018). Therefore, Indigenous practices for natural resource management (and restoration/regeneration) are devalued and ignored in favour of municipal interpretations of ‘land and resource management’ (Barry & Agyeman, 2020). Further, the ongoing ‘Land Back’ movement, which aims to reallocate North American land and land governance to Indigenous peoples, is ignored. Consequently, attempts by municipal actors to engage Indigenous peoples in ‘land and resource planning and management’, no matter how well-intentioned, lack truth and authenticity because settler-colonialism and neoliberal capitalism permeate all interactions and relationships between Indigenous peoples and municipal actors, including the invitation for engagement itself and the possible processes and outcomes of engagement (i.e., including relationship-building; see Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Schiffer, 2018). Indeed, marginalized groups have a valid fear of inauthentic

engagement and relationship-building opportunities with their local governments, and this relates to pressures of economic growth and profitability that can limit municipalities' capacities intended for meaningful engagement.

Impression Management

Impression management refers to conscious and subconscious processes that people use during social interactions to influence others' perception of themselves (Johansson, 2009). Impression management often implies constructing a desired or ideal image of oneself to present to others; this can have positive, negative, or neutral motivations and implications (Braun, 2015; Johansson, 2009). The concept was coined by sociologist Erving Goffman, who compared individuals in social interactions to 'actors' 'performing' on a 'stage' for their 'audience' (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Johansson, 2009). Using this drama/theater metaphor, Goffman emphasized a difference between 'front stage' and 'back stage' behaviour. The 'front stage' describes social interactions where individuals 'perform' for their 'audience' in a way that is fixed and expected for that context. 'Actors' on the 'front stage' will use verbal and nonverbal cues, including physical appearance, demeanor, and diction, to 'perform' an ideal impression that is consistent with the expectations of their 'audience' (Goffman, 1959). In contrast, the 'back stage' is where 'actors' are not in the presence of an 'audience' and can 'drop the act' and behave in ways that differ from the 'front stage performance'. The 'back stage' is also where individuals construct and manage their 'performance' or desired impression (Goffman, 1959). Simply put, the 'back stage' is where the 'performance' is prepared, and the 'front stage' is where the 'performance' happens for the 'audience'; these two 'stages' are separate, and can even contradict each other (Johansson, 2009).

Impression management is a useful theory for understanding interpersonal relationships and social interactions because it emphasizes that meaning (both individual and shared) is reconstructed and coproduced through our interactions (Johansson, 2009; see Boiral et al., 2020; Solomon et al., 2013). Impression management theory holds that all parties in a social interaction have ideas related to their personal realities (i.e., personal identification, including expectations for a ‘front stage’ performance), and these ideas affect both the processes and outcomes of social interactions, and therefore relationships. As individuals regulate themselves in social interactions through processes of impression management, this subsequently affects how interactions play out and how relationships are co-created through continual reconstructions of reality and meaning both within and across individuals (Johansson, 2009). If one considers the social relevance of impression management, one can see it has the potential to be negative or positive. That is, impression management can have ‘relational importance’ and ‘foster longevity and respect’ if the front stage presentation is not too incongruent from the back stage; on the other hand, impression management has the potential to “remove the possibility of sincerity from our interactions... [rendering] all our communication meaningless as we become actors” if the front stage performance is completely different from the back stage reality (Zavattaro, 2013, p. 514).

Organizational Impression Management

Impression management was originally conceptualized on an individual level, but it also occurs at an organizational level – ‘organizational impression management’. Both public and private firms engage in impression management to project desired images to their ‘audience’, which can include service users/product consumers, other public or private organizations, and other interested stakeholders (Bolino et al., 2016; Zavattaro, 2013). Organizational impression management occurs at multiple levels. Organizations themselves use visual, written, and verbal

cues to reinforce desired images with their audience; further, teams and individuals within organizations engage in impression management on an individual level to maintain desired impressions (Bolino et al., 2016; Futrell, 1999; Zavattaro, 2013). This may be considered ‘individual-level organizational impression management’, referring to individual employees’ concern with their organization’s public-facing image or impression.

Organizational impression management can take many forms such as apologizing, downplaying unfavorable information, denying or externalizing responsibility, and providing excuses (Ginzel et al., 2004; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011; Mohamed et al., 1999). Additional strategies include separating negative situations and outcomes from the organization as a whole and adopting socially acceptable (but often superficial) policies (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011). While it is not the focus of this paper to explore organizational impression management strategies in-depth, it is notable that more research is needed to develop an exhaustive and robust set of organizational impression management strategies that is agreed upon by researchers (see Mohamed et al., 1999). This is especially true for individual-level organizational impression management strategies, or how individual employees manage impressions for their organization. Regardless of the specific ‘level’ or manifestation, the goal of organizational impression management is the same: to maintain or repair an institution’s reputation as legitimate, sincere, and positive (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011).

Organizational Impression Management and the Equity Deficit within Municipal Planning and Action

Organizational impression management can be disingenuous, such as when firms adopt socially acceptable goals but do not follow through with traceable changes to their practices

(Merkel-Davies & Brennan, 2011). This can be seen in the context of environmental sustainability, where organizations are increasingly promising 'green' or 'sustainable' operations in response to public pressure, and thus constructing a positive, socially acceptable impression for their audience. However, a 'front stage' performance of environmentally conscious organizations is often incongruent from the 'back stage' reality. For example, Talbot and Boiral (2021) examined biodiversity reports from Canadian provincial organizations and found inaccuracies, unrealistic goals, and an overall lack of transparency. The authors suggested the reports were an exercise in impression management and served to improve organizations' images rather than provide useful information to support biodiversity initiatives (Talbot & Boiral, 2021). This finding was reinforced through interviews where employees discussed organizational pressures to appear compliant (re: manage impressions) in the reports and noted the lack of current and future biodiversity initiatives at their organizations (Talbot & Boiral, 2021). In a similar analysis of annual sustainability reports from various provincial ministries, Chiba and colleagues (2018) found the reports were of questionable validity and credibility, as information within the reports was often inconsistent, vague, or unclear. The researchers concluded the reports were not useful for measuring sustainability outcomes, yet helped improve organizational impressions (Chiba et al., 2018). There is also research supporting strategies of impression management within private organizations; given the encroaching of privatization within the public sector, it is reasonable to consider this research and its relationship to impression management in Canada's public sector. An analysis of sustainability-related documents, plans, and reports from top-polluting private Canadian companies found significant discrepancies between the initiatives outlined within the reports and the operations of the company (Talbot & Boiral, 2015). The authors suggested the reports concealed the 'back stage' reality of

unsustainable operations with a ‘front stage’ ‘performance’ of more sustainable ones (Talbot & Boiral, 2015). Overall, this research collectively demonstrates both public and private Canadian organizations engage in organizational impression management tactics to present themselves as environmentally conscious and sustainable despite potentially conflicting ‘back stage’ priorities and operations. One might suggest these tactics are disingenuous and not motivated by desires to be transparent and accountable; instead, they seem to serve as ‘acts’ or ‘performances’ that conceal and contradict the realities of organizations’ ‘back stage’ (Chiba et al., 2018; Talbot & Boiral, 2021).

There is also some evidence to suggest *municipalities* use strategies of impression management to influence public perceptions of their plans and operations (see Futrell, 1999; Zavattaro, 2013). This is increasingly true in the realm of climate planning and action as more municipalities reconstruct their public image to include priorities of climate mitigation and adaptation (see Guyadeen et al., 2019). However, in the context of the aforementioned literature, municipal governments committing to ambitious climate mitigation and adaptation strategies may be considered disingenuous impression management. That is, it has been established that municipalities face increased pressure to prioritize economic growth and the ‘financial bottom line’ to remain competitive, accumulate profits, and appease financial stakeholders; however, they also face increased pressure to address the climate crisis and prioritize environmental sustainability (see Guyadeen et al., 2019). Municipalities cannot realistically pursue both goals because unlimited economic growth and capital accumulation are incompatible with adequately addressing the global climate crisis (i.e., which requires adjusting our lifestyles so that fossil fuel consumption levels do not exceed planetary boundaries; see Barry & Agyeman, 2020). Therefore, faced with immense institutional pressure to prioritize economic growth, and given

the “complexity, opacity, and uncertainty associated with [environmental] issues”, (Talbot & Boiral, 2015, p. 332), it is reasonable to suggest municipalities may engage in disingenuous impression management, presenting a ‘front stage’ ‘performance’ of ambitiously and adequately addressing the climate crisis that could be incongruent from the reality of ‘back stage’ municipal operations.

It is also plausible that these strategies of impression management apply to the equity deficit within municipal climate planning and action. That is, if municipalities use impression management to construct a public image in which *the environment* is prioritized over the economy – despite opposite priorities being likely – they may also construct public images in which the environment *and social equity* are prioritized over the economy. As the equity deficit within municipal planning gains increased attention from scholars and the public (see Agyeman & Evans, 2003; Champagne, 2019; Russo & Pattison, 2016; Rice et al., 2019), municipalities may feel pressured to construct public impressions that align with constituent expectations; that is, prioritizing the well-being of people and the planet over profits. It is important to note, however, that it is arguably more difficult to prioritize the environment *and social equity* in the face of contradictory economic goals than it is to prioritize the environment alone, given the added complexity of ensuring climate mitigation and adaptation strategies do not exacerbate existing inequalities or create new ones for equity-deserving groups (see Agyeman & Evans, 2003; Champagne, 2019; Russo & Pattison, 2016; Schrock et al., 2015). It is also noteworthy that the equity deficit within municipal climate planning and action has already been linked to strategies that prioritize economic growth over social equity (see Champagne, 2019; Russo & Pattison, 2016; Schrock et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest local-level governments and their employees face increased pressure to construct ‘front stage’

impressions of addressing both the climate crisis and the equity deficit, which may contradict ‘back stage’ priorities and capacities.

Impression Management as a Barrier to Authentic Relationships, Meaningful Engagement, and the Equity Deficit within Municipal Planning and Action

The use of impression management by municipalities has serious implications, especially as it pertains to climate policy and the equity deficit. That is, recall that meaningful engagement is considered a necessary component for addressing the equity deficit; this includes municipal actors forming and maintaining genuine interpersonal relationships with citizens – especially those of marginalized groups – to help foster meaningful engagement (Holden & Larsen, 2015; Sprain, 2017). However, authentic relationship-building and processes of engagement can be impeded by the municipality itself, especially if its operations, structures, and socio-political-historical context remain unexamined and unchanged (Barry & Agyeman, 2020). This is especially true for relationship-building with marginalized groups because dominant discourses embodied by municipalities (e.g., omnipresent pressures to prioritize economic growth and profitability) can impose pressures at both the organizational and individual level that limit conceptualizations of and capacities for fostering genuine relationships (see Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Fieldman, 2011; North et al., 2017; Schiffer, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2019). That is, municipalities often do not have the capacity to facilitate the genuine relationship building needed for meaningful citizen engagement. This is further complicated by impression management, as the previously reviewed literature suggests employees may feel strong pressure to manage positive impressions of their municipality when engaging with the public – even if those impressions knowingly or unknowingly contradict the organization’s actual capacities for

relationship building and engagement (see Zavattaro, 2013). Indeed, impression management adds further barriers to fostering genuine relationships, as employees may be ‘making promises the city cannot keep’ or masking the city’s true capacities for relationship building and meaningful engagement simply by managing certain positive impressions. In this context, organizational impression management is paradoxically void of ‘relational importance’ because the ‘actors’ present ‘front stage’ impressions that are incongruent from the realities of the ‘back stage’ (see Zavattaro, 2013).

