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The role of cunning misrepresentations in entrepreneurial impression management

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a dramaturgical theory of cunning misrepresentations, an important but previously unexplored aspect of entrepreneurial impression management. By cunning misrepresentations, we refer not to illegal activities such as fraud or corruption but rather impressions constructed during everyday interactions that actors (and their performance team) know to be false or misleading, such as small exaggerations, white lies or tall stories. We examine three vignettes from an ethnographic study of small business owners. Our analysis reveals three types of cunning misrepresentation: pretending, exaggerating and embellishing. We outline the contribution of our theory of cunning misrepresentations for the study of everyday entrepreneurial impression management and discussing the methodological implications of studying the relationship between the frontstage (when the audience is present) and the backstage (when the audience is absent).

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Introduction

Entrepreneurs seek to construct a range of different impressions to a range of different audiences throughout the process of establishing and growing their businesses. For example, an entrepreneur might seek to create the impression that their financial position is secure when trying to attract employees to join their fledgling firm (Clarke 2011), that their business plan is promising when seeking investment (Parhankangas and Ehrlich 2014), or try to restore their public image when their new business fails (Kibler et al. 2021). Thanks to this existing literature on entrepreneurial impression management (EIM), we now have many insights into the forms that entrepreneurs' impression management takes. However, the existing literature has yet to explore all the dimensions of EIM.

Existing literature has tended to focus on impression management during high stakes performances, which are typically one-off events that are 'make or break' for the business or for its founder. While this focus is understandable, it also limits our understanding of other times, places, settings and audiences where EIM takes place. In this paper, we follow Welter's (2011) call for entrepreneurship research which seeks to broaden the understanding of 'when, how, and why entrepreneurship happens and who becomes involved' (p. 166) across a range of contexts. This means taking seriously the more *mundane* aspects of an entrepreneurs' everyday life (see also Rehn and Taalas 2004, Welter et al., 2017). We disagree with those who might view the mundane as unimportant. We think the mundane *is* important and we aim to reveal the 'extraordinary' things that happen in apparently 'ordinary' interactional encounters that entrepreneurs face.

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We also follow the movement away from the dominant positivistic variance-based methodologies which reduce impression management to a series of variables (e.g. Parhankangas and Ehrlich 2014) towards studying entrepreneur*ing* as an ongoing interactional process (Steyaert, 2007). This means exploring entrepreneurs *actually do* during real-time processes of interaction, which relies on observational and ethnographic research methods rather than post-hoc reflections in interviews (e.g. Clarke 2011, Clarke, Cornelissen, and Healey 2019). In-depth observation over time has a major advantage for generating new insights into EIM because it 'enables the researcher to "get behind the scenes" and see what happens when performers are "off stage" as well as "on stage"' (Whittle & Mueller, 2024, 244). Studies of the backstage are conspicuously absent from existing literature on EIM. This gap is significant because the backstage is known to play numerous important purposes and functions which existing theories of EIM have yet to incorporate. As Whittle and Mueller (2024) argue:

> Back regions have a number of purposes (Goffman 1959: Ch. 3). They are where fabrications are constructed, where ceremonial equipment is stored, and where stage props and costumes are stored and repaired. Crucially, back regions are also where performances are rehearsed and where poor performing team members are 'schooled' or 'dropped' from the team. Back regions are also where performers can 'relax', 'drop their front' and 'step out of character'. (p. 240)

In this paper, we address this gap by going 'behind the scenes' to explore how entrepreneurs manage impressions in everyday interactions with significant others. We analyse three observations drawn from an ethnographic study of small business owners in a small rural town in North-East England. Going 'behind the scenes' using the ethnographic method enabled us to discover a previously overlooked practice, which we call 'cunning misrepresentation'. We ask: *How do entrepreneurs use cunning misrepresentations to manage impressions in their everyday mundane interactions?*

By studying performances on the frontstage *and* backstage, the study was able to 'follow the action' (Johnstone 2007, 101) across naturally-occurring interactions across a range of settings where cunning misrepresentations were performed for different audiences and for a range of different purposes. We develop a typology of the three forms of cunning misrepresentation used by the entrepreneurs in this study, which we label 'pretending', 'exaggerating', and 'embellishing'. We contribute to the literature by proposing that cunning misrepresentations are a significant but previously unknown element of EIM.

In what follows, we first review literature on entrepreneurial impression management. We then consider writing about the backstage and misrepresentations from the dramaturgical literature, before ending the literature review with a brief overview of existing writing about entrepreneurial cunning. Next, we explain the methodology used in the study. The findings are presented in three sub-sections, each focusing on an observation of an entrepreneur using a cunning misrepresentation. The discussion section then outlines how our findings advance existing theories of EIM. We conclude by summarizing the contribution we have made and discussing the methodological implications and avenues for future research arising from our study.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurial impression management

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective uses the theatre as a metaphor for studying the social world. Goffman highlighted the many features of social life that are similar to the world of theatrical performances, such as having a frontstage (where an audience is present) and backstage (where the audience is absent), the interplay of actors and audiences, and the role of things like scripts, scenery and props. Goffman (1959) was also interested in the 'performance team' (Goffman 1959, 85), which comprises people who work backstage or frontstage to help the actor to craft, stage and rehearse performances designed to create a desired impression in the eyes of the audience. Taken together, these dramaturgical practices and processes are typically referred to as 'impression management' (Goffman 1959, 85).

The dramaturgical approach has been influential in entrepreneurship research. An early paper by Downing (2005) theorizes the interaction between 'narrative' and 'dramatic' processes in the social construction of entrepreneurship. Another early paper by Anderson (2005) lays out the value of a 'theatrical' conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a performance in which people 'act out many roles' (p. 593). Importantly, Anderson (2005) also highlights the use of frontstage and backstage regions 'to distinguish between the space and time set aside for social interaction and for preparation' (p. 594).

Variance-based positivistic research has established many insights into entrepreneurial impression management that takes place in high-stakes contexts such as securing investment and company failure. For example, Shepherd and Haynie (2011) identified why some entrepreneurs use impression management to manage the stigma associated with business failure. In a different context, Parhankangas and Ehrlich (2014) analysed the impression management used by new ventures pitching for investment from angel investors, finding that proposals which used a moderate level of impression management language were preferred.

Other scholars have adopted a more processual, interpretivist or interactionist approach to the study of impression management. These distinct onto-epistemological perspectives on the phenomenon, within which this study is positioned, leads to a different set of insights into impression management in entrepreneur*ing* (i.e. as a verb, a doing or activity) (Steyaert, 2007). According to Anderson and Air (2022), any 'performance' involves both 'material and discursive practices' (p. 166). Some scholars have focused more on the material and embodied aspects of EIM. For instance, Clarke (2011) used a dramaturgical lens to study the visual practices used by three entrepreneurs who were videotaped interacting with stakeholders. The study found that visual symbols, such as office furniture and styles of dress, played an important role in the construction of an appropriate impression. Kašperová and Kitching (2014) also drew on Goffman's ideas to study non-able-bodied entrepreneurs, finding that non-linguistic practices such as movement, posture, gesture and facial expression were central to the presentation of entrepreneurial identity.

Other scholars have focused more on the discursive aspects of entrepreneur's performances. Kibler et al. (2021) identified the impression management used in the public narratives produced by entrepreneurs after their businesses had failed. Teasdale et al. (2022) also used a dramaturgical approach to understand social entrepreneurs and revealed that actors constructed 'scripts' which were continually renegotiated as different audiences responded to them. Particularly relevant to our work is Reveley and Down's (2009) interview study of the strategies of self-presentation used by entrepreneurs from indigenous Australian communities in light of their 'spoiled' or 'stigmatized' identity. In dramaturgical approaches such as these, identity is viewed as an ongoing process of 'presenting the self' in social interactions (Radu-Lefebvre et al. 2021). More recently, Giazitzoglu and Down (2017) also used a dramaturgical framework in their ethnographic study of male entrepreneurs performing their masculinity in the front-stage region of a local pub, using a combination of material, embodied and discursive practices, such as being good at playing golf, engaging in pub banter or owning an expensive car.

Despite these many insights, existing literature has yet to explore what happens on the *backstage*. The backstage is important because it is where members of the performance team interact before or after the performance when the audience is not present. It was backstage access that was pivotal to the insights revealed in this study because it enabled us to learn about the secrets that lay behind the performance and, as a result, realize that some frontstage performances contained elements of *misrepresentation*. It is to the backstage aspect of impression management that we will now turn.

Backstages, secrets and misrepresentations

According to Goffman (1959, 114), a 'back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is *knowingly contradicted as a matter of course*' (emphasis added). These backstage spaces are where entrepreneurs can 'relax' their fronts or 'rehearse' their performances. The backstage is also the place where actors and their 'performance team' (Goffman 1959, 85) – those who assist the actor in designing or delivering their

performance – might 'conspire' to construct misrepresentations by keeping secrets from a specific audience (Ringel, 2019, Whittle et al., 2021).

To clarify, Goffman (1959), did not say that *all* performances involve misrepresentations. An important distinction can be made between working 'behind the scenes' to put on your 'best front' and operating 'behind the backs' of the audience to put on a 'false front' (Whittle, et al., 2021). The former might involve practices of relaxation or rehearsal (Whittle, et al., 2021) and is where 'secrets of imperfection' are kept hidden backstage (Ringel, 2019). The latter involves practices of conspiring to make claims to an audience that the performance team knows to be false (Whittle, et al., 2021). As such, the latter could involve more damaging 'dark secrets' which, if revealed, could fatally undermine an aspect of the performance (Ringel, 2019). Thus, in this paper we conceptually distinguish between impression management that involves showing oneself in a 'favourable' light (Goffman 1959, 18) and impression management that involves portraying a 'false impression' (Goffman 1959, 71) through the use of practices of 'misrepresentation' (Goffman 1959, 65).

There are different types of misrepresentation.[1] Some misrepresentations breach more-or-less shared ethical principles, moral rules or codified laws. Goffman (1959) gives the examples of confidence men (p. 77), spies (p. 148) and con merchants (p. 219) when speaking of the former. In entrepreneurial contexts, the recent jail sentence for fraud handed down to Elizabeth Holmes, founder of Theranos, is a case in point. However, Goffman also discusses misrepresentations that *do not* involve illegal behaviour and might not even cross any societal threshold for being viewed as unethical conduct.[2] For example, Goffman (1959, 48) gives the example of American college girls 'playing dumb' with their boyfriends to affirm their traditional gendered role (p. 49), householders exaggerating their display of poverty to visiting welfare agents (p. 49) and furniture salespeople using standard 'tricks of the trade' to up-sell furniture to unsuspecting customers (p. 139). To clarify, in this paper, we focus on 'everyday misrepresentations' which break no formalized codes or laws and which are designed to help the entrepreneur to manage impressions with a range of different audiences they encounter in their everyday lives.

Misrepresentations and 'cunning'

In this paper, our argument is that misrepresentations form part of the broader entrepreneurial phenomenon known as 'cunning'. The term cunning has to date only been used by a handful of scholars in entrepreneurship. The term is used by Johannisson (2014) to refer to the 'tacit and situated knowledge' and 'internalized disposition[s]' that entrepreneurs use to cope with 'equivocal' and 'ambiguous realities' (p. 113). For Johannisson (2014), cunning intelligence is not the type of intelligence that involves rational thought and planning but rather the tactical moves (p. 112), improvisation (p. 113) and creative acts (p. 116) which are used to transform 'coincidences into opportunities' (p. 113).

Other scholars have also mentioned the term 'cunning' in studies of entrepreneurial settings, but have not developed it as a concept in its own right. For instance, Hertting, Thörn and Franzén (2022) mention the 'sly, crafty or cunning' strategies used by elites to influence the urban entrepreneurial governance plans in two Swedish cities. Dey and Teasdale (2016) also mention cunning in passing as they discuss the idea that entrepreneurs have the 'ability to cunningly exploit whatever opportunities' (p. 498) they encounter. Importantly for our purposes here, they also argue that entrepreneurs are 'cunning actors who dramaturgically enact' (p. 497) different subject positions, conceptually linking dramaturgy and cunning in ways that we seek to advance further here. Other studies have uncovered commonplace semiotic associations between the terms 'entrepreneur' and 'cunning'. For example, Dodd, Jack and Anderson (2013) conducted a survey of perceptions about entrepreneurs across seven European countries and found that some people associate entrepreneurs with being 'sly and cunning' (p. 74), often associated with the metaphor of the fox. In a recent study of immigrant entrepreneurs, Chidau, Khosa and Phillips (2022) also found that the entrepreneurs were sometimes perceived as 'opportunistic' and 'cunning' in the eyes of the local business community.

As we have reviewed the entrepreneurship literature more broadly, we noticed that scholars have recounted examples of practices that could be labelled 'cunning', even if the authors do not explicitly use

this term. For example, Clarke (2011, 1387) discusses examples of visual 'tricks' of concealment used by the entrepreneurs in her dramaturgical study. For instance, one entrepreneur held meetings in high-end restaurants to conceal the fact that his business had no suitable premises to hold meetings and to symbolize the up-market nature of his company. Another entrepreneur had a small and untidy office and decided to borrow the office space of another firm to create a good impression when interviewing candidates for a new position. In a different context, Giazitzoglu and Korede (2023) found that Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs in the UK invented 'Anglicized' names for themselves[3] in an attempt to 'fit in' and appear legitimate in the predominantly white entrepreneurial community. Similarly, Van Merriënboer and colleagues (2023) noted that one ethnic minority participant in their study, Romeo, considered removing his photo from the company website and displaying only his white co-founder to construct an image he thought would attract more clients. Some studies also discuss acts of deception which failed to create the desired impression, such as the 'Walter Mitty' character who claimed to be a government spy but was ostracized and ridiculed by the local entrepreneurial community (Giazitzoglu and Down 2017, 51).

Thus, while it is clear that cunning is viewed by some scholars as an important aspect of entrepreneuring, there are opportunities to develop it further through in-depth studies of *cunning-in-action*. We join Dimov (2007) and others in seeking to move away from viewing entrepreneur*ship* as an *event* towards viewing entrepreneur*ing* as a complex interplay of activities and interactions that take place in multiple times and places within the entrepreneurial journey (McMullen and Dimov 2013). As such, we take up Lerner, Hunt, and Dimov (2018) call for entrepreneuring research that moves beyond the study of single events towards following the 'action' whenever and wherever it takes place, including the apparently mundane 'everyday' settings (Welter, 2011, Welter et al., 2017). It is to the methodology that we will now turn.

Methodology

Research context

This paper analyses a small part of the dataset from a wider ethnographic study conducted in Mayfield (a pseudonym) that was funded by the *National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise*. The research project was not originally designed as a study of impression management, misrepresentations or cunning. Rather, the study was designed to examine the working lives of small business owners in Mayfield, a small market town located in a rural area in the North-East of England (UK). National newspapers regularly identify Mayfield as a highly desirable place to live. It has a thriving town centre and high-performing schools, with above-average house prices compared to the surrounding local area. Mayfield's population has experienced rapid growth in recent years, together with a number of new housing developments on the outskirts. The Covid pandemic also saw an increase in people move to places like Mayfield as part of the shift to homeworking. The general question guiding the fieldwork was: What is life like for small business owners in Mayfield in the post-Covid era?

Data collection

Ethnographic data were collected by the first author between 2021 and 2023. The other two authors became involved in the research only after data collection had been completed. The fieldwork used a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. For the broader study, thirteen entrepreneurs were recruited through informal connections, for example while networking at business dinners and charity events organized by local business networks. All participants were men because the study was designed to explore the particular challenges that men running small businesses were facing. All participants were informed of the first author's overt role as a researcher and were asked if they would consent to be part of the study together with a pledge of confidentiality and anonymity.

Following the argument by Welter et al. (2017) about *when* and *where* to study entrepreneurship, the researcher used no preconceptions or criteria to decide which spaces were most relevant to research. The researcher attended *any* and *all* events the entrepreneurs invited him along to. This included business networking events, family barbecues and picnics, coffee shops, pubs, golf courses and social events. This meant he 'hung around' and tried to talk to as many people who let him. There was no specific event he wanted to observe but was refused access to or where he was asked to leave, although his request to interview or observe some participants was declined. The researcher also studied the entrepreneurs interacting with friends, acquaintances and family across the interplay of business and domestic life (Welter, 2011), where he also informed them of his researcher role and gave the option to not consent.