Additional findings from impression management research suggest organizational impression management may be a barrier to authentic relationships and meaningful engagement. In one example, Futrell (1999) examined employees’ interpersonal interactions during city commissions proceedings to better understand the impression management tactics they used. Not only did they observe impression management via interpersonal interactions, but findings also suggested the relationships and social bonds among municipal employees were in and of themselves an impression management tactic, because “the capacity of coordinated teamwork is central to staging an effective performance” (Futrell, 1999, p. 517). The idea that impression management is inherently maintained through municipal teams and co-workers further complicates barriers to relationship building with citizens. Further, through interviews with private-sector employees, Solomon et al., (2013) found employees can perceive their participation in organizational impression management as benign or harmful depending on a variety of contextual factors. This is relevant because an employee’s perception of impression management as benign or harmful may not match the real implications of said impression management. This is exemplified in the context of relationship-building and meaningful engagement with citizens, as it has been suggested engaging in impression management (whether

intentional or unintentional, whether harmful or benign) can create complications and barriers.

Research Questions and Significance

The proposed research will explore perceptions and experiences of organizational impression management as described by municipal government actors/employees. The objective of the proposed study is to better understand how municipal employees perceive, understand, and navigate pressures to engage in organizational impression management as it relates to their occupational role and responsibilities, especially in the context of citizen engagement. The research questions being addressed are: *How does 'organizational impression management' (as it has been defined in the present study) present itself within a sample of municipal government employees in relation to their personal occupational experiences? How do the actors describe their perceptions and experiences navigating organizational pressures? and How do municipal government actors navigate impression management on behalf of their organizations in the context of issues pertaining to citizen engagement?*

There are several gaps in existing literature that this study hopes to address. First, existing research in organizational impression management predominantly examines written documents such as plans and reports; there is a need to explore other methodologies, such as interviews, which can better capture the nuances and complexities of how people perceive and articulate experiences of organizational impression management (Chiba et al., 2018). Second, scholars suggest more research is needed to understand the processes and implications of individual-level organizational impression management in various organizational contexts (Bolino et al., 2016), including public organizations (Talbot & Boiral, 2021). The proposed research will also fill a gap by examining impression management in the context of a 'modern' workplace (i.e., heavily

reliant on technology, decentralized, remote work), which is an unexplored area of interest (Bolino et al., 2016). Finally, this research is the first to conceptualize individual-level organizational impression management as a barrier to relationship building, fostering meaningful engagement, and ultimately reducing the equity deficit within municipal climate action planning.

Methods

Research Design Overview

An exploratory descriptive qualitative study was designed to investigate the research questions; exploratory research is suitable for better understanding a group, process, situation, or other phenomenon for which there is little scientific knowledge (Stebbins, 2008).

The objective of the proposed study was to better understand how municipal employees perceive and navigate organizational impression management in their occupational role and responsibilities. Ten participants were recruited, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. A vignette was used in the interview to elicit relevant reflections and discussions. The interview data was analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step method for analysis and reporting.

Research Paradigms and Underlying Assumptions

This research proposal is underpinned by the constructivist/interpretive paradigm. Constructivist/interpretive ontology maintains that reality is socially constructed, and that people construct 'relative' realities based on their personal experiences and contexts (i.e., historical, socio-political, cultural contexts). Constructivist/interpretive epistemology and axiology emphasize the subjective and value-laden nature of research; this paradigm's methodology aims

to interpret, understand, and make meaning of people's lived experiences and constructions of reality (Riemer et al., 2020). The proposed research will embody this paradigm by collecting personal accounts/experiences of a specific group (i.e., municipal actors) and analyzing their experiences to better understand how the context of their occupational role and organization (i.e., municipal governments) affects their experiences.

Reflexivity and Positionality

It is important to consider how my social location, lived experiences, and personal history affect my understanding of the world and subsequently influence my research proposal and overall research process.

First, I acknowledge my identity as a white, Canadian-born, cisgendered, able-bodied, 'middle-class' person. These aspects of my identity have inescapably influenced my worldview; my privileged social location enabled my capacity to pursue post-secondary education, which in turn impacted my interests and worldview. Consequently, my ability to pursue a Masters thesis and my research interests are both impacted by my unique identity and social location. Further, my current social location as a graduate student/researcher affects my research; that is, my study will operate within 'bureaucratic' structures and spaces (the university and municipalities) rather than grassroots structures.

Finally, it is important to consider how my positionality impacted my relationships with participants. A researcher's position as an 'insider' or 'outsider' of their group of interest affects their understanding of the participants, how they interact with participants, and the nature of their relationship with participants (Sherry, 2008). I feel my relationship with my participants was dynamic and ambiguous because I hold both insider and outsider status, where "[h]olding

membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference.” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). That is, my mom worked as a municipal employee for over ten years, but I have never been a municipal employee myself; however, I often shared similarities with my participants in terms of demographic variables, social location, and associated lived experiences (i.e., white, Canadian-born, cisgendered, able-bodied, ‘middle-class’). To help ensure the success of my study, I familiarized myself with the operations, practices, and language of municipal governments. I also attempted to foster genuine relationships with my participants to establish trust, and ensure the research resonates with and benefits the participants (Sherry, 2008).

Participants

Selection Criteria

Eligible participants needed to be current or former public-facing municipal employees with at least four months of experience employed full-time by a municipal government in Ontario within the last five years. Experience in climate action planning and/or ‘meaningful citizen engagement’ were considered an asset. Participants were required to be at least 25 years of age; no other demographic variables were considered in the selection criteria, nor recorded. Notably, the demographic diversity of Canadian public-sector employees is likely not representative of the Canadian population itself, including an underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities (see Ng & Sears, 2015). Therefore, an all-Caucasian/white sample was very likely unless non-white employees were specifically targeted for recruitment, which they were not; examining the impact of municipal employees’ race on impression management as it relates to authentic citizen engagement was beyond the scope of this study.

Participant Recruitment and Flow

Participants were recruited through targeted emails; the first round of emails were sent to first and second-degree contacts within the primary researcher's social/professional networks who met inclusion criteria (i.e., at least 25 years old with at least four months of experience as a full-time municipal employee within the past five years). The initial recruitment email (see Appendix A) broadly described the study including its purpose and expectations and extended an invitation for participants to attend a one-on-one 15-to-20-minute pre-meeting where they could learn more about the study. In the pre-meeting, participants learned about the study, read the consent form, and were given an opportunity to ask questions and formally indicate their interest in participating. In total, 18 potential participants were identified by the primary researcher or a first-degree contact within their network – 12 responded to the initial recruitment email and attended the pre-meeting, and ten were recruited.

Sample

The sample consisted of ten participants – nine current and one former public-facing municipal employees representing six departments across four Ontarian municipalities. All participants had at least eleven months of experience working for a municipal government within the last five years, with the following occupational roles: two Managers, two Superintendents, one Supervisor, one Director, one Coordinator, one Consultant, and one Associate. All participants had some public-facing responsibilities that involved interacting with residents. Two participants had experience in climate action planning, and one described themselves as an 'engagement consultant', speaking to 'meaningful citizen engagement' experience.

Purposeful homogenous sampling was used to investigate this specific group in-depth (see Padgett, 2012; Patton, 2002). Pertinent impression management studies interviewed 20 to 36 participants (see Solomon et al., 2013, Boiral et al., 2020); however, evidence-based recommendations for studying homogenous groups through interviews suggest a sufficient sample size of ten to twelve participants in most cases (see Guest et al., 2006). In the present study, ten participants were recruited, and data saturation of the main themes was achieved after six interviews; however, the small sample size may be considered a limitation of the present study.

Data Collection and Procedure

Recruitment

Prior to all recruitment and data collection, this study was reviewed and approved by Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board. Potential participants were contacted beginning in January 2022 with ongoing recruitment and data collection until April 2022. All data was collected remotely due to the logistics of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants were recruited through a targeted email (see Appendix A) that briefly explained the study; interested individuals were invited to attend a pre-meeting to learn more about the study.

Pre-Meeting

After being solicited through targeted emails, interested participants attended a 15-to-20-minute informal pre-meeting (see Appendix B). The one-on-one pre-meeting meeting began with introductions and casual conversation, followed by a description of the study and its objectives,

and participation expectations. Potential participants were then asked about their employment history; this conversation simultaneously verified participant information while building rapport between researcher and participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Dilley, 2000; Tracy, 2020). Participants were reminded of their right to informed consent and voluntary participation, then given an opportunity to confirm their voluntary participation (i.e., or end the pre-meeting). Finally, the consent form was reviewed in detail. The purpose of the meeting was to inform participants about the study while simultaneously developing rapport and trust between researcher and participant, with the hopes of establishing a sense of trust (Eide, 2008; Padgett, 2012).

Semi-structured Interview

The main form of data collection was a one-hour one-on-one semi-structured interview held remotely through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for gaining a detailed understanding of individual perceptions and experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006) while also keeping the discussions focused on the topic of interest (Patton, 2002). The interviews in this study may be considered ‘expert interviews’ because participants were speaking to their occupational knowledge and expertise (Flick, 2009). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting interviews virtually rather than in-person had drawbacks such as potentially losing information that is conveyed through non-verbal communication such as body language; however, virtual interviews offer alternative potential benefits such as decreasing the likelihood of socially desirable responses (Padgett, 2012), more flexibility with scheduling the interview, and a smaller environmental impact (i.e., not driving to meet for interviews).

The primary researcher developed an interview guide (see Appendix E) to ensure the interviews remained somewhat consistent and standardized (Padgett, 2012; Patton, 2002). The interview guide also provided flexibility to probe certain responses, ask further questions, or explore relevant thoughts (Padgett, 2012). The interview guide was informed by academic and non-academic research about Canadian municipal governments and their operations. To ensure the interview topic(s) resonated with participants, the interview guide was piloted with one non-participating municipal employee and subsequently improved based on their feedback to better represent the knowledge and experiences of municipal actors. Conducting research and piloting for the interview guide ensured the primary researcher was comfortable discussing municipal operations and other ‘technical’ topics relevant to the interview (Padgett, 2012).

The primary researcher also developed a vignette which was presented early in the interview (see next section). Following its presentation, participants were asked to recap or summarize what happened in the vignette; this fact-checking question ensured they read and understood the vignette and was also designed to help them ease into the interview through a low-stakes question (see DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Dilley, 2000; Tracy, 2020). In questions two and three participants were asked to take on the perspective of Sally and consider how they would feel and what they would do if they were ‘in her shoes’. Taking on the perspective of a character is a potentially less confrontational way to reflect on one’s thoughts and experiences, compared to starting with first-person self-reflection (see Jenkins et al., 2010). After participants had some time to explore organizational impression management from Sally’s perspective, they were asked questions about their own experiences. The main research questions were probed through questions such as ‘While working for a municipality, have you ever experienced similar feelings to the ones you thought Sally was feeling?’ and ‘Have you ever experienced implicit or

explicit pressure to manage positive impressions of your municipal employer, especially in the face of conflicting information?', as well as natural follow-up questions and probes depending on participants' responses. Finally, participants were asked how the vignette resonated with them in terms of its realism based on their understanding of Canadian municipal operations. This question was asked so that any issues participants noted could be considered in the context of potential research limitations.