Unlike studies which are designed at the outset to uncover the 'secrets' of the backstage (e.g. Costas and Grey 2016), gaining backstage access was never part of the design of this study. It was by accident rather than design, simply by virtue of 'hanging around' with the entrepreneurs and building a degree of trust, that they allowed the researcher to know the 'destructive information' (Goffman 1959, 143) on the backstage. For example, in Vignette 1, the researcher did not request access to the backstage, he just happened to be there when Mike received the phone call and Mike himself chose to reveal the destructive information (that he did not actually own a cravat). Thus, we must also recognize that the researcher could also have been an audience for misrepresentations he was unaware of because the destructive information was never known to him.

The study was designed to be as 'immersive' as possible and the emphasis was on *participation*, not detached observation. As Langley and Klag (2019) argue, this level of involvement was not a problem but was a key source of insight, especially for dramaturgical analysis where it was insights into the frontstage-backstage relationship was crucial. For instance, in Vignette 1, without involvement (in the form of having a coffee with Mike rather than simply observing Mike drinking coffee from afar), the researcher would have never been able to discover the misrepresentation that Mike had crafted.

Observations were recorded in a fieldnote diary on the same day or the following day. A total of 47 events were observed, which were later whittled down to three observations which we refer to as 'vignettes'. The term 'vignette' is used to refer to a short piece of writing about a particular moment of time. We use the term to distinguish between the kind of study that seeks to 'tell the whole story' about the entrepreneur, and our focus here on specific moments where the researcher saw (or more accurately *later discovered*) a misrepresentation had taken place.

The three entrepreneurs in the vignettes analysed in this paper all knew of each other because they operated within a close-knit entrepreneurial community, but none had specific business, family or friendship connections. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each entrepreneur in this study. Importantly, the interviews included not only generic questions but also tailored questions exploring the meanings behind some of the specific observations of each participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. An overview of the data collected from the three participants included in this paper is provided in Table 1.

Data analysis

The first stage of analysis was conducted by the researcher alone. He looked one-by-one at the 47 observations recorded in his fieldnote diary and noted all interactional moments that appeared to be significant in the entrepreneurs' life, work, business or identity. It was here that the researcher spotted *four* observations which involved: (a) efforts to construct a desired

Table 1. Overview of data collection.

Participant	Participant observations	Interviews
Mike	11	1
Ben	17	1
Phil	12	1

impression in the eyes of a particular audience (i.e. impression management), and (b) something in that impression that was 'misrepresented' to create a 'false front' (Goffman 1959, 66). The researcher then invited the second and third author to become involved in data analysis and theory development using the dramaturgical perspective.

The author team looked at these *four* examples where a *misrepresentation* had been observed, defined as the performance of an impression that the actor and the performance team know to be a 'false front' (Goffman 1959, 66). One of these four observations involved a participant cheating on the music round of a pub quiz by using his mobile phone to find the answers. This observation was excluded on the basis that it appeared to have little or no relationship to their work or their businesses. This left *three* remaining observations, which we analyse in this paper.

The data analysis of the three observations involved analysing the sequence of interactional turns using the conceptual vocabulary provided by Goffman (1959) (listed in italics) to identify: Who was the *actor* and *performance team*? Who was the *audience*? What *impression* was being *performed* on the *frontstage*? What *destructive information* was concealed on the *backstage*? Where, when and for what purposes was the *misrepresentation* constructed? What happened next in the interaction and what *interactional outcomes* followed?

The three observations were then written up as 'vignettes' which pieced together the direct observations from the researcher's fieldnote diary, his interpretations of these observations, and what the participants later said in interviews. Crucially, the vignettes are written in a reflexive style that acknowledges the researcher's active *involvement* in data collection and subsequent interpretation (Langley and Klag 2019). The researcher is 'unsilenced' by making it clear that this is *his* voice and *his* interpretations rather than a detached 'observer' speaking (Hansen et al. 2023).

Symbolic interactionist approaches to data analysis share with other qualitative approaches a focus on meaning-making, but with an emphasis on meanings constructed *in interactional practices* (Atkinson and Housley 2003). Thus, for each vignette, we identified not only the meanings ascribed to the actions by participants in the interviews afterwards, but also the *symbols* of meaning being constructed by the actor(s) as follows: symbols of 'class' displayed through the claim to own a cravat (Vignette 1), symbols of 'wealth' displayed through bids at a charity auction (Vignette 2), and symbols of 'friendliness' displayed through things like offering 'caring' advice and sending flowers (Vignette 3).

It was only at a later stage, after the analysis had been completed, that we considered a conceptual link between the observations and the concepts of misrepresentations and cunning. To be clear, 'cunning' was not a term used by any of the participants themselves and is also not a term used by Goffman. Rather, it was a term introduced by the authors to capture the creative-but-deceptive practices observed by the researcher. Hence, we decided to use the term 'cunning misrepresentation' to capture this phenomenon.

In the final stage, we categorized the different types of cunning misrepresentation we had observed. We arrived at the three labels – 'pretending', 'exaggerating' and 'embellishing' respectively – by comparing the claims made on the frontstage and the backstage, as follows:

(1) Vignette 1: The entrepreneur claimed he owned a cravat (frontstage), but afterwards revealed to the researcher that he did not actually own one (backstage), meaning this aspect of his frontstage performance was a *pretence*;
(2) Vignette 2: The entrepreneur gave off the impression that he could afford to bid large sums of money (frontstage), but afterwards revealed to the researcher it was more he could afford (backstage), meaning his frontstage performance was an *exaggeration* of his wealth;
(3) Vignette 3: The entrepreneur's wife claimed that the ex-employee was phoning to beg for her job back (frontstage), but the entrepreneur later revealed to the researcher that no such phone call took place (backstage), meaning his wife's frontstage performance had *embellished* the story of the ex-employee dislike of her new job.

An overview of the steps taken in the data analysis is provided in Table 2. It is to the findings that we will now turn.

Table 2. Overview of data analysis steps.

	Analytical decisions and rationale
Step 1	All 47 observations were analysed to identify instances where the entrepreneurs appeared to be engaged in 'impression management'.
Step 2	Four observations were singled out as involving a form of impression management known as a 'misrepresentation', where the actor and performance team present something to an audience that they know to be false. The researcher observed these four misrepresentations only when he was allowed to learn the 'secrets' of the performance on the 'backstage'.
Step 3	One of the four observations – involving a pub quiz team cheating on the music round – was removed because it did not appear to have relevance to the actor's role as a small business owner.
Step 4	The remaining three observations (Mike, Ben and Phil only) were analysed in their naturally-occurring temporal sequence of interactional turns, identifying the dramaturgical features of the interaction using Goffman's (1959) conceptual framework.
Step 5	The follow-up formal interviews and informal conversations were then analysed to identify relevant aspects of the meanings and motivations reported by the entrepreneur.
Step 6	After the analysis was completed, the author team considered the term 'cunning' as a useful common descriptor for three 'misrepresentations'. Finally, labels were created to distinguish the three 'cunning misrepresentations', namely: pretending, exaggerating, embellishing.

Findings: 'Cunning' in everyday entrepreneurial misrepresentations

In what follows, we will analyse the three observations – which we call 'vignettes' – using a dramaturgical lens to reveal the different forms of 'cunning misrepresentations' that were observed in this study. Each vignette starts with a brief description of the entrepreneur and the business they owned. Next, the observation is recounted in a 'thick description' of what happened, narrated in first person through the eyes of the researcher, followed by analysis of what the participants said about the episode during the interviews conducted afterwards.

Vignette 1: The cravat ('pretending')

Part 1. I first met Mike at a local business dinner organized by the local Chamber of Commerce. Mike was 40 years old and had moved to Mayfield from the South of England five years ago. He was active in Mayfield's local business community, often attending weekly networking events and monthly business dinners in the hope of making business contacts. Mike's business was in the IT sector, designing and maintaining websites for small businesses. While many of Mike's clients were nation-wide, he was keen to network in the local area to increase his local clients. During fieldwork, Mike often said how 'vital' it was to get business through word-of-mouth personal recommendations.

One Sunday morning, I was walking through Mayfield's town centre, and I bumped into Mike. We went for an impromptu coffee nearby. While chatting over coffee, Mike's phone rang. The call was from a prominent local business owner, Doug. I had known Doug for years. He was well-known locally as a wealthy and successful entrepreneur. Doug drove an expensive Range Rover and I had previously been invited over to his house, set in large woodland grounds, and heard him talking about his summer home in Portugal. Doug had a reputation for 'getting things done' and had an extensive network of personal connections. I saw other entrepreneurs behave in ways I thought were quite 'sycophantic' towards Doug, singing his praises or trying to do him favours or buy him a drink.

Unbeknown to Mike, Doug had actually called me earlier that day in a panic, asking if I had a cravat he could borrow.[4] Doug was attending an event that afternoon where Saudi Arabian royalty would be attending and the dress code required a cravat. I told Doug that I could not help because I did not own a cravat, only a bow tie. Doug seemed surprised, telling me 'I thought you posh university boys were into crap like this'. Doug told me he'd called several other people to no avail and that he was now getting anxious. I just happened to be having the impromptu coffee with Mike later that same day when he also received the same call from Doug, asking to borrow a cravat. I noted in my fieldwork diary that Mike became animated and excited during the call, saying 'yes, of course I am that sort of man' and 'yes, I do have class, I am a man with class, I'm not just a southern nobody you know'.

When Mike hung up the phone, I asked him what the call was about. Mike seemed ecstatic when he explained that Doug had called him 'to borrow a cravat' because Doug believed him 'to be the sort of man who owned a cravat', 'a man with class' and someone who is 'not like most of the lads up here [in Mayfield] who don't have style and aren't in the know'. I didn't tell Mike that Doug had also called me and several other people before him, exercising what Goffman (1959) might term 'tact' (p.24). At this point, as a bystander who could 'overhear' (Goffman 1959, 227) Mike's interaction with Doug, I had no idea whether Mike actually owned a cravat. I just assumed he did, otherwise why would he have offered to lend him one?

After ending the phone call, Mike turned to me and told me he didn't own a cravat and he needed to find one. Later, I realized that Mike was no longer relating to me as an 'overhearer'. He was now inviting me into his 'performance team' (Goffman 1959, 85) by sharing 'destructive information' (Goffman 1959, 143) vis-à-vis his performance to Doug. Destructive information is information that 'would discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters' (Goffman 1959, 141) and any associated knowledge that would 'discredit or at least weaken the claims about the self that the performer was attempting to project' (Goffman, 1959: 204). In short, Mike wanted Doug to think he was the kind of 'man with class' who owns a cravat, but for whatever reason he was willing to admit to me that he was not. Now 'backstage', I was allowed to see the performance 'knowingly contradicted' (Goffman 1959, 114).

Later on, when looking back at my fieldnotes and discussing this episode with my co-authors, we realized that this episode involved what Goffman called a 'misrepresentation' (Goffman 1959, 65). In particular, this misrepresentation appeared to be an improvised act of 'cunning intelligence' (Johannisson 2014, 109) designed to further his entrepreneurial venture. After all, Mike could have simply told Doug that he does not own a cravat and politely ended the call.[5] But he did not. In the course of only a second or two – the amount of time typically available to reply to a turn in a conversation – he had decided to be 'cunning' and seize this moment as an opportunity to help grow his business. Mike seemed to have artfully crafted this 'white lie' to create a *quid pro quo* relationship of mutual obligation with someone who was well-connected in the local community, who might later return the favour and refer him clients.

Mike quickly finished his coffee and asked me if I would like to join him in his hunt for a cravat. I agreed. Looking back, I now seemed to be firmly part of his 'performance team', helping him to procure his 'props'. We walked to three different men's clothes shops in Mayfield, but in each shop we failed to find a cravat. Mike then called his wife, Charlotte, and asked her to drive to a shopping centre 25 minutes away to buy a cravat.[6] About 45 minutes later, Charlotte made a video-call, asking Mike which cravat she should buy. Mike instructed her to buy *three* different colours of cravat.

Later, Mike and I were back in the same coffee shop. Charlotte came in and handed Mike a bag containing the three cravats. Mike then phoned Doug to tell him the cravat was waiting for him to collect from the coffee shop. A few minutes later, Doug arrived. Doug noticed the price tags still on the cravats and made a comment about that, to which Mike replied 'oh yeah I've never worn them but I've had them for ages, you can keep those ones, they are just standard ones, nothing special'. He seemed to be implying that a 'man with class' (to quote Mike's own phrase from earlier) like him owned *so many* cravats that he was only lending his 'standard' ones.

At the time, I did wonder whether Mike's ploy had been rumbled and if the price tags had led Doug to suspect Mike had lied about already owning a cravat. I could not tell if Doug believed Mike's claim that the price tags were because he owned them but had 'never worn them'. I wondered whether, even if he 'smelled a rat', he would be grateful anyway – or perhaps *especially grateful* - because of the trouble he had taken to help him. *Equivocality* remained for me and presumably for Mike too.[7] Was Doug annoyed at having been 'duped'? Was he put off by this almost sycophantic and obsequious act? Or was he especially impressed and grateful at the extraordinary lengths he had taken to help him?

Subsequently, it appeared that the latter interpretation was substantially more plausible. At the time, Doug certainly gave the impression of being sincerely grateful, given his many expressions of appreciation in the coffee shop. Also, later in the fieldwork, I was in a bar with Doug when Mike walked in. Doug seemed to make a big 'fuss' of Mike, thanking him *again* for the favour and adding

compliments like 'here is a man with style'. He even offered to buy Mike a bottle of wine 'for saving my bacon'.[8] Based on this later interaction, I concluded that the misrepresentation – even if it had been 'rumbled' – appeared to have strengthened Mike's ties with Doug and created a future context for entrepreneurial relationships of reciprocity where the favour might be repaid.

> It's like there are the alpha males, yeah, like [lists other names] and Doug is one of them because of his experience and success and like the way people treat him, you know … coming into this town you can sort of feel it and you can like sense it … Like he can get tables at restaurants even if they are full … He drives around in that [name of car]. So it's like Doug is 'the man' … So that's why I did that [sent my wife to buy the cravats] because you never know what opportunities can come about through a man like him.

Part 2: A few weeks later, I had arranged an interview with Mike which I tape recorded. I asked him about the incident with the cravat. Mike explained why he went to such extraordinary lengths to do that favour for Doug:

Later in the interview, he unpacked further what kinds of 'opportunities' he was referring to:

> … in the future if he [Doug] needs a website he might come to me and say, right I owe you a favour, you're a good lad. Or like if 'so and so' [another person] needs a website, let's get Mike involved … when a man like that asks for a favour, you know, you do it, like someone might say to him in the future do you know a lad who can make me a good web presence and he will think, yeah Mike from [company name] is the man for the job.

Mike also talked about how the cravat incident was important for addressing his sense of being an outsider in the local business community:

> When people especially people from around here see you with Doug, like when Doug is being nice to you, it means [they think] right, he's one of the lads, he's a serious lad if Doug respects him. You get elevated somehow, like transported, from some lad who moved here to, like, a member of the inner circle, like the circle of trust. That helps your business a lot, it helps your reputation a lot, it's all to do with how people see you, this game. … That means it doesn't matter that I didn't go to school here or play rugby for (Mayfield), that stuff doesn't matter because I jump it through association.

After the fieldwork, when I looked back at these interview accounts, I interpreted Mike as being *creatively cunning*: pretending he owned a cravat to do a favour for an important and influential person. His motivations were also apparently complex. He spoke about wanting to do this favour to create a relationship of reciprocity so that Doug would repay the favour by making client referrals. But he also spoke about wanting to be accepted and liked in the local business community (not just 'some lad who moved here', part of the 'inner circle') and to project his preferred masculine and class-based identity as an entrepreneur ('alpha males', 'good lad', 'one of the lads', 'right sort of chap', 'man with class').[9]

Vignette 2: The flag ('pretending' and 'exaggerating')

Part 1: I first met Ben at a pub barbeque. Ben's business was buying and selling building supplies. Ben was in his late 50s and had moved up to Mayfield from the South three years ago because he wanted to retire in the area. Ben had not yet retired and he claimed to now work 'part time'. Ben appeared too keen to impress these men and almost 'beg' them for business in a way that was embarrassing. Later in the fieldwork, Ben explained the nature of his business to me and why being seen as a 'key player' in Mayfield was important. Ben explained he specialized in 'building stuff underground, so it's not just bricks and cement, it's more pipes and specialist stuff'. This was quite a niche industry and Ben had told me that he was keen to cultivate local contacts he could sell directly to, rather than having to bid for contracts which involved copious amounts of paperwork.