Vignette

A written/text vignette was presented at the beginning of each main interview to elicit thoughts and responses pertaining to organizational impression management. Vignettes depict hypothetical but realistic situations that participants respond to and can be used as a tool to facilitate discussion about how people may react to similar events in principle (Hughes & Hubey, 2004; Wilks, 2004). Vignettes have been criticized for their hypothetical nature, with critics noting that they do not simulate actual life and questioning the generalizability of vignette responses. However, it is important to remember that no research method truly reflects or captures 'reality'; just because vignettes occur in an imaginary space does not mean the hypothetical actions and thoughts they elicit do not have value in and of themselves (Hughes & Hubey, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2010). Further, the validity of vignettes as a research method is dependent on their appropriateness for exploring the research question, and whether the vignettes are plausible and realistic to the participants (Hughes & Hubey, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2010). A vignette was appropriate for exploring the present research topic because of their well-documented success exploring sensitive topics (see Wilks, 2004) as well as previous research using them to explore impression management in organizations (see Ashford & Northcraft, 1992;

Fedor et al., 1989).

The vignette presented a fictional character, Sally, who worked as a City Clerk and was responsible for publishing news related to city council meetings. One day, after taking meeting minutes for a council meeting, Sally was approached by her boss and asked to write and release information about the meeting that does not accurately reflect what actually happened in the meeting. The vignette explains that Sally has a decision to make – she could write and publish the release as requested, despite knowing it was inaccurate (and thus engage in managing positive impressions for her employer), or she could push back against the request to try and ensure the content of the release better reflects the reality of what happened at the meeting (and thus refuse or resist engaging in impression management). The whole vignette can be found in Appendix E.

The vignette was intentionally designed to make participants think about their past thoughts and experiences navigating organizational impression management, as well as how they may handle similar future or hypothetical situations. Several steps were taken to improve the likelihood that the vignette put participants in a mindset that facilitated relevant reflection. First, the vignette was based on real events pertaining to Canadian municipalities and was heavily informed by relevant news articles. The vignette was also piloted with a non-participating municipal employee to test its resonance. Further, tactics were employed to help avoid ‘vignette response fatigue’ including changing tasks (i.e., switching between interview questions and re-visiting the vignette), and providing participants with ample time to consider their response (Hughes & Hubey, 2004). Additionally, the vignette was written from a third-person perspective with hypothetical characters; this perspective is thought to be less personal, less threatening, and

likely to reduce socially desirable patterns of responses (Hughes & Hubey, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2010; Wilks, 2004). Fictional characters allowed the participant to relate and apply their own experiences to those of the characters, which was likely less confrontational than starting off with first-person reflections (Jenkins et al., 2010).

Remuneration

Participants were compensated \$30 for participation in the main interview. Participants were paid via Interac e-transfer, and compensation was confirmed with an acknowledgement voucher through the Viessman Center for Engagement and Research in Sustainability (VERiS).

Data Analysis

All main interview data was analyzed between March and May of 2022 using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide for theory-driven analysis and reporting. This method was chosen because it is appropriate for detailing, analyzing, and reporting themes across a variety of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the interviews were transcribed and actively read until the primary researcher felt a level of familiarity with the breadth and depth of their content. Then, the interview transcriptions were coded. Initially, three interviews were coded using a combination of structural coding, descriptive coding, in-vivo coding, process coding, emotion coding, values coding, and some simultaneous coding (Saldanã, 2009). The nature of the topic and research questions lent themselves to structural coding, descriptive coding, process coding, emotion coding, and simultaneous coding. Values coding and in-vivo coding emerged as the interviews were analyzed and the codebook was created. An initial codebook was formed consisting of approximately 50 codes; upon further review of the first three interviews, some codes were re-conceptualized and merged to better define and capture

recurring concepts, as well as to better differentiate between actions, emotions, and thoughts. A final comprehensive codebook consisting of 36 codes was used to complete first-round coding of all interviews. Once this first round of coding was complete, the codes were re-conceptualized and re-sorted into emerging themes and sub-themes based on both their pertinence and rate of occurrence; the research questions were also revisited at this time to inform the themes. Five main themes, five sub-themes, and two minor themes were identified. Some further organization and reconceptualization was required; however, all codes coincided with a theme or sub-theme.

Results

As previously mentioned, themes were identified using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step method for thematic analysis and reporting. The themes are presented below; they are largely situated in the context of the research questions, but also represent insights that emerged through analysis.

Table 1: Summary of research questions, themes and subthemes

Research Question	Theme	Description	Related Codes
	>Sub-Theme		
How does 'organizational impression management' present itself within a sample of municipal government employees in relation to their personal occupational experiences?	'I've been there'	An understanding of organizational impression management; clearly articulating feelings/experiences of tension about maintaining impression for one's employer	Realism of vignette, Sally's perspective, 'story of my life', tension/conflict, fear of losing paycheck

Context-Dependence	Perceptions of and approaches to impression management are described as context-dependent or nuanced depending on specific factors	Approaches to dealing with IM, thoughts about IM, depends on the particular situation
>Personal Values	Perceptions of and approaches to impression management are dependent upon personal values, beliefs, ethics, or morals	Approaches to dealing with IM, thoughts about IM, personal values/ beliefs/ morals/ ethics, misalignment of values, alignment of values, professional self vs personal self, honesty/truth, 'right/wrong'
>Job Security, Power, Comfort	Perceptions of and approaches to impression management are dependent upon level of security at one's job; including power/leverage within the organization	Approaches to dealing with IM, thoughts about IM, amount of personal power/leverage
Impression Management Strategies	Hypothetical and actual strategies for navigating organizational impression management	Approaches to dealing with IM
>"Towing the Company Line"	Strategy for navigating organizational impression management; managing impressions	Approaches to dealing with IM, do what you're told, respect corporate missions, defend the city, customer service training
>"Pushing Back"	Strategy for navigating organizational impression management; refusing to partake	"Pushing back", by the book, leaving workplace
>Calculated or Strategic Messages	Strategy for navigating organizational impression management; strategic/calculated use of language	Framing of messages, making constituents feel heard, working with corporate communications

How do the employees describe their perceptions and experiences navigating organizational pressures?	Importance of Internal Relationships	The importance of good working relationships among coworkers with and among departments; aids in managing impressions	Individual relationships among co-workers, internal culture, relationships within departments, relationships among departments, different perspectives/goals
	Complexity of Servicing Constituents	The complexity of serving and respecting a wide array of constituents with varied priorities and goals	Directly opposing groups, constituent complexity, 'sheer number', level of engagement
	Limited Human Resources	Limited human capacities at the city affecting work	Capacities/resources, limited human capacities
	'Powerful Players'	The possible influence of private capital enterprise organizations on municipal decisions	Powerful players
How do municipal government actors navigate impression management on behalf of their organizations in the context of issues pertaining to citizen engagement?			

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‘I’ve been there’

First, participants understood and related to organizational impression management and discussed experiencing tension about maintaining public-facing impressions of their municipal employer as part of their occupational responsibilities. The concept of impression management resonated with all participants, and they expressed familiarity navigating situations pertaining to impression management, as well as thoughts and emotions about their experiences. After reading the vignette, one participant, Tracey, said “Sure. I’ve been in this situation, so I get it.”. Sam agreed, saying “I would say I related this story to a couple other things that happened to me as I was reading it. So no, it was dead on, I think, a pretty good account of what someone could go through.”. Jordan agreed, saying the story was “super relatable” and they could “relate to the story in many different ways”. Participants also expressed feeling conflicted or uncomfortable in relation to navigating impression management, demonstrating the associated tension.

Participants' understanding of organizational impression management was also demonstrated through their ability to empathize with the protagonist of the vignette and adopt her perspective as she contemplated whether to partake in impression management. Taylor said they "absolutely" empathized with the character "because I've seen it happen before. I have also been a participant in it.". Jordan echoed they "For sure" understood the character's perspective because "we've been in situations like [that]". Overall, there was an explicit recognition and thorough comprehension of impression management as it was defined in this study.

Context-Dependence

This theme highlights that participants' thoughts about impression management, as well as their hypothetical and actual approaches to navigating impression management, were often dependent upon the topic or situation, or other contextual factors. Some participants acknowledged an overall context-dependence, with Leslie saying their perception and course of action "really depends on the subject", and Alex saying, "it's context dependent" when asked how they would navigate the situation described in the vignette. In addition to an overall context-dependence, several salient contextual factors emerged as sub-themes, which are described below.

Personal Values

This sub-theme describes the recurrent mention of personal values, beliefs, ethics, and morals in relation to organizational impression management. That is, participants' thoughts about impression management were often contingent upon how strongly a situation related to or aligned with their personal values. For example, Cameron explained how some instances may be more "egregious" than others: "something that's minor in nature, you know, I don't think that's

necessarily a great idea, but whatever. I mean, it's not changing anyone's lives. Some of them- some of the decisions impact people's lives.”. Shortly after, Cameron described having to “search my soul” to determine whether they were “comfortable” managing impressions on behalf of the city and relaying the city’s messages; the language ‘soul searching’ speaks to a deep consideration of what may be described as personal values. Participants used language such as ‘honesty’ (Cameron, Jordan, Taylor), ‘truth’ (Taylor, Tracey), and ‘right and wrong’ (Leslie) when talking about personal values. Sam said they would “never ever” engage in something “that you think would morally hurt somebody or yourself”; Charlie emphasized “whether or not [a person’s] morals and ethics align with the corporation is something that they need to understand at a personal level.”. Leslie explained, “I think we’ve all experienced some times where we’ve been told to do things that don’t necessarily align with what’s right, and it puts you in a bit of a moral predicament.” with the phrases ‘moral predicament’ and ‘what’s right’ further speaking to the idea of personal values. It is also notable that Leslie said ‘I think we’ve all experienced [this]’, suggesting moral conflict associated with managing impressions on behalf of one’s employer is a common or even ubiquitous experience.

Personal values also related to participants’ *approaches* to navigating organizational impression management. Charlie demonstrated this connection by saying “You got a choice you have to make, and it comes down to ethics. Comes down to, you know, what your morals are as well.”. They went on to say “So this is where your morals come into play – Is this right? Should I be taking this further, or should I be satisfied”. Sam echoed personal values could influence their course of action, saying they would “definitely” be less inclined to engage in impression management if they were asked to do something that “was morally against what [they] believed in”. Participants also suggested that misalignment between personal values and occupational

responsibilities could lead to leaving one's job, with Tracey recalling a "turning point" where "I would have moved on based on my own moral values". Charlie spoke to similar ideas by saying: "If you're not morally or ethically aligned with what the decision is from your bosses, you can find another job". In contrast, a different participant, Avery, was more pragmatic, explaining "I think usually, I'm able to see the many sides of any particular matter. So I don't know if that necessarily makes me unethical, but I think it means that I can at least find the thing that I can be supportive of in any particular direction". However, some participants mentioned an effort to separate personal values from occupational responsibilities regardless of "whether [they] agreed or disagreed with [the city's actions]" (Sam), saying their "conscious" needed to be 'parked at the door' (Cameron) or their "own personal feelings on a particular subject might need to be put in check" (Leslie), or "staff have a duty to be fair and unbiased" (Avery). Indeed, personal values were discussed in a variety of contexts.