During fieldwork, I attended a charity event with several other Mayfield entrepreneurs, which Ben also attended. The charity event involved a golf day at an expensive hotel, followed by a black-tie

dinner and auction of mainly sporting memorabilia. All the money from the ticket sales and the auction went to local charities for children. A large number of people from Mayfield's established business community were at the event, including at least one person who I know works in Ben's industry and who Ben wanted to sell to. The room was laid out with multiple round tables. I sat at the same table as Ben and several other men I knew from Mayfield. As the evening progressed and the alcohol flowed, I noticed Ben making some comments about how successful his business had been over the years and how wealthy he now was. Ben also mentioned some awards he had received for procurement in building materials. Ben tried to pass off his comments in a joking 'banter-like' manner, but it wasn't clear if the others also saw it like I did, namely as somewhat crass and ostentatious 'boasting'. This 'boasting' seemed to be part of a sales pitch because he ended one of his sequences with the statement: 'that's why I can get the best deals on materials and tools'.

Later in the evening, during the charity auction, I watched as Ben got into a bidding war with many other people for a football shirt signed by Wayne Rooney. It was a very popular item, with many men in the room bidding on it. I knew Ben would be keen because the shirt was from the football team he supported. Ben ultimately pulled out of the bidding war towards the end, which I presumed was because the price was exceeding what he felt he could afford. At this point, some other men around the table started teasing him, saying things that I later noted in my fieldnote diary such as 'you wanted the Rooney shirt but you couldn't compete with the lads', 'you say you're big time but you haven't got the cash' and 'you're all fur coat and no knickers'; 'you come up here [from the south] pretending to be the big man and know all the trade but the proof of the pudding is in the eating'.[10] A bit later, some men also shouted 'Rooney, Rooney' at Ben when he returned from the bathroom. Ben appeared to be getting agitated and his face was visibly reddening at this point. He did not return the 'teasing' with his own 'banter' and he did not appear to be taking the 'teasing' in good humour. Looking back on my fieldnotes later with the author team, I considered whether Ben might have been feeling a threat both to his sense of masculinity ('competing with the lads') and his reputation as a successful and wealthy local business owner ('you haven't got the cash'). If so, in dramaturgical terms, his 'face' (Goffman 1967, 5) was under threat.

The next and final item to be auctioned was a golf flag from a recent US Masters tournament which was signed by the winner. To the best of my knowledge, Ben had no interest in golf. He had never played the game before and had not played in the charity golf event earlier that day. However, Ben started bidding on the golf flag immediately. His bids seemed to delight the other men around the table, who started to snigger, whisper and 'elbow' each other. The bids for the flag kept going up and Ben kept bidding. Several other men at the table also made bids, which I assumed at the time were 'fake' bids designed only to 'tease' Ben by seeing how far he was willing to go. The sniggering brought tears to the eyes of one businessman, who found it hard to compose himself. Ben made yet another, higher bid and nobody else made a counter-bid this time. Just as the auctioneer had called 'going . . . going . . . ', but before hitting the hammer on the gavel and saying 'gone', Ben surprised everyone by *upping his own bid* to just over a thousand pounds, which was met with both laughter and applause across the room. After winning the bidding war, Ben projected an image of being very pleased with his item. In dramaturgical terms, then, I had apparently witnessed an 'actor' (Ben) craft a 'performance' for an 'audience' (the local business community) and displaying a desired face – or him supporting 'an image of self . . . which he now [found] threatened' (Goffman 1967, 8). However, at this point, I did not know whether I had witnessed a *misrepresentation*, apart from my vague suspicions that he didn't really like golf and for some reason was pretending to be passionate about winning this golf flag.

Part 2: A few weeks later, I arranged an interview with Ben. During the interview, I asked him about the charity event and the bidding war. It was at this point Ben confided in me that the bid was more than he could afford[11] and that he didn't want the flag and he didn't even like golf: drawing me into a form of 'back region' where these 'suppressed facts' 'which might discredit the fostered impression' (Goffman, 1959: 114) could be openly discussed. In this episode, Ben was obviously acting alone as an 'actor' because he did not have a 'performance team' to help him to prepare or perform, but afterwards during the interview he 'relaxed his front' *vis-à-vis this particular business community audience* and disclosed this 'destructive

information' behind his misrepresentation.[12] It was only much later, during discussions between the authors, that we categorized this as a form of cunning misrepresentation involving both *pretending* (i.e. pretending to be a golf fan) and *exaggerating* (i.e. exaggerating his wealth). Ben explained in the interview why afterwards he paid by credit card (rather than debit card) so he had the option of cancelling the transaction:

> I paid on a credit card. Now the thing about paying on a Visa card is that it takes time, right. It's not like cash, that's paid straight off, so in theory I could cancel the card before payment went through and give the flag back. But then I thought I can't do that, like, because this is a small town and it might get out and then I'd look cheap.

Ben explained that he didn't cancel the credit card transaction because he wanted to avoid the embarrassment of looking 'cheap', something in dramaturgical terms would have 'symbolic implications' that would 'threaten face' (Goffman 1967, 12). Further, he explained how his bids on a flag were a symbol that would bolster his status with his audience as a successful and wealthy business owner:

> Well there is no doubt now [in their eyes] that I have cash because if I didn't I couldn't have done that [the high bids]. It was a way of saying 'well you lot [the local business community] might not rate me and think I'm just a southerner', but it was to lay a marker down, like 'I am a proper man' and I can back it up, I can provide and bring home the bacon.

Forms of hegemonic masculinity and the 'gender order' feature also in Ben's account of the auction bids ('proper man', 'bring home the bacon'[13]) when he describes his actions in terms of the masculine competitiveness and 'breadwinner' role, both of which are rooted in patriarchal forms of masculinity (see also Giazitzoglu and Down 2017). I also wondered whether the earlier teasing and ridicule (e.g. sniggering, elbowing and whispering) triggered him to try to restore his 'face'.[14] I never probed Ben about the teasing in the interview, in my own attempt to exercise 'tact' (Goffman 1959, 24), but I was left with the impression that it was a key part of the trigger for his (albeit seemingly failed) attempt at a cunning misrepresentation.

Vignette 3: The dinner ('embellishing')

Part 1: Before starting this study, I already knew Phil because my wife Emily is friends with Phil's wife, Martha. Phil had moved to Mayfield with his family about ten years ago. Phil owned a small business in the business services sector, but he asked for the exact nature of his business to remain anonymous in this study. Emily and I had received an invitation to a meal at a local restaurant to celebrate Phil's birthday. Phil had invited all his staff and their partners to the meal, about 15 people in total. Birthday balloons filled with helium were on the table and everyone sang happy birthday to Phil as he was presented with his birthday cake, who for some reason was wearing a Mexican sombrero hat despite not being at a Mexican restaurant.

During the meal, Emily and I sat opposite Martha and one of Phil's employees, Heather, who had brought along her boyfriend Zac. Phil was sat at the other end of the table. Heather managed the social media presence for Phil's company. Throughout the meal, I noticed how friendly and charming Martha was being towards Heather and noted it later in my fieldnote diary. Martha bought Heather (but nobody else) several expensive cocktails and the pair laughed and joked a lot. At the time, I was puzzled about their apparent closeness and rapport. It was hard to tell if Martha and Heather were very good friends, if Martha was just being extremely nice for some reason, or if Martha's behaviour had another – what later transpired to be a more 'cunning' – agenda.

Before the dinner, I had already heard about Phil losing one of his members of staff, Chloe, to a rival company owned by Tom. Tom's company was a fierce rival to Phil's firm, known for poaching both staff and clients. Not long after we sang happy birthday to Phil, I overheard Martha tell Heather stories about what Chloe had said about her new job. She explained that Chloe found the new work environment stressful and added that the stress had affected Chloe's marriage and her relationship with her children.

She explained that Chloe had been begging Phil for her old job back, claiming that 'she calls [Phil] really late at night saying "I can't cope with this"'. At various points in the evening, I observed Phil sitting at the head of the table with a huge smile on his face winking at Martha. In return, Martha would stick her thumb up. I wasn't sure what the winks and thumbs up referred to at the time, but afterwards I wondered whether I was witnessing some kind of 'secret signals' being used. In dramaturgical terms, looking back at this event, I think I sensed this was some kind of 'performance' by Martha (actor) to Heather (audience), but I could not rule out that this was just a bit of helpful information or caring advice being shared between close friends.

Part 2: Later that same week, I arranged to play a round of golf with Phil. During golf, I asked Phil whether he enjoyed his birthday meal. He told me that Martha had ordered an expensive bouquet of flowers to be delivered to Heather's house the next day. Phil told me that Martha had pulled off a 'charm offensive' on Heather, designed to persuade her to turn down a job offer at Tom's firm – the same company that Chloe had recently moved to. The offer involved a pay rise for Heather and the opportunity for her to become a partner in Tom's business.

Phil went on to explain that he was desperate not to lose Heather because her social media expertise was invaluable to his business. I sensed some kind of deep rivalry between Phil and Tom in the way that Phil talked, for example when he said that Tom trying to poach his staff was designed to 'insult him' – in dramaturgical terms a face-threatening (Goffman 1967) incident – and 'finish me off' (i.e. bankrupt his business). He explained that before his birthday meal someone had told him about Heather's job offer. He had told his wife Martha but had decided not to let Heather know that he knew.

As we played golf, Phil went on to explain that the whole birthday meal was actually Martha's idea, and that Martha was keen to help him by persuading Heather not to leave. As I noted later in my fieldnote diary, Phil said:

> [Martha] knew how much I needed to keep Heather so she pulled out a few classics . . . I knew that I could leave her (Martha) with Heather for a couple of hours and by the end of the night Heather would never leave us (fieldnote extract)

When I asked Phil if he had planned the 'charm offensive' with Martha, he insisted he had not, adding that: 'Martha is always two steps ahead of me'. He was taking no credit for the 'cunning' plans for a 'charm offensive' laid on by Martha. Phil also told me that Martha sent Heather an expensive bouquet of flowers the next day, calling it 'a classic trick' and describing it as 'the old kill with kindness' method, as he explained:

> Imagine you might leave your job but you go out and they buy you a meal with cocktails then send flowers, it puts you in a position where you can't leave if you're a decent person. (fieldnote extract)

While still playing golf, I told Phil that I had overheard Martha tell Heather that Chloe was so unhappy in her new job at Tom's company that she wanted her old job back. Phil seemed surprised and told me he didn't know anything about this. He said he had not seen or heard from Chloe since she left and claimed that she had never phoned late at night begging for her job back. It was only at this point in the conversation that I started to wonder whether Martha's story about Chloe could have been exaggerated or even been made up entirely. I could not be sure, though, because I had not had in-depth conversations with Martha herself.[15]

Discussing this episode with the author team afterwards, we decided to categorize this as a type of cunning misrepresentation called 'embellishing'. Martha appeared to have taken the initiative to help her husband's business by embellishing one part of her story about Chloe as part of a wider 'charm offensive' to address the imminent threat of losing a key employee.[16] Martha did not seem to have a 'performance team' to assist her performance, if we believe what Phil said that is. However, the team-like relationship between Phil and the researcher can still be noted in the way Phil 'entrusted' (Goffman 1959, 143) to him the secret 'tricks' and covert 'agenda' behind the performance.

Phil and I remained regular 'golf buddies'. A couple of days later, we were playing golf again and Phil told me that Heather had made up her mind: she was turning down the job offer and didn't even want a pay rise to stay. Phil attributed this outcome to Martha's 'charm offensive'. This episode therefore appeared to have both 'bottom line' implications for Phil's business (i.e. not losing a valued employee) as well as face-related implications (i.e. not 'losing' this symbolic battle with a bitter local rival). However, following Johannisson (2011, 140), we reiterate the inherent ambiguity and equivocality of these interactions. Neither Phil, nor Martha, nor the researcher could be *certain* that Heather's decision was down to Martha's 'tall story', or the broader 'charm offensive' it was part of. Like all real-life interactions, actors sometimes never know for sure what impression the audience *formed* or what that impression led the audience to *do* as a result.

Finally, it is worth noting that this vignette differs from the previous two in some significant ways. Here, it is the family member (Martha), not the entrepreneur (Phil), who constructs the cunning misrepresentation. It is also distinct in the meticulous planning, fore-thought and design (Goffman 1959, 212) that Martha seemed to have undertaken. What all three vignettes share in common, though, is the way that the actors used cunning misrepresentations to create entrepreneurial opportunities or mitigate threats in apparently mundane encounters.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the contribution of our findings to the theory of EIM. By taking the mundane seriously (Welter et al., 2017), by studying interactions as they happen in real-time (J. Clarke 2011, J. S. Clarke, Cornelissen, and Healey 2019) and by going backstage – which existing entrepreneurship research has not previously done – we were able to reveal a series of insights into the interactional dynamics that take place when entrepreneurs craft cunning misrepresentations. Specifically, it enables us to develop new insights the type of cunning misrepresentation that was created, who created them, where, when, how and why they were created, and what interactional outcomes they generated. These insights are summarized in Table 3.

Starting with the *who* question, the dramaturgical perspective we develop draws our attention to who is involved in *preparing, assisting or 'acting out'* cunning misrepresentations. They can be performed by the lone entrepreneur or performed by a 'performance team' (Goffman 1959, 85). The performance team can comprise people the entrepreneur formally employs but they can also involve their friends or family members, which this study observed in Vignette 1 and Vignette 3. In Vignette 3, the entrepreneur's wife was the actor who staged the performance, with the entrepreneur himself merely watching the 'charm offensive' unfold. Conceptually, performance teams are important because this group is the one which knows the 'secrets' (Goffman 1959, 141–4) and 'destructive information' (Goffman 1959, 162) that lie behind the performance. Unless the actor(s) 'slip up' and these secrets become known to the audience, only the performance team knows that a misrepresentation has taken place. In this study, the researcher was allowed to learn the secrets of the entrepreneur's performance when Mike told the researcher he did not own a cravat (Vignette 1), when Ben told the researcher that he bid more than he could afford on the golf flag (Vignette 2), and when Phil told the researcher that he had never received the late-night phone call from an ex-employee begging for her job back (Vignette 3). This finding therefore also has *methodological* significance because researchers can only know a cunning misrepresentation has taken place if they catch a glimpse of the backstage or if the actor(s) invite them backstage and share their performance secrets.

In relation to the *where* and *when* questions, this study has moved the attention of the analyst beyond the more obvious 'high-stakes' performances that entrepreneurs create to reveal the impression management that takes place in the 'everyday life' (Welter, 2011) of the entrepreneur. This study has shown that entrepreneurial performances can also take place outside the workplace and the 9-to-5 working day. All three vignettes took place in non-work social and leisure settings: a coffee shop and shopping centre (Vignette 1), a charity fundraising event at a hotel (Vignette 2) and a meal at a restaurant (Vignette 3). This insight relies on ethnographic methods which 'follow the action as it unfolds over time' (Johnstone 2007, 101) rather than focusing on a single event.

Table 3. Overview of selected interactional dimensions of the everyday misrepresentations in the three vignettes.