Job Security, Power, Comfort

Participants' thoughts and approaches to managing impressions were influenced by their position within the municipality – particularly their level of comfort in their job and their perception of their power or leverage. That is, this sub-theme reflects whether participants felt secure enough in their job to question or resist managing impressions, perhaps without fear of repercussions. Participants mentioned several factors that affect their willingness to be "forthcoming and speak up" (Taylor). Alex cited age: "I have to say as I get older, I'm becoming more willing to just say it like it is". Charlie, Taylor, and Jessie said their willingness to speak up would be affected by how long they had been working for their employer. On a related note, seniority was mentioned, and some participants said they would navigate impression

management differently as Sally, the city clerk in the vignette, versus “a position where I had more power, that I’m not necessarily Sally” (Tracey).

This sub-theme also describes that regardless of job comfort, security, or power, participants discussed how fear of losing their job could influence their thoughts and decisions. As Alex phrased it, “when is it time to be real? And when is it time to make sure that you don't get yourself fired? That is a harder conversation”. Sam and Charlie agreed, saying their actions are dependent upon consideration of “the ones that sign your paycheck” (Sam) or “the side my bread is buttered on” (Charlie).

There was also an interesting connection between this sub-theme and the previously mentioned one, wherein participants considered both their personal values and their job security when navigating organizational impression management. Cameron explained: “I mean, everything weighs against what you A) know to be true, what you believe... is honest, or your version, your perspective of what is honest and true... versus your paycheck, versus your family and the risk of potentially upsetting your employer and losing your job”. In another example, Tracey said, “For myself, I've been lucky, I've [...] usually not ever had to compromise my values in that way [...] And I think it's hard for different people, because you might be in a position where you don't have the opportunity to move on and you need the job. And, you know, you have no choice but to work through it and do stuff that you don't necessarily support. And that's a tough situation; you still have to put food on the table”. These quotes speak to complexity and context-dependence by illustrating how perceptions of managing impressions are affected by multiple (and even conflicting) factors.

Impression Management Strategies

When participants discussed their lived experiences navigating organizational impression management, and when they reflected on the hypothetical situation within the vignette, several approaches to impression management emerged. Notably, all participants discussed a variety of impression management strategies, and all cited using or considering different strategies across various situations. Eight of the ten participants spoke to the ‘Towing the Company Line’ sub-theme, nine participants are represented in the ‘Pushing Back’ sub-theme, and all ten interviews somehow informed the third and final ‘Calculated or Strategic Messages’ sub-theme.

“Towing the Company Line”

One strategy for navigating impression management was simply agreeing to engage in it; participants cited past instances of managing positive impressions for their employer and suggested they could pursue the same course of action in hypothetical or future situations. Participants used language such as “I think I’d have to do my job” (Jordan) and “So I basically sort of parked my conscious at the door and did my job” (Cameron), with ‘my job’ referring to occupational activities that directly or indirectly managed impressions. In response to the vignette, Sam said, “I would probably just follow along with what they [*my bosses*] wanted”, and further explained that “towing the company line” – that is, maintaining positive impressions for the public – was something they “had to do [for] so many years”. Alex said they sometimes have to ‘tow the company line’, saying “we have HR policies that say we can’t speak ill of the city” or “write something that’s critical of the city”. In a similar vein, some participants cited their employer’s “procedures”, “protocols”, and “directions” when deciding whether to manage impressions (Sam, Tracey). A few participants also mentioned customer service training, with Leslie saying it can “teach people how to interact with residents and people of concern and how

to de-escalate a situation. So it is a little bit scripted in that sense, the responses that are expected of us”, speaking to managing impressions.

“Pushing Back”

A different and perhaps contrasting strategy for navigating impression management was ‘pushing back’; this theme describes refusing to partake in impression management or attempting refusal through questioning or other forms of resistance, with these actions often directed at a superior. Many participants articulated their experiences ‘pushing back’, using language such as “pushing back” (Alex, Tracey), “pushing up” (Leslie), “speaking up” (Taylor), and “questioning” actions or decisions (Leslie, Tracey). Participants also said they would “bring it *[the issue]* to my directors” (Jessie) or “revisit with my boss” (Leslie) to evade or call into question requests for impression management behaviours. Jordan elaborated: “I wouldn't post something that isn't accurate. I would question those details. [...] The stuff that I don't agree with, you know, make a list of that, and then present that to my boss and say, ‘hey, look, I have no problem publishing this. But these statements here, I don't agree with’”. Taylor mentioned the strategy of “following protocol, following processes” and “stick[ing] very close to policy” in the context of ‘pushing back’ against requests to manage impressions. On a similar note, Charlie said they would ‘vet’ the situation to “[make] sure that the correct information that’s sent out is the information that should be sent out” in an effort to ‘push back’. This mention of protocol, processes, and policy is notable because participants also discussed procedures, protocols, and directions in the previous sub-theme; however, these similar constructs were used in juxtaposing contexts, with some instances of using procedures and policies to justify ‘towing the company line’, and other instances of using them to justify or rationalize ‘pushing back’ against requests to

manage impressions.

Calculated or Strategic Messages

This theme describes participants' accounts of using calculated public messages (i.e., strategic/deliberate word choice and use of language) in the context of navigating impressions. This theme is complex and contextual; there were some situations where participants described 'framing' messages in a way that intentionally maintained positive impressions of their employer, and yet there were other instances where participants talked about 'framing' messages in a way that explained or rationalized their employer's actions. While both these situations could be seen as 'towing the company line', there were many instances where calculated messaging was actually described as an attempt to 'push back' against more disingenuous forms of organizational impression management. Indeed, one could argue that explaining or rationalizing an employer's decisions is always a form of disingenuous impression management (i.e., because it is justifying the city as a rational, logic, and fair entity), however, I felt presenting the following quotes that way would have been a misrepresentation of participants' accounts. (Recall Avery saying they try to "see the many sides of any particular matter [...] I think it means that I can at least find the thing that I can be supportive of in any particular direction"). Rather than assume all discussions of strategic messaging were examples of disingenuous impression management, I was more nuanced in my attribution of motives, hence this separate sub-theme.

Sometimes calculated messaging was an intentional strategy to maintain positive organizational impressions and/or minimize opportunities for criticism. Participants described actual and hypothetical situations where they might "take every fact and spin it our way [*the*

city's way]" (Cameron) or "change up the wording a bit as to not leave us open for criticism" (Taylor). Alex used the phrases "damage control" and "try to avoid a crisis" to describe finding the best way to frame a decision or action. Several participants also mentioned working with their employer's corporate communications department to ensure messages are 'framed correctly' (Alex, Leslie, Tracey).

In other instances, calculated messaging was described as an alternative to more disingenuous or deceitful forms of managing impressions. That is, participants discussed crafting messages to explain or rationalize municipal decisions as a more favorable option than managing disingenuous impressions. As Alex explained, "[it's] sometimes about just simply letting people know here's the pros and cons that we're weighing, or here's a little background, so you understand why it is that we're talking about this". Tracey emphasized the importance of ensuring "the community feels that they've been listened to"; Avery elaborated, "a lot of the work is to try and hear them, explain to them why we can't do the thing that they want us to do, or why we have to do the thing that they don't want us to do [...] and do the best we can to mitigate their concerns as much as we can". Tracey discussed the importance of giving constituents a "proper response to their concerns" rather than ignoring concerns and criticism and always framing things in an overly positive way. As Sam simply put it: "explain your reasonings".

Importance of Internal Relationships

Participants discussed the importance of having good relationships with their co-workers both within their own team and department, and interdepartmentally. Having positive working relationships brings certain benefits; however, it can also trigger organizational impression

management.

Good working relationships included trusting co-workers and their judgement (Taylor), feeling comfortable and safe around each other (Tracey), and listening to and respecting each other (Alex). Jessie emphasized “relationships are the key to everything. They really are”. Participants also discussed the importance of good interdepartmental collaboration and communication, especially in the context of different departments working together with competing priorities and goals. That is, participants discussed how “departments don’t always see things eye to eye” (Tracey), therefore, it is important to “[work] through just trying to find the solutions if you can” (Jessie), being respectful of department’s different priorities in a collaborative project (Avery, Jessie, Taylor, Tracey). Avery said “no one city employee does work on their own. There’s so many people that contribute to a project or an approval or report or anything. And there’s value in that because everybody picks up on a little piece of something different.”, demonstrating the importance of good relationships to collaboration. In contrast, Cameron spoke to how negative relationships among city employees can create problems such as poor communication and fighting (i.e., verbally, via email).

Participants also discussed how good interdepartmental communication can help manage positive organizational impressions. As Tracey explained, “we’re really good internally about talking to each other before we have a public meeting and making sure that we share all that information ahead of time so that we’re not blindsided [...] I think that internally we are pretty strong with our communications with each other”. Alex echoed the importance of, “having those conversations internally” before interactions with the public. In a more direct example, Cameron said, “sometimes [communicating internally] is also a benefit because ultimately, we can go back

to a constituent go ‘We tried, but sorry, city rules’. [...] And we use that as a cudgel to also get out of doing things we really don't want to do”.

Complexity of Servicing Constituents

Participants discussed difficulty serving a wide array of constituents with varied priorities and different expectations of the city; this theme calls attention to their accounts navigating this complexity. Participants recalled instances where members of the public had different requests or expectations, and they discussed trying to address (or even placate) them, which sometimes involved managing impressions for some or all constituents. Tracey described this as a “balancing act” where “there’s a lot of negotiation skills involved” including “asking all the right questions” to “really understand what is driving people and why they are pushing back against something”. Charlie said it was important to remember the “big picture”, referring to looking beyond one resident or group’s concerns and consider various perspectives. This was reinforced by Avery who said “The other piece that we're always very cautious about is, you know, we often hear from people who are upset about something, and we don't hear from maybe the vast majority of people that are happy about something. And so making decisions based on who's unhappy, you have to be very careful to not make decisions then that will reflect badly or be badly received or cause harm to those that you're not hearing from”.

Participants also discussed dealing with two “opposing groups” or “opposing forces”, referring to constituents who have competing or contradictory priorities or goals, saying it creates a “‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ kind of situation when you get involved in changing anything”, meaning taking action to appease one group may upset or alienate the other (Cameron). Tracey, speaking to situations where “it [*public opinion*] might be split right down

the middle” said dealing with the complexity of constituents was “really hard to do” because “everybody’s feelings on something are valid, and you need to make sure that you are responding to them [...] I mean, not everyone’s going to be happy with the decision that we make”. Tracey elaborated, “how do we, going forward [...] keep you [*the public*] engaged and find a way to still help you out in some way [...] so that maybe you don’t get a win today, but down the road, how can we help you?”, which perhaps speaks to impression management tactics in relation to the complexity of constituent interactions.

Limited Human Resources

This minor theme highlights accounts of limited human capacities within the city. Participants from smaller municipalities emphasized that “capacity is always, always an issue” (Jessie) in smaller municipalities because “[they] don’t always have the kind of human resources that a larger or midsize municipality do” (Alex); however, limited human resources was cited as an issue by participants from smaller and larger municipalities. Jessie described themselves and their colleagues as sometimes being “tapped out” with too much work and “inundated with work”; Taylor echoed these feelings and said that “municipalities [are] being pressured more and more to do more with less”. Charlie said limited resources interfered with their ability to service the public: “And it’s very burdensome in terms of trying to get your actual work done on top of dealing with trying to figure out how to best service the residents”.

‘Powerful Players’

As can be seen in Appendix E, the vignette in the main interview described a fictional impression management situation where an employee was asked to state that constituents overwhelmingly supported a proposal for a new highway, when in reality many constituents

were against the proposal. The vignette also explained “council had decided to endorse the highway project before the council meeting was even held [and] those who supported the project – including land developers, real estate companies, and automotive companies – were ‘powerful players’ who would strongly influence the city’s decision”. Near the end of the interview, all participants were asked the open-ended question, ‘How did the vignette resonate with you in terms of its realism? That is, based on your understanding of Canadian municipal operations, as well as your personal occupational experiences, was the story in the vignette realistic?’ (see Appendix E). In response to this question, Cameron, Jessie, Jordan, and Leslie mentioned that ‘powerful players’ have considerable sway over some city council decisions; Cameron described these ‘players’ as “groups [that] are large and powerful and have a lot of money and have a lot of pull and say” such as property/real estate developers. Jordan explained their perception of the relationship between the city and these ‘powerful players’: “I think that ‘powerful players’ title there, I think that is real. You know, like a few people could outweigh the whole public's opinion on something, just because they're powerful.”. This theme and the other themes will be further explored in the Discussion.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions and experiences of organizational impression management as described by public-facing municipal government employees to better grasp how they understand and navigate those experiences in their occupational roles. This study was exploratory with no hypotheses; however, it is important to examine the research questions in light of the findings.

First, the findings strongly suggest that municipal government employees thoroughly understand and experience tension or misalignment about their occupational responsibilities and/or organization's operations which is indicative of organizational impression management. All participants demonstrated an understanding of organizational impression management and shared experiences managing positive impressions for their employer; they also expressed related feelings of tension and conflict. Notably, this is the first study to examine organizational impression management in municipal governments through firsthand accounts from employees themselves. Both the sample and methodology of this study address existing gaps in impression management literature by contributing to a better understanding of the processes and implications of individual-level organizational impression management in the context of public (i.e., not private) organizations (see Bolino et al., 2016, Talbot & Boiral, 2021). Specific processes and implications were introduced in the Results section and are discussed further throughout this section.

Several themes emerged in response to the second research question, '*How do the actors describe their perceptions and experiences navigating organizational pressures?*'. The 'Context-Dependence' theme and sub-themes emerged because participants' perceptions and experiences of organizational impression management were extremely nuanced and dependent upon their personal values and/or their confidence in their job security. Strategies for navigating impression management also emerged as three distinct but related sub-themes. These strategies could perhaps be conceptualized on a continuum, with engaging in impression management or 'Towing the Company Line' on one end of the continuum, and refusing to partake in impression management – the most extreme form of 'Pushing Back' – on the other end. Participants' strategies for navigating impression management were also nuanced and complex, with

contextual variables influencing not only what impression management strategy was used (or considered), but also whether the impression management was more disingenuous or honest. Further, a few prominent contextual factors that spoke to impression management emerged as themes, specifically interpersonal relationships among co-workers, and limits to human resources. Additionally, the ‘Complexity of Servicing Constituents’ theme emerged as participants discussed challenges placating and appeasing a wide array of constituents with diverse wants and needs, sometimes having to decide which constituents or groups will be impressed at any given moment. This was further complicated by the mention of ‘powerful players’ such as real estate/property investors whose interests may be considered or prioritized as part of the positive impressions that are managed.

Another purpose of this study was to explore organizational impression management as a potential barrier to relationship building and therefore fostering meaningful engagement between municipal actors and constituents. To properly address the third and final research question, ‘*How do municipal government actors navigate impression management on behalf of their organizations in the context of issues pertaining to citizen engagement?*’, it is important to revisit relationship building and meaningful citizen engagement.

Impression Management as a Barrier to Authentic Relationships and Meaningful Engagement

The underlying impetus for this study is addressing the equity deficit within municipal planning, and a proposed pathway to addressing the equity deficit is meaningful engagement through genuine relationship building between municipal employees and constituents. This study is the first to propose that individual-level organizational impression management could be a

barrier to relationship building and meaningful engagement, and indeed, the themes that emerged provide preliminary support for this perspective. Participants discussed managing impressions in the face of the public, both directly (i.e., face-to-face), and indirectly (e.g., through email) – and all these public-facing interactions are examples of employees engaging with citizens. Although participants were not explicitly asked to speak to impression management in the context of authentic relationships and meaningful engagement, their perceptions and experiences in public-facing interactions speak to these constructs because all interactions with the public are relational. Several preliminary inferences can be drawn about impression management as a barrier to relationship building and/or meaningful engagement based on their accounts.

First, participants discussed engaging in what could be considered disingenuous impression management – that is, managing positive impressions with the knowledge that what was being presented to the public was embellished, or did not necessarily align with the city's actual actions, decisions, or goals. This finding aligns with previously reviewed literature which suggested employees manage positive impressions of their employer even if those impressions knowingly contradict organizational capacities (see Zavattaro, 2013). This disingenuous impression management is not conducive to relationship building nor meaningful engagement because not being honest and forthcoming has the potential to damage any relationship, and the relationship between a municipality and its constituents is no different. In this way, disingenuous impression management is arguably in and of itself a barrier to relationship building and meaningful engagement.

There are also possible implications of 'less disingenuous' impression management, such as the strategies described in the 'Calculated or Strategic Messaging' theme. Recall that

participants described impression management tactics that did not involve lies or dishonesty, such as managing positive impressions by making sure constituents ‘feel heard’ or providing thoughtfully crafted responses to address or mitigate their concerns. Further, there were other strategies where authenticity and honesty were complicated, such as managing impressions through justification or rationalization. These varied strategies and the nuanced contexts in which they were discussed beg the question, is it possible for municipal employees to manage positive impressions for their employer while still maintaining sincerity and ‘relational importance’ between themselves and constituents, or is impression management inherently a hindrance to authentic relationships and meaningful engagement? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to definitively answer that question, findings from the interviews suggest the answer is complicated. On one hand, there are instances where well-intentioned attempts to manage positive impressions have a negative impact on meaningful engagement because some impression management tactics look very similar to ‘surface-level’ citizen engagement strategies. As previously mentioned, popular methods of citizen engagement are often ‘tokenistic’ and may not foster a culture of meaningful engagement, such as consulting a small sample of constituents, or providing ad-hoc information to explain a municipal decision (see Dekker, 2018; Holden & Larsen, 2015). These strategies mirror and relate to some impression management strategies described by participants, such as explaining or justifying the city’s reasoning, ‘framing’ with specific language, and mitigating the concerns of some constituents. Managing positive impressions – whether well-intentioned or not – could in and of itself be a hindrance or barrier to authentic relationships and meaningful engagement by acting as a form of ‘surface-level’ engagement. On the other hand, there are instances where well-intentioned attempts to manage positive impressions may have a benign or positive impact on relationships and engagement, as

long as impressions are not too disingenuous and there is some attempt at transparency and honesty. Indeed, participants did not engage in impression management with malicious intent – in fact, it could be argued that many valued ‘relational importance’ between themselves and constituents because they discussed their desire to engage with the public honestly and transparently. At the very least, the intention behind managing impressions can be genuine, and there can be a conscious attempt to present a ‘front stage’ impression that is not too different from the ‘back stage’ reality. Finally, there is evidence from the interviews to suggest that ‘pushing back’ against impression management may have a positive impact on authentic relationships and meaningful engagement, or at the very least have a benign effect. Indeed, refusing to manage positive impressions for one’s employer or vouching for a ‘front stage’ presentation that is more congruent with and reflective of the ‘back stage’ reality has the potential to positively impact relationships. Just as lies and dishonesty can harm relationships between municipalities and their constituents, transparency and honesty can help build authentic relationships. Constituents could interpret resistance towards managing impressions as a demonstration of honesty and sincerity from the municipal employee.

The findings from this study provide preliminary evidence to suggest that individual-level organizational impression management – whether well-intentioned or not – has the potential to thwart or hinder authentic relationship building and meaningful engagement between municipal employees and residents. Alternatively, impression management *could* have no impact or even a positive impact on these processes so long as the impression management is well-intentioned and rooted in values/goals of sincerity, honesty, and transparency. Indeed, sincerity, honesty, and transparency are necessary for building positive relationships and fostering meaningful engagement, and impression management can potentially embody these values,

rather than being void of sincerity and ‘relational importance’.

Managing Impressions in the Municipal Institution

Context-dependence, referring to the varied and nuanced contexts in which participants described perceiving and navigating impression management, was an important theme that emerged from the interviews. Using systems-thinking (see Senge et al., 2005), it is important, however, to also consider the broader context – that is, the context of the municipality itself and how its operations and structures affect how municipal employees work and manage impressions. The emerging themes suggest the ‘municipal institution’ itself can mold and perhaps dictate employees’ participation in impression management. While participants indeed have choice and agency, as described through their personal perceptions and experiences, they are also in a difficult situation because they are limited by the municipality’s bureaucratic operations and structures.

In one example, we can turn to participants’ accounts of their interpersonal relationships with co-workers and consider how this aspect of working in a municipality (i.e., working with and fostering professional relationships with co-workers) can impact experiences managing impressions. Having positive relationships with co-workers is beneficial in most jobs, and participants reaffirmed this, emphasizing the importance of mutual trust and respect in these relationships. Having relationships with one’s coworkers is obviously not a bad thing – it is not malicious, nor is it negative; however, it does have potentially negative implications in the context of impression management. It seemed that positive relationships within and across departments helped municipal employees manage impressions (both individually and together), such as having internal conversations to ‘get the story straight’ before interacting with the public.

Indeed, relationships seemed important for maintaining the ‘back stage’ of municipalities, where employees work together to properly manage impressions before going to the ‘front stage’ where they can be viewed by the ‘audience’. Again, while forming relationships with one’s coworkers is obviously not done with malicious intent, it does appear that the social bonds among municipal employees contribute to impression management by way of helping maintain consistent impressions for the institution. This may reaffirm Futrell (1999)’s observation that good relationships and teamwork among municipal employees help ‘stage an effective performance’. This puts municipal employees in a difficult position because having good working relationships are necessary/required for almost every job; this is just one example of how operations inherent to the municipal institution can impact impression management.

In another example, we can consider how the role of ‘municipal employee’ itself can influence employees’ participation in managing positive impressions. Occupying the social role of ‘municipal employee’ bestows certain status and social power. Findings from the ‘Personal Values’ sub-theme suggest this power may be enacted by allowing personal values to influence actions and decisions on the job, as participants discussed how personal values could affect their chosen approach when navigating impression management. Indeed, it appears an employee could refuse to present disingenuous impressions for the city solely because the impression (or larger topic/issue) is personally relevant or deemed important by the employee personally. Of course, having personal values is not malicious, nor is it inherently bad to uphold those values when one is occupying to social role of ‘employee’. However, allowing personal values to influence occupational impression management behaviours can have very serious consequences. This is further complicated by the ‘Job Security, Power, Comfort’ sub-theme, where participants discussed how fear of losing their job could influence their decisions in situations of impression

management. While participants have particular status and power as municipal employees, they are also expected to act based on the goals and mandates of their employer. A municipal employee could decide to engage in impression management to ensure their job security, even if their actions knowingly or unknowingly have a negative effect on constituents, including hindering relationship-building and engagement processes. Indeed, the interviews revealed that both personal values and perception of job security can be impactful factors when navigating impression management. This is demonstrative of how the ‘municipal institution’ itself can mold and dictate employees’ participation in impression management. As was revealed through the interviews, participants are in a difficult situation because they are limited by the bureaucracy of the municipality’s operations and structures.