	What type?	Who?	When and where?	How?	To whom?	For what purpose?*	What interactional outcomes?*
Vignette 1: The cravat	Pretending	Actor: Mike (entrepreneur) Performance team: The researcher + Charlotte (Mike's wife)	A phone call received during a Sunday morning visit to a coffee shop, then two shopping trips	Pretending he already owned a cravat he could lend (which he did not) and then going out to buy one	Audience: Doug (a local businessman)	Trying to do a favour for someone with extensive business networks, who might later return the favour and refer clients	Doug appeared to be grateful for the favour and expressed appreciation at the time and during a later encounter
Vignette 2: The flag	Exaggerating (and pretending)	Actor: Ben (entrepreneur) Performance team: The researcher	A black tie charity auction evening during a charity fundraiser at a local 5-star hotel and golf course	Exaggerating what he could afford to bid (and pretending to be a golf enthusiast) when making large auction bids on a golf flag	Audience: Local business community	Trying to impress the local business community by presenting himself as a wealthy and successful business owner	Some people teased and laughed at Ben, suggesting he had *not* succeeded in 'pulling off' being viewed as a wealthy and successful business owner (or as a golf enthusiast)
Vignette 3: The dinner	Embellishing	Actor: Martha (wife of entrepreneur Phil) Performance team: Phil and the researcher	A Friday evening birthday dinner for the business owner with employees at a local restaurant	Making up one part of a 'horror story' about the work environment at another company	Audience: Heather (current employee of Phil)	Trying to dissuade an employee from accepting a job offer at a rival local firm	Heather turned down the job offer and stayed working for Phil (for exact reasons not known)

In the eyes of the researcher, based on observations during the event and interviews after the event.

This study has also enabled EIM research to broaden the understanding of *who* entrepreneurs create impressions for in their everyday lives. In existing EIM literature, the focus has tended to be on audiences in high-stakes formal business contexts, such as pitches for investment (e.g. Parhankangas and Ehrlich 2014). Our study has shown that a wider range of audiences can also be targeted for the creation of desired impressions. In our study, the audiences were not formally invited to choreographed events such as pitches. They were audiences during events which just happened during everyday interactions, such as a prominent local businessman who made a phone call (Vignette 1), the local business community which happened to be at a charity auction (Vignette 2) or a current employee who happened to be considering changing jobs (Vignette 3). In so doing, this study identifies the 'interface between the private and public' (Welter, 2011, 173) and reveals the interconnections between the entrepreneurs' private lives, family lives and communities (Welter et al., 2017, 317). For entrepreneurship research, this means future research should expand the range of times, places and audiences which are considered relevant for the study of impression management.

In relation to the *how* question, this study adds to existing understandings of the 'cunning' of entrepreneurs (e.g. Johannisson 2014) by revealing the less well understood 'behind the scenes' which involves misrepresentations which, we propose, are also an important part of the imaginative and creative ways that entrepreneurs *do* things, such as creating opportunities from coincidences (Johannisson 2011, 142). Moreover, we have revealed that cunning misrepresentations can be created in planned and rehearsed ways as part of a staged 'charm offensive' (Vignette 3), but that they can also be created in spontaneous and improvisational ways during an unexpected phone call (Vignette 1) or in ways that are reactive to perceived threats to the entrepreneur's face in the face of ridicule and teasing (Vignette 2).

This study has also explored the range of *purposes* that entrepreneurs seek to achieve when they create cunning misrepresentations. Existing literature on EIM has understandably focused on high-stakes performances and therefore focused primarily on purposes such as securing investment (e.g. Parhankangas and Ehrlich 2014) or repairing reputation after business failure (e.g. Shepherd and Haynie, 2011). Our study has identified a broader range of purposes which also need to be considered. For instance, this study has shown that cunning misrepresentations were created by (or for) an entrepreneur for the purposes of creating a 'quid pro quo' relationship with a well-connected businessman who could refer clients (Vignette 1), for the purposes of trying to repair his social status as a wealthy businessman after being subjected to teasing and ridicule (Vignette 2), and for the purposes of trying to retain a valuable employee (Vignette 3).

Finally, we can consider the question of *what interactional outcomes* arose from these acts of 'cunning'. As discussed earlier, the dramaturgical approach to the study of social interaction does not seek to identify cause-and-effect relationships between variables, as variance-based positivistic studies seek to do. Thus, we have not sought to identify outcome variables in this study. We have, though, shown that cunning misrepresentations can lead to a variety of intended or unintended outcomes for the entrepreneur. Importantly, a cunning misrepresentation might not always create the desired impression and they also come with the risks. The risks are three-fold: the misrepresentation could simply fail to generate the desired impression; it could fail because the actor 'slips up' at some point and the discrediting information is revealed to the audience; or it could fail because the audience finds out that the performance is false or misleading.[17]

We have also shown that interactions with audiences are hard to predict and equally hard to control, as the questions about the price tags on the cravats (Vignette 1) and the intensified ridicule in the auction bids (Vignette 2) revealed. In addition, we have shown that entrepreneurs might never really know what impression the audience actually formed. Here, we are mindful of arguments put forward by Johannisson (2011, 140) about the ambiguity and equivocality of the entrepreneurial environment, for instance when there is ambiguity about whether the desired impression was created and uncertainty about whether the cunning misrepresentation 'worked'.

A summary overview of the new insights into EIM provided by this study of misrepresentations is provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Theoretical insights and future research questions about cunning misrepresentations in entrepreneurial impression management.

Dramaturgical dimension	Theoretical insights from this study	Future research questions
Who creates cunning misrepresentations?	• This study has shown that cunning misrepresentations are created by one or more people ('actors') during performances designed to construct a desired impression for a particular audience. • We have shown that an 'actor' can perform alone, or they could be helped by members of their 'performance team' • We have shown that the performance team are those who share the 'secrets' of the performance and assist the actor(s) 'backstage' (e.g. preparing costumes or props, writing scripts, rehearsing lines) and might also co-deliver the performance 'frontstage'. • We have shown that the 'actor' could be the entrepreneur, or any other individual or group acting on behalf or (or in service of) their entrepreneurial venture (e.g. employee, friend, family member).	• Who is enlisted into the entrepreneurs' performance team (e.g. employees, friends, family members etc.) when cunning misrepresentations are crafted? • What roles do each of the team members perform before, during and after the performance (e.g. preparing props, writing scripts, directing the performance)? • How are team members selected, trained and disciplined these roles?
Where and when are they created?	• This study has shown that cunning misrepresentations can be created in more mundane and less high-stakes settings • We have shown that they are created in informal non-business contexts (e.g. family home, leisure time, sporting activities, etc.) outside of the workplace.	• What research methods (e.g. ethnographic observations, shadowing, diary studies, in-depth repeated interviewing) should be used to identify the cunning misrepresentations used in high-stakes formal workplace contexts (e.g. investment pitches, product launches, entrepreneurial speeches)? • What research methods should be used to identify other cunning misrepresentations in informal non-business contexts (e.g. ordinary interactions at home, in the workplace or in the community)? • What kinds of research access negotiations and research ethics agreements would be needed to enter non-work times and places?
For *whom* are they created?	• This study has shown that cunning misrepresentations can be created for any audience to whom the entrepreneur wishes to create a particular desired impression (e.g. as competent, trustworthy, successful, etc.). • We have shown that these audiences can be members of the business community and employees.	• Which audiences do entrepreneurs seek to impress or influence with cunning misrepresentations during high-stakes interactions (e.g. investors, customers, prospective employees)? • Which other audiences do entrepreneurs seek to impress or influence with cunning misrepresentations in more mundane everyday interactions (e.g. friends, family members, neighbours)?
How are they created?	• This study has shown that cunning misrepresentations involve forms of creativity used to make a claim to an audience that the actor (and their 'performance team') knows not to be true (but do not break the law or breach other more-or-less accepted rules or standards), to facilitate the construction of a desired impression. • We have identified three creative practices, which we have categorized as pretending, exaggerating and embellishing. • We have shown that they can be planned, scripted and rehearsed in advance of the performance or they can be created during the performance in spontaneous, improvisational or reactive ways.	• How do societal members, resource providers or institutions distinguish between misrepresentations which are acceptable and those which are unacceptable (e.g. based on existing laws or accepted moral standards)? • What other creative practices are used in the crafting of cunning misrepresentations? • Why do entrepreneurs plan and rehearse some cunning misrepresentations (and what do these rehearsals involve)? • Why do entrepreneurs choose to cunningly misrepresent something during an unplanned interaction (as opposed to simply 'telling the truth')?

(*Continued*)

Table 4. (Continued).