Finally, when considering the implications of the municipal context itself on impression management, it is important to consider the ‘Limited Human Resources’ theme. Participants explained that themselves and their colleagues are often ‘tapped out’ and ‘inundated’ with work due to a lack of human resources. Insufficient human resources have been cited as a barrier to implementing quality municipal initiatives and services in existing literature (see Fieldman, 2011; North et al., 2017; Wamsler et al., 2019), and appear to be an increasingly common feature of the municipal institution. They could also be a barrier to relationship building and meaningful engagement as ‘tapped out’ employees likely don’t have the time or capacity to take initiative on public engagement in addition to their regular job responsibilities, and employees specifically dedicated to public engagement may not have the overarching institutional support. Further, if we consider the role of ‘Powerful Players’, the municipal institution operates within a global political economy where economic priorities are paramount. The interviews suggest that in addition to municipal employees being ‘tapped out’, they may be aware of the pressure their

institution is under to operate within dominant frameworks of economic growth and secure profit accumulation for relevant stakeholders. These conditions do not prioritize and are not conducive to authentic relationship building and meaningful citizen engagement.

Overcoming Impression Management in the Municipal Institution

A systems-thinking perspective (see Senge et al., 2005) illuminates how the municipal institution or ‘municipal system’ affects employees’ actions – the systemic structure of local-level government in and of itself produces certain patterns of behaviour among its actors, including organizational impression management (see Senge, 1990). These patterns of behaviour enacted by individuals within the municipal system help uphold its power and legitimacy; that is, municipalities must constantly exercise and redemonstrate their power to maintain themselves as a powerful institution (Culley & Hughey, 2007). An explicit example of demonstrating power is when municipalities make budgetary decisions; by making decisions about how money should be allocated to various departments, projects, infrastructures, and services, municipalities are able to control the resources available to and used by constituents, ultimately controlling their living conditions and quality of life (see Culley & Hughey, 2007). However, power can also be demonstrated through the control and manipulation of ‘myths, ideology’, and mental models surrounding the institution, shaping how the institution is perceived (see Culley & Hughey, 2007). Organizational impression management could perhaps be conceptualized as a manifestation of implicit institutional power because it is used to influence perceptions of the municipality in the eyes of the public. Indeed, organizational impression management is a tactic used to control dominant ideologies about the municipal institution and influence how community members view the purpose and function of municipal government – in this way, it

perpetuates or sustains power (see Culley & Hughey, 2007). In the context of this study and its impetus (i.e., the equity deficit), organizational impression management helps maintain powerful notions of municipal institutions as democratic (i.e., representative and participatory, or at the very least striving towards/prioritizing true democratic participation).

Given considerations of systems-thinking and social power, organizational impression management – though sometimes demonstrated through patterns of behaviour enacted by individuals – is perhaps a systemic problem inherent to the structure of local-level government itself, specifically its effort to uphold its power and legitimacy. Therefore, if it is a systemic problem, one could conclude that it is not useful to assign blame to individual employees for engaging in organizational impression management, nor is it useful to say individual employees are responsible for overcoming impression management through micro-level changes to their behaviour. Rather, it is better to turn one's attention to the system and understand how it operates (see Senge, 1990). That is, to overcome organizational impression management and ultimately achieve better relationships and meaningful engagement, it is imperative that both municipal actors and constituents gain a better understanding of the municipal system as a whole, specifically how it influences and perhaps even dictates impression management behaviour and creates conditions where impression management is likely to occur (see Senge, 1990). By gaining a better understanding of the systemic structure of municipal government (as well as how the system wields and maintains social power, in part through managing impressions), all individuals within and affected by the system would be less likely to blame local-level problems (such as the equity deficit) on 'external factors, individuals, or scapegoats', and would instead place responsibility on the system itself (see Senge, 1990). This shift to a systemic perspective then has the potential to improve relationships and engagement. That is, if individuals within a

system are aware of systemic problems, they are inclined to communicate with each other about it, and direct their attention towards addressing those problems and finding solutions (i.e., rather than blaming and fighting with each other; see Kania et al., 2018). In the context of this research, that means municipal employees and constituents – especially those from equity-deserving groups - would turn their collective attention and efforts towards the common goal of changing the inherent structure of the municipal system in a way that is more socially just and equitable. This collective action and collective critical consciousness would ultimately transform the relationships between employees and constituents (and all individuals who make up the system) by building genuine connections between them. Further, there would be more honesty between individuals about the reality of the municipal system, as well as a sense of trust among people, knowing they are working together towards a common goal of systems change (see Kania et al., 2018, Senge, 1990). Put simply, a systemic perspective would lead to communication and collaboration towards mutually understood goals, which would ultimately build positive relationships between people. Transforming relationships among people, in turn, transforms systems (Kania et al., 2018).

This paper has discussed organizational impression management in relation to individual actors and actions; however, a systems-thinking perspective underscores that solutions to ‘individual events’ and even patterns of behaviour lie in addressing systemic structure (Senge, 1990). Using a systems-thinking perspective, one could re-examine the question posed earlier: is it possible for municipal employees to manage positive impressions for their employer while still maintaining sincerity and ‘relational importance’ between themselves and constituents, or is impression management inherently a hinderance to authentic relationships and meaningful engagement? One could conclude that whether or not an interaction between an individual

employee and constituent has ‘relational importance’ is perhaps partially beyond the control of those individuals, and therefore attention should be redirected towards how systemic problems and institutional power creates the conditions in which interactions can occur without honesty, trust, and sincerity in the first place.

Contributions to Impression Management Research and Theory

As previously mentioned, this research is the first to suggest that individual-level organizational impression management could be a barrier to relationship building, fostering meaningful engagement, and ultimately reducing the equity deficit within municipal climate action planning. The results of this exploratory study warrant further investigation of this perspective; however, the results also provide preliminary support to suggest that impression management theory may be useful for better understanding processes of and barriers to authentic relationship building and engagement within the municipal institution.

The interviews revealed an implicit understanding of Goffman’s ‘front stage’ where municipal actors ‘perform’ for their ‘audience’ (i.e., constituents), and the ‘back stage’ where the performance is crafted. Indeed, all participants understood that the impression they presented to the public was not always accurate, and all gave some indication of ‘back stage’ operations. Some participants even explicitly acknowledged the separation from the ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ when they openly admitted discrepancies between the two. The interviews also revealed a wide array of organizational impression management strategies, some grounded in ‘relational importance’ and trying to limit the incongruity between the ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’, but others a truly insincere ‘performance’ (see Zavattaro, 2013). Using one-on-one interviews, this study was the first to examine how impression management plays out in interpersonal

interactions and relates to interpersonal relationships. This study is the first to examine the ‘relational importance’ of impression management in municipalities – that is, understanding how the complexities and nuances of social meaning are coproduced through interactions (see Johansson, 2009; Solomon et al., 2013). This contrasts with most recent literature on organizational impression management which examines impression management in written works such as reports and documents and often doesn’t address individual-level manifestations in this context (Bolino et al., 2016).

‘Individual-Level Organizational Impression Management Strategies’

The interviews may contribute to an understanding of individual-level organizational impression management strategies. As previously mentioned, it is not the focus of this paper to explore individual-level organizational impression management strategies in-depth; however, the topic briefly emerged as participants discussed how they have navigated or would navigate real and hypothetical impression management situations, and the topic is worth exploring because it remains understudied (see Mohamed et al., 1999). Notably, research on ‘individual-level organizational impression management strategies’ typically refers to employees’ concern with their own image; that is, strategies for managing impressions of themselves as a competent, likeable, or perhaps promote-able employee in the eyes of superiors or co-workers. In this context, individual impression management strategies have been taxonomized with some consensus among researchers (see Bolino et al., 2008 for review). This taxonomizing has subsequently been applied to organizational impression management – that is, current understandings of organizational impression management strategies are based on individual-level strategies in the context of employees managing impressions of themselves within organizations

(see Mohamed et al., 1999). Therefore, strategies of organizational impression management warrant further research, including further methodological consideration and consensus which are beyond the focus of this paper. This is especially true for individual-level organizational impression management strategies, referring to how individual employees manage impressions of their organization; there is little to no research applying existing scales and measures of organizational impression management strategies to individuals in this way.

One way to conceptualize organizational impression management strategies is with a 2x2 taxonomy with tactics being either direct or indirect, and assertive or defensive. Direct strategies involve presenting positive information about the organization (e.g., accomplishments), while indirect strategies are attempts to manage (or perhaps ‘frame’) known/existing information about the organization (Mohamed et al., 1999). Assertive strategies “are acquisitive in nature; they are used in situations that actors view as opportunities to boost their image”, while defensive tactics are used in response to potentially negative or damaging situations “to minimize or repair damage to [the organization’s] images” (Mohamed et al., 1999, p. 111). The individual-level organizational impression management strategies mentioned in the interviews were predominantly ‘direct and defensive’ – that is, employees providing explanations, excuses, rationalizations, or justifications on behalf of the organization to boost or restore its public reputation. Unfortunately, strategies were not discussed repeatedly, nor with enough detail to provide specific/substantive examples (i.e., the primary researcher did not probe about strategies in the interviews as it was not the focus of the study); further, not enough information was provided to map participants’ strategies onto existing ones within the ‘direct and defensive’ category. However, participant quotes pertaining to ‘direct and defensive’ strategies can be found in the “‘Towing the Company Line’” and ‘Calculated or Strategies Messages’ sub-sections of the

Results.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to the current study that need to be addressed. First, while saturation of interviews was reached, the sample was small ($n = 10$) and findings may not be generalizable to other groups; examining other municipal government employees such as employees working outside of Ontario, or other public sector employees such as federal government employees may warrant different results. Conversely, there is a lack of research exploring how impression management manifests in municipalities and other structures of government, and this study contributes to said research. Further, while organizational impression management has been identified in both local-level governments (e.g., Futrell, 1999) and provincial governments (e.g., Chiba et al., 2018), further research is needed to better understand how this phenomenon manifests, as well as how it affects relationships between residents and their governments, governance strategy, and social and political development (Zavattaro, 2013).

Addressing another limitation, demographic variables such as race were not considered in analysis in part because municipal employees tend to be relatively homogenous for certain demographic variables (e.g., white, cisgendered, see Ng & Sears, 2015); however, if demographic variables such as race and gender were considered, the findings could be quite different. Indeed, having a personal identity that differs from the homogenous 'norm' could impact how one perceives and conducts themselves in their occupational role, including how they navigate managing impressions. However, it is important to remember that demographic variables were not collected for this study, and therefore participants could have unique demographic variables that impact their experiences as a municipal employee that were simply

not seen or explored by the researcher (i.e., ability/disability status, sexual orientation). Future research could explore how demographic variables such as ability/disability status, race, and/or gender impact how employees perceive and navigate managing impressions for their employer. Considering the present findings, it would be especially interesting to explore the relationship between personal identities and personal values, beliefs, ethics, and morals in relation to organizational impression management (e.g., Would a city employee who identifies as BIPOC be less inclined to manage positive impressions for their employer than one who identifies as white/Caucasian, especially/specifically if requested to present the city as inclusive of equity-deserving groups?). It is important to consider this question in relation to the fact that municipal employees tend to be relatively homogenous for certain demographic variables (i.e., in the context of the equity deficit, and the ‘social power’ associated with certain demographic variables/personal identities, see below).

Another limitation of the current study was the possibility of getting socially desirable responses. Steps were taken to reduce the likelihood of this occurring, including using a third-party perspective in the vignette, taking steps to build rapport with each participant, and reminding them of their right to privacy in the context of the research. Reflecting on the interviews, there were some comments from participants that resembled impression management; however, there were also instances where participants explicitly said they were being honest, or they had no reason not to be honest and forthcoming in the interview. It is always possible that participants altered or embellished their responses because they were in an interview – funnily enough, there is no way of knowing for sure whether participants were engaging in impression management for their employer in the interviews. Nonetheless, the interviews provided many benefits, such as allowing participants to share complex and nuanced

accounts of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings pertaining to impression management.

A theoretical limitation of the current study was that the concepts of social power and systems-thinking were included but not explored in-depth. These concepts were not included in the theoretical underpinning of the paper in part to maintain an appropriate scope, but also to avoid applying too many theories in a paper that already made several novel theoretical applications and connections (i.e., this paper was already the first to conceptualize organizational impression management as a barrier to relationship building and fostering meaningful engagement, as well as the first to apply impression management theory to the context of engagement and the equity deficit). However, not further exploring social power is especially relevant to Community Psychology where there has been a call for more discussions of power as it relates to social relationships and barriers to democratic participation (see Culley & Hughey, 2007). Future research grounded in impression management theory should consider using a systems-thinking perspective and/or exploring concepts of social power in more depth.

It is also important to address that the present study was ‘one-sided’ in the sense that it discussed a two-way relationship between municipal employees and citizens but only gathered accounts from one of those groups. The primary researcher carefully considered whether to explore impression management through interviews with municipal employees, constituents, or both. Ultimately municipal employees were chosen because there was a clear body of related literature on organizational impression management and several gaps that could be addressed by interviewing municipal employees in this context. Future research could explore constituents’ perceptions and experiences of municipal organizational impression management and whether they feel it acts as a barrier to their engagement.

There are several theoretical and practical implications of this research. The first is a potential effect on the participants; bringing their attention to the concept of impression management and having them discuss it created a space where they could reflect on impression management, and perhaps think about how they may navigate similar situations in the future. This research has the potential to cause minor, individual-level change in select municipal institutions through the participants themselves. Further, this research will inform a larger ongoing project, *Towards Equity and Accessibility in Municipal Climate Action (TEAMCA)*, which aims to address the equity deficit within municipal climate action planning by bringing together stakeholder from the academic, social innovation, equity-deserving, and municipal realms. The findings from this research will be used to inform how to better address barriers to meaningful engagement and genuine relationship building within Canadian municipalities; further, the findings may be used to inform initiatives and resource-sharing networks within the project. Through knowledge mobilization to TEAMCA's municipal partners, both municipal employees and the broader community could be better educated on institutional or bureaucratic limitations that the city is pressured to operate within. Ideally the implications from the findings could be made available to municipal employers and their employees, informing how better community engagement could be achieved through less – or at the very least more sincere and genuine – organizational impression management.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Recruitment Email Template

This is only a template; individual emails to potential participants could vary slightly based on factors such as recruitment method (i.e., snowball sampling, if there is an existing relationship to other participants).

Email subject line: Call for Public-Facing Municipal Employees- Research Participants Needed

Hello [name of potential participant],

I hope this email finds you well. [If participant was recruited through snowball sampling, include sentence indicating relationship/connection to existing participant.] I am reaching out to express interest in recruiting you for my ongoing research study, which aims to discuss how

public-facing municipal employees perceive and navigate situations where they may feel pressured to maintain certain public perceptions of their municipality.

I think you would be a great fit as a participant because [describe known aspect of employment history here as it relates to eligibility criteria]. Participation in the study would consist of 1) a 15 to 20 minute online meeting with me (Alicia) to discuss the study in more detail, 2) filling out an online survey about your employment history within municipalities, and 3) attending a 1-hour online interview with me to discuss your thoughts on ‘managing impressions’ on behalf of municipal employers. Participation in the study would be entirely remote and would take approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes total. You would be compensated \$30 for participating in the 1-hour interview.

If you have the capacity and are interested in participating in this research, please reply and I’ll share more details and set up a time for our 15 to 20 minute meeting. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Alicia Bevan

Appendix B – Guide for Pre-Meeting

Prior to the pre-meeting participants have been solicited via targeted emails to attend a pre-meeting and ultimately participate in the study. Prior to the pre-meeting, I should have necessary documents ready including a consent form (Appendix D) and the participant’s profile with known participant information. The nature of the pre-meeting is low-stakes and informal; it provides a space for developing trust and rapport between the participant and myself while communicating key information about the study. This guide provides some main talking points, but the actual meeting will be unscripted to ensure authentic interactions and natural flow of conversation.

- Introductions
 - o Thank participant for their interest and time

- Allow for natural flow of conversation
- Review purpose of pre-meeting
 - Briefly talk about myself as it relates to the study (i.e., research interests, situate the research within larger contexts)
 - Allow opportunities for questions throughout
- Provide details about the study
 - Necessary background information; study purpose
 - Participant expectations: one-hour semi-structured interview where they would reflect on their occupational experiences as they relate to reputation management
 - Compensation
 - Right to voluntary participation and right to informed consent
- Talk about participant's employment history as it relates to inclusion criteria/eligibility
 - Discussions will likely involve where and when participants have worked in client-facing roles within municipalities
 - Questions will be asked about employment history and occupational roles and responsibilities related to eligibility and the study purpose
- Ask if participant is 'officially' interested in participating [*If not interested, end meeting.*]
- Review 'paperwork package' that participants will be asked to complete between pre-meeting and main interview
 - Consent form: review, allow for questions, and ask to sign and return
 - Confirmation survey: review, allow for questions, ask to fill out to confirm employment information discussed today
- Thank participant for their time, end interview

Appendix C – Online Survey for Confirmation of Eligibility

This screening survey will be hosted on Qualtrics. The survey will be presented via hyperlink in the initial recruitment email and will encourage participants to complete it if they are interested in participating in the study.

Thank you for your interest! [*Need to provide brief blurb here about how information from the survey will be stored and protected*]

1. Please enter your full name: _____
2. Please enter your age (to confirm eligibility): _____

3. Please enter your preferred email address to be contacted going forward:
- _____
4. Are you currently employed by a municipal government in Ontario, Canada?
- Yes
 - No
5. Have you previously been employed by a municipal government in Ontario, Canada within the last five years (since January 2017)?
- Yes
 - No
6. How much cumulative experience do you have as an employee of municipal governments in Canada? (e.g., months, years) *(Enter in text box)*
7. What is (or was) your job title in your current (or most recent) occupational role in a municipal government? *(Enter in text box)*
8. What is (or was) your department in your current (or most recent) occupational role in a municipal government? *(Enter in text box)*
9. How would you describe the main tasks, roles, and responsibilities of your current (or most recent) occupational role in a municipal government? *(Enter in text box)*
10. If you have held additional jobs/positions within municipal governments between January 2016 and the present, please detail your other job titles, associated departments, and main tasks/roles/responsibilities: *(Enter in text box)*
11. Which day(s) and time(s) of the week would be preferable for the main interview (approximately 1 hour)? Select all that apply:
- Sunday afternoon (12-5pm)
 - Monday morning (9am-12pm)
 - Monday afternoon (12-5pm)
 - Monday evening (5-9pm)
 - Tuesday morning (9am-12pm)
 - Tuesday afternoon (12-5pm)
 - Tuesday evening (5-9pm)
 - Wednesday morning (9am-12pm)
 - Wednesday afternoon (12-5pm)
 - Wednesday evening (5-9pm)

- Thursday morning (9am-12pm)
- Thursday afternoon (12-5pm)
- Thursday evening (5-9pm)
- Friday morning (9am-12pm)
- Friday afternoon (12-5pm)
- Friday evening (5-9pm)
- Saturday morning (9am-12pm)
- Saturday afternoon (12-5pm)
- Saturday evening (5-9pm)

12. Is there any additional information you think the researcher should know prior to our pre-meeting? *(Enter in text box)*

Thank you for your time! The researcher (Alicia) will follow up to your provided email address within 1-2 business days!

Appendix D – Consent Form

Wilfrid Laurier University Informed Consent Statement

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY



Municipal Employees' Experiences of Pressure for Organizational Impression Management: An Explorative Study (REB #7010)

Principal Investigator: Alicia Bevan

Supervisor: Dr. Manuel Riemer

Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring how municipal workers – specifically public-facing employees within various Ontario municipal governments – perceive and navigate organizational impression management in their occupational roles and responsibilities, as well as to explore whether organizational impression management is perceived as a barrier to fostering meaningful engagement with citizens. The research is being conducted by graduate student Alicia Bevan under the supervision of Dr. Manuel Riemer, both within the Viessman Center for Engagement and Research in Sustainability (VERiS) and Wilfrid Laurier University.

Information

You are invited to participate in a one-hour one-on-one qualitative interview via Zoom, where you will be asked to discuss how you perceive and navigate ‘organizational impression management’ as it relates to your occupational role(s); that is, how would you respond to situations where you may feel pressured to maintain or defend certain impressions (re: public perceptions) of a municipality, especially in the face of citizens. You are also invited to complete an online survey about your employment history as it relates to this study. The entire study will be conducted online.

The following is eligibility criteria for participating in the study:

- 1) 25+ years of age
- 2) Currently or formally employed by a municipal government in Ontario (i.e., within the last five years)
- 3) At least four months of experience working full-time within an Ontario municipal government in a client-facing role (i.e., roles and responsibilities included engaging with citizens)

Approximately 10-14 individuals are expected to participate in the study; a randomly selected three-digit number will be used to de-identify participants. Please note that the researchers may use your de-identified quotations within written reports, publications, and presentations that result from this research. If necessary, researchers will remove or explicitly alter other identifying information from the quotes. You will be informed of any quotations that are intended for use and will be provided an opportunity via email to vet your quotations prior to their inclusion in any related works. Please do not sign this form if you do not allow the researchers to use your de-identified quotations.

Please note that by participating in this study, you allow the principal investigator to record the qualitative interview. The recording will be deleted after it has been transcribed. Please do not sign this form if you do not allow the principal investigator to record the interview.

Participating in this study is expected to take 1 hour and 45 minutes total. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study, your data will be removed from the study and destroyed.

Risks

There are minimal anticipated risks related to your participation in this study. You may feel hesitant about sharing information related to your work and workplace(s), or other information that may be considered confidential. The subject matter of the interview – specifically considering instances where you may have felt pressure/tension to maintain your employer’s reputation or public image – may elicit negative emotions not limited to tension, anger, and dissatisfaction. Further, you may feel concerned that sharing information about your work and workplace(s) could have negative consequences on your existing or future professional relationships and occupational prospects. These feelings are normal and should be temporary.