Dramaturgical dimension	Theoretical insights from this study	Future research questions
For what *purposes* are they created?	• This study has shown that cunning misrepresentations can be created for different purposes the entrepreneur attends to at different points in their entrepreneurial journey, including building relationships of reciprocity with prominent and well-networked individuals, impressing the wider business community, and impressing and retaining valued employees. • We have shown that they can be designed for purposes that are more obviously related to business-related goals or objectives, which have clear 'bottom line' outcomes. • We have also shown that they can also be designed for purposes that are more linked to interpersonal, status-based or identity-related concerns, such as gaining social acceptance, managing social stigma or presenting a high-status version of oneself.	• What business-related purposes are cunning misrepresentations crafted to achieve (e.g. securing investment, winning contracts, attracting new clients, hiring talented employees, launching new products)? • What other social purposes or concerns are cunning misrepresentations crafted to achieve (e.g. managing stigma, fitting in, avoiding embarrassment)?
What *interactional outcomes* do they have?	• This study has shown that cunning misrepresentations can lead to a variety of intended or unintended outcomes for the actor as the interaction unfolds and the audience reacts. • We have shown that they do not always 'work' (i.e. create the intended impression) and they come with risks (e.g. the risk of being 'found out'). • We have argued that these interactional outcomes are difficult for entrepreneurs to predict in advance and hard for them to control fully, because they cannot dictate the impression that the audience actually forms. • We have also argued that cause-and-effect links to dependent variables (e.g. securing investment, winning contracts, etc.) are difficult to pin-point and measure when using real-time observational data because these interactions involve ambiguity and equivocality (e.g. where it is difficult to say for certain whether the desired impression was created).	• How do audiences assess performances in which a cunning misrepresentation was involved but is not known to them? • How do audiences respond when they discover that a cunning misrepresentation has been used during a performance? • How can the 'impression' formed by the audience be identified and measured in a meaningful way when visible measures (e.g. securing investment, winning contracts) are not available?

Conclusion

This paper has provided two main contributions to the literature on EIM. First, the study has identified misrepresentations as an important but previous overlooked aspect of impression management. Misrepresentations are performances where the 'front' viewed by the audience is contradicted in the 'back' regions known to the actor and their performance team. To be clear, our argument is not that the various types of performances that entrepreneurs undertake in their everyday work to 'impress' important stakeholders, such as investors, clients or members of business networks, *always* involve cunning misrepresentations. Entrepreneurs can choose to put on their 'best' front rather than a 'false' front (Whittle, et al., 2021). We also recognize that there is more to being 'cunning' than misrepresentations, such as the skill of seeing an opportunity in a coincidence for instance (Johannisson 2014). Thus, our argument is that misrepresentations are one form of 'cunning' practice used by entrepreneurs for managing the challenges and opportunities they face during their entrepreneurial journey.

This study has identified three types of cunning misrepresentation – which we call pretending, exaggerating and embellishing. This list is not exhaustive and we invite future research to identify other types that entrepreneurs might create in other contexts, such as the practice of 'concealment' identified by Clarke (2011, 1378). Importantly, the ability to learn about misrepresentations relies on access to the backstage. Hence, a key methodological implication arising from our study is that researchers need to go beyond the frontstage performance seen by the audience and get 'behind the scenes' to see how performances are crafted by actors and their performance team. The ethnographic method involving participant observation is arguably the best-placed research method for doing this, in our view.

The second contribution of this study is to propose a broader understanding of the times, places, people, audiences and purposes that impression management involves. In this study, we have shown that EIM can take place in more 'mundane' leisure and social settings outside of the working day and can involve people like friends, family members and the wider business community. We have shown that cunning misrepresentations can be created in ways that are spontaneous, reactive or planned. We have also shown that the purposes can be related to aspects of 'doing business' and can also be related to concerns about 'face'. We have also highlighted the ambiguous, risky and hard to control nature of the interactional outcomes that follow. The implications of this study are that future research needs to expand its sights beyond the more obvious high-stakes performances that entrepreneurs engage in to explore the impression management that entrepreneurs engage in during their everyday encounters. We therefore join Welter et al. (2017) in their call for a revitalized programme of research into 'everyday entrepreneurship'.

Notes

1. In his later work on frame analysis, Goffman (1974: Ch 4) usefully distinguishes between different types of misrepresentation (this time using the term 'fabrication'), for example those which are 'benign' insofar as they harm nobody, those which are 'playful' because they seek to entertain or amuse, and those which are 'paternal' and are designed to further the interests of the person being duped.
2. We recognize that readers may well differ in the degree to which they view the practices in our three vignettes as morally acceptable. Scott (2023, 31) observes that Goffman 'bracketed out' moral questions concerning impression management. Goffman (1959), did however discuss briefly the distinct moral judgements that societal members might make towards those presenting 'false fronts' (p. 66). One such distinction is between those condemned for wholly misrepresenting who they are and those who are given sympathy for concealing a single flaw or imperfection (p. 67). Another distinction is between those who misrepresent themselves for collective purposes and those who do so for personal material gain (p. 67). Goffman (1967, 68) also notes that these moral judgements can differ between sub-groups in a society and can change over time. To be clear, our purpose in this paper is not to develop a moral theory of misrepresentation but rather to focus the 'sociological eye' on exploring them as an important but previously overlooked aspect of the everyday social interactions of entrepreneurs.
3. An interesting parallel is found in Goffman's (1959, 68) discussion of the acceptability (or otherwise) of immigrants in America seeking to 'Americanize' their names.

4. It is important to note that a cravat is different from a tie and a silk scarf. A cravat is associated with men's formal wear for special events such as weddings. While many European languages still use words similar to cravat to refer to a tie, in English these are distinct terms, the latter being common but the former relatively rare.
5. Another option available to Mike could have been to offer to *purchase* a cravat for Doug. This option might have also created a relationship of future reciprocity (i.e. a 'quid pro quo' obligation). However, two potential downsides of this option are noteworthy here: (a) it would not have enabled Mike to present himself as a 'man with class' who already owned one (something that appeared to be important to Mike's 'presentation of self'), and (b) it might have come across as overly 'keen' or perhaps even 'desperate' to Doug.
6. I remember thinking at the time 'why did Mike not drive to the shopping centre himself?' I was not sure whether it reflected their typical gendered division of labour in their relationship or something else, such as the practicalities of owning one car.
7. Equivocality here refers to something being open to multiple potentially plausible interpretations.
8. 'Save my bacon' means helping someone get out of a dangerous or difficult situation.
9. In this extract, as with many others, issues of gender and class are at the forefront (e.g. 'alpha male', 'the man', 'man with class', 'posh University boys', etc.). While our focus in this paper is on the role of everyday misrepresentations in entrepreneurial cunning, we recognize the importance of gender and class in the self-presentations we observed. Although we have not analytically foregrounded these issues in this paper, we invite future scholars to explore them further.
10. This kind of public teasing and ridicule is also ambiguous and equivocal. In some cultures, it signals scepticism or exclusion. In other cultures, however, it can signal acceptance, for instance where 'ribbing' reflects an affirmation of friendship amongst men.
11. For space reasons, we have not included details from the follow-up interview about what happened next. In summary, Ben hid the flag from his wife at the back of the garage because he feared 'a row' (i.e. an argument) if she discovered how much he had spent on it. Ben explained he was subsequently 'rumbled' when his wife noticed the transaction on his bank statement and, in his words, 'gave him hell' (i.e. criticized angrily). As such, this vignette shows how a 'face' presented to one audience (i.e. the 'wealthy' business owner presented to other businessmen) can create problems for the 'face' being maintained in another context (i.e. the 'fiscally responsible family man' at home).
12. Research interviews should also be viewed as a site for 'frontstage' behaviour and impression management activities, where the researcher is the 'audience' (Alvesson 2003). In this study, interviews also played a different role, namely as the place where one aspect of the 'front' was relaxed and a 'secret' behind the performance for another audience was revealed.
13. 'Bring home the bacon' is a colloquial reference to the traditional male breadwinner role.
14. The term 'face' refers to the 'image of self' with 'positive social value' the person seeks to claim for themselves (Goffman 1967, 5).
15. There were several reasons I didn't want to directly ask Martha, including fear it might affect my research relationship with Phil and fear of creating a face-threatening event (Goffman 1967, 12) for Martha (e.g. being effectively accused of lying).
16. Goffman (1974, 107) also discusses this scenario: 'A fabricator can engineer a definition of a second party in order to be in a position to dupe a third party into certain false beliefs concerning the second'.
17. Another potential outcome is that the misrepresentation achieves the desired impression *despite* being exposed as false, as we suspected had happened in Vignette 1 when Doug commented on the price tags still left on the cravats.

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