Every attempt will be made to remove any identifiable information from your data. Only the research team will have access to these data; your information will be kept private and confidential. You will be informed of any de-identified quotations that are intended for use and will be provided an opportunity to vet your quotations prior to their inclusion in any related works. If you experience any lasting negative affect as a result of participating in this study, please contact the researchers. If you experience feelings of loss of privacy at any time, please contact the researchers.

Benefits

By participating in this study, you will be contributing to gaps in academic literature on organizational impression management, and more broadly, barriers to meaningful citizen engagement and equitable municipal planning. You may gain a better understanding of organizational impression management and may discover approaches to addressing or otherwise overcoming impression management in your occupational role. The findings from this research will also inform projects within VERiS, specifically contributing knowledge to projects and professional networks interested in addressing barriers to citizen engagement and municipal planning (e.g., municipalities, community groups, academic researchers).

Confidentiality

Only Alicia Bevan and Dr. Manuel Riemer will have access to the data and information collected during this study. Necessary measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of your data, including storing data in a secure location. All data, including consent forms, contact information, survey data, recordings, transcripts, codebooks, etc, will be stored on a secure internal VERiS OneDrive database.

All identifying information except consent forms will be destroyed by August 31st, 2022; consent forms will remain securely stored for five years and be destroyed by August 31st, 2027. Only de-identified, anonymized data will be retained indefinitely by the Viessmann Centre for Engagement and Research in Sustainability, and may be made available to other authorized researchers in the future.

Please note that while in transmission on the internet, confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed. The researchers acknowledge that the host of the online survey (Qualtrics) may automatically collect participant data without their knowledge (i.e., IP addresses); however, the researchers will not use or save this information. Information will be moved from the host of the online survey to a secure OneDrive as soon as possible.

Please note confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during Zoom sessions; however, researchers will follow Zoom best practices to help ensure participants' privacy and security. Zoom sessions will be by invite only. Once participants have joined the meeting, the researcher will lock the meeting in the security tab. Please note that Zoom sessions are hosted through data centers in Canada and United States only. The Zoom recording will be moved to a secure OneDrive as soon as possible. Please note that by participating in this study you agree to not share any Zoom meeting links with anyone.

Payment

You will be paid \$30 for taking part in the 1-hour interview in this study. If you withdraw from the study during or after the main interview, you will still be compensated \$30 for your participation. You will be paid via interact e-transfer and will be asked to complete a voucher confirming remuneration; please note you are required to report compensation for participation in research to the Canada Revenue Agency for income tax purposes. Wilfrid Laurier University will not issue a tax receipt.

Contact

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB #7010). If at any time you feel your rights as a participant have been violated, or that you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, you may contact the Research Ethics Board Chair at (519) 884-1970 x 3131, or REBChair@wlu.ca.

If you have questions at any time about the study or your compensation, or if you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, please contact the researcher, Alicia Bevan, at beva2176@mylaurier.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Manuel Riemer, at mriemer@wlu.ca or (519) 884-0710, ext. 2982.

Feedback and Publication

The results of this research will be published as a Masters thesis through Wilfrid Laurier University's Department of Psychology no later than August 31st, 2022. A summary of the key findings will be available to interested participants by August 31st, 2022.

The findings from this research will also be available to authorized stakeholders through the Viessmann Centre for Engagement and Research in Sustainability. The results may also be utilized within VERiS projects aimed at addressing barriers to equitable municipal planning and action.

Check this box if you would like to receive a summary of the key findings from this study upon its completion. The summary will be sent to the email address provided below.

Declaration of Consent

I have read and understand the above information. I agree to participate in this study. I understand that the audio recording of my interview is mandatory and the video recording of my interview is optional. I also understand that my de-identified quotes may be used in publications and presentations that result from this research, and that the researchers will send me these quotes via email to review before they are used.

I have read and understand the above information. I do not want to participate in this study

Participant's Name: _____

Date: _____

E-mail: _____

Please email your signed consent form to Alicia Bevan at beva2176@mylaurier.ca. It is recommended that you print or save this consent form. It is also recommended that you save the researcher contact information in case you have any questions or concerns.

Appendix E – Guide for Main Interview with Vignettes

Prior to the main interview, I should have necessary documents ready including a copy of the participant's signed consent form, and relevant occupational information from the screening survey and pre-meeting (organized in a way that is clear and can facilitate probes and questions about the individual's personal experiences). Please note that additional probes/questions may be asked in the interview based on participants' responses to the questions.

- Hi [interviewee]! *[Ensure there are no technical difficulties, that we can hear and see each other.]* How are you? *[Allow for more natural/casual flow of introductions' perhaps integrate information from pre-meeting.]*

- Do you have any questions before I begin the interview? *[Allow for questions.]* Okay, I am going to begin recording now.
- 1. You mentioned in your online survey and pre-interview that you work/worked at [municipality]; how would you define your position within [municipality]?
**If participant has experience at more than one municipality, ask about the one that seems most relevant to the research topic. If participant has had more than one role within the same municipality, ask about the role that seems most relevant to the research topic.*
- 2. How would you describe the main tasks and responsibilities of your job?
**Probe: What does your role entail? How does your role contribute to the operations of [municipality]?*
**Probe: How would you describe a typical day or week?*
- Now I am going to show you a vignette, which is a brief fictional story. I will turn off my microphone and give you some time to read the vignette; take as much time as you need and let me know when you are done. Then I will give you a minute or two to silently reflect on what you have read. After that I will ask you some questions.
- Do you have any questions? *[Allow for questions.]*. Okay, I am going to share my screen so you can read the vignette. Please let me know if you cannot clearly see the vignette. *[Will increase font size as necessary; as a last resort, if technical difficulties ensue such that I cannot share the vignette on my screen, I can have a back-up Google document with the vignette which I can link to participants via the Zoom chat.]*

Sally works for the municipality of Sunset Valley in the City Clerk's Office. Her job responsibilities include providing administrative support for city council meetings and sharing relevant information about municipal operations with the public. She recently attended a special council meeting where the council discussed whether to endorse or oppose the construction of a 65km intercity highway that would run through Sunset Valley; the meeting also provided an opportunity for citizens and organizations to give input on the project. The meeting began with the council discussing the highway and explaining its benefits, including that it would accommodate Sunset Valley's growing population and provide convenient transportation of people and goods among surrounding municipalities. Then the council allowed for public consultation; first, a representative of the Sunset Valley Realty Corporation spoke in favour of the highway, saying investments in real-estate near the highway would bring economic growth to Sunset Valley. Next, a team of representatives from the Sunset Valley Chapter of Environmental Defense, the Sunset Valley Environmental Network, and Clean Water Warriors of Sunset Valley spoke against the highway, citing concerns that its construction would destroy two natural heritage sites and cause serious environmental destruction to local wetlands and waterways. After that, two members of the Farmers' Union of Sunset Valley also expressed concerns, stating that themselves and other farmers did not want a highway to be constructed over or through their farmlands. Then, a resident spoke on behalf of the Federation of Sunset Valley West

Neighbourhoods and the Sunset Valley North Neighbourhoods Federation; they stated that some residents were concerned about the noise pollution and air pollution that the highway would bring to their neighbourhoods. Finally, another citizen spoke in opposition of the highway, saying they would rather see the city invest in environmentally sustainable and accessible public transportation. In the year Sally had spent working as a City Clerk, she had never seen so many individuals attending and speaking at a city council meeting.

After the city council meeting, Sally was asked to prepare and publish the agenda and meeting notes as per usual. However, she was also instructed to prepare a press release ‘declaring the council’s decision to endorse the highway project due to overwhelming support from the provincial government, surrounding municipalities, and Sunset Valley citizens and organizations.’ The request confused Sally – based on what she heard in the city council meeting, citizens and organizations clearly did not support the highway. She went to [her boss] to discuss the press release and explained that she did not feel comfortable publishing something that was misleading.

[The boss] told Sally that he understood where she was coming from, but that she shouldn’t worry so much because the council had decided to endorse the highway project before the council meeting was even held. He also told her that those who supported the project – including land developers, real estate companies, and automotive companies – were ‘powerful players’ who would strongly influence the city’s decision. [Sally’s boss] finished by telling Sally to publish the press release exactly as instructed.

Sally felt very conflicted about writing and publishing the press release. Sally had a decision to make: should she write and publish the press release as requested, despite knowing it was inaccurate, or should she push back against this request to ensure the content of the release better reflects the reality of citizens’ thoughts and concerns at the council meeting?

1. Can you briefly recap or summarize what happened in the story?
[Fact-checking question.]
2. How do you think Sally felt at the end of the story?
**Probe: Why do you think she felt that way?*
**Probe: Do you understand or empathize with Sally’s feelings? Why or why not?*
3. If you were Sally, what would you do in this situation?
**If necessary, clarify: would you write and publish the press release as requested, or would you push back against this request?*
**Probe: Why would you choose that course of action?*
4. Have you ever experienced a similar situation to Sally’s while working for a municipality?
**If necessary, clarify: In your occupational role(s), have you ever experienced a situation where you felt pressured to maintain certain impressions of the municipality, especially in the face of conflicting information?*
**If no, move on to next question.*

**Probe: If you feel comfortable sharing, please describe the situation more; what happened? What did you do in response to the situation?*

5. While working for a municipality, have you ever experienced similar feelings to the ones you thought Sally was feeling?

**If necessary, clarify: Have you ever felt [reiterate/paraphrase their answer to question 2] due to the nature of or responsibilities of your job in a municipality?*

**If no, move on to next question.*

**Probe: If you are comfortable, can you tell me what caused you to feel [paraphrase their answer to question 2]. What happened?*

6. Have you ever experienced implicit or explicit pressure to manage positive impressions of your municipal employer, especially in the face of conflicting information?

**If no, move on to next question and conclude interview.*

**Probe: Can you elaborate on your experiences? When did you feel this pressure?*

**Probe: Where/what do you feel was the source of this pressure?*

**Probe: What did you do in response to this pressure? What did you do in response to any emotions or situations that may have arisen in response to/in relation to this pressure?*

7. Finally, I would like to ask if the vignette resonated with you in terms of its realism; that is, based on your understanding of Canadian municipal operations, as well as your personal occupational experiences, was the story in the vignette realistic?

**Probe: If not, what about the story was not realistic?*

**Probe: Is there anything that could be done to make the story more realistic based on your understandings and experiences?*

- Thank you so much [interviewee] for your time today and for sharing your thoughts and experiences. I will follow up within 24 hours with your compensation via e-transfer, as well as a voucher confirming remuneration that you will be asked to return and sign. Do you have any questions for me before we end the interview? *[Allow for questions.]*
- Don't hesitate to reach out to myself or my supervisor, Manuel, if you have any questions or concerns at any time following this interview. Our information can be found on the consent form. I am going to stop recording now. *[Stop recording]*. Thank you again [interviewee] for your time, I really appreciate it

Appendix F – Participant Acknowledgement Voucher

Completed by participants upon completion of the 1-hour interview (or upon their withdrawal from the study during or after the interview) and reception of the e-transfer for remuneration.

Participant Acknowledgement Voucher

Participant Name/Identifier		Payment Value (CAD)	
Form of Payment (cash/gift card)		Comments	
Details (i.e. Starbucks Gift Card, etc)			
Participant Signature/Initials: <i>"By signing here I am confirming receipt of funds"</i>		Date Received (yyyy-mm-dd)	

APPROVALS

Researcher's Name		Extension	
Researcher Signature		Date (yyyy-mm-dd)	
