

**Executive compensation in charitable organizations:
A comparison of media coverage
and actual practice in Canada**

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Abstract

According to the Canada Revenue Agency, there are over 80,000 registered charities competing for donations from organizations and private citizens to raise funds for their charitable mandate and to cover their operating expenses. A threat in the form of negative perceptions noted by the media poses a risk to these charitable operations as one media perception highlights issues with exorbitant executive compensation in the charitable sector (Blumberg, 2018). Given charitable organizations are dependent on organizations and citizens for donations, media attention related to high compensation levels within a charitable organization, may threaten their ability to raise funds needed to achieve their mandate.

My thesis consisted of three distinct phases. In Phase 1, publicly available media articles were thematically analyzed to determine the core concepts that are discussed by the media that have the potential to shape public perception to compensation within charitable organizations. Phase 2 consisted of analyzing the compensation data of nearly 20,000 Canadian charities to determine the actual practices of executive compensation in Canadian charitable organizations. Finally, Phase 3 quantitatively analyzed the compensation data of the organizations discussed in the media articles of Phase 1, to identify if the media is accurately representing the Canadian averages. The findings of these three phases revealed that the media is not accurately portraying the executive compensation practices of many of the not-for-profits organizations in Canada.

My thesis significantly adds to the areas of research surrounding executive compensation within the charitable sector, as it is one of the first studies to assess the accuracy of the media coverage on executive compensation within the charitable sector and how this may shape the public's perception on executive compensation. My thesis also provides a novel framework for

charitable organizations to better benchmark their executive compensation levels to organizations of similar size based on Canadian averages.

Key words: Executive compensation, compensation, charity, public perception, and media.

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Introduction

When you consider headlines in the media surrounding executive compensation, some coverage is undoubtedly critical toward the compensation levels of executives who lead charitable organizations. For example, these headlines are available online “Six figure salaries, the norm at top charities” (Waldie, 2010), “Be wary of charities that pay their staff too much” (Bronwell, 2019), and “As more migrant children get detained, he gets richer” (Baker, 2018).

Despite many of these critical media headlines focusing on just a handful of charitable organizations, their potential impact cannot be underestimated given 75% of Canadians get their news through online mediums (Watson, 2019). In addition, people reading these headlines may fail to further explore the topic and instead apply these negative media headlines to all charitable organizations (Watson, 2019). With the presence of social media, and the emergence of terms such as ‘clickbait’ and ‘click targets’, journalists now must work to ensure their articles get recognized in the mass media. This, however, can come with the risk of creating perceptions towards a topic that present generalizations based on outliers rather than the norm (Gee, 2018). Further, when over 70% of readers are sharing posts without ever actually clicking a headline, it can be hard to uncover the facts within an article, and let harsh headlines pave perceptions (Gee, 2018).

To consider the issue of perception versus reality on a topic, in terms of how people decipher and form perceptions covered by the media, there are several examples to consider. In the case of immigration rates, across 14 countries studied by Ipsos MORI (2014), a leading market and opinion research specialist firm, the average estimate of the percentage of immigrants in their country was more than double reality. This demonstrates a perception shift caused by the media, where the public deems a topic to be more prevalent than reality (Blidook, 2008).

Another example of media creating false perceptions is teen pregnancy rates. Teen pregnancy rates have been vastly overestimated by the public due to television shows such as ‘Teen Mom’, discussions by politicians, and articles getting shared on social media. Ipsos MORI (2014) found the public in the United States believed approximately 24% of girls aged 15-19 give birth each year, when in reality it is actually closer to just 3%.

While the impact of the media on shaping public perception has been studied in various contexts including those noted above, little analysis has been done in the area of compensation rates of executives in the charitable sector. Discussions of executive compensation practices in any industry often gain interest by the public, however in the charitable sector public concern over matters related to compensation is much more salient (Akingbola, 2012). Charities often serve the most vulnerable populations, but do so typically by using government funding and public donations, leading to a higher level of emotional attachment to the organization both due to the monetary involvement as well as overall care for the mission (Akingbola, 2012).

Charitable organizations need to take note of this increased concern by the public in relation to compensation given there is limited funding available and negative public perception can be detrimental to these organizations already limited funding potential. The importance then of assessing media coverage and the resulting public perception in relation to compensation then, is crucial to both the charitable organization, and the individuals they serve.

Given the potential of detrimental impacts to charitable organizations if executive compensation is presented by media and in turn is perceived by members of the public as too high, it is important to better understand how compensation levels within charitable organizations are presented by the media in relation to actual compensation levels. The purpose of this thesis is to gain a stronger understanding of the actual compensation levels for executives

in the charitable sector, as well as examine the accuracy of the information presented in the media surrounding executive compensation in these types of organizations. Three separate analyses were completed to identify the accuracy of the information the public has access to, and what the actual practices are in terms of executive compensation in charitable organizations. First, an analysis of media articles that discuss executive compensation was conducted and then coded to identify core themes, topics, and net positivity or negativity towards the topic. Second, the actual levels of executive compensation in the charitable sector were analyzed using the top compensation brackets at every charity in Canada as identified through Statistics Canada. This was then compared with core organizational factors also provided through Statistics Canada, such as organizational revenue, compensation levels, and number of employees. Finally, an analysis was conducted on compensation information presented in the media articles to see how they compare to the actual average compensation rates for non-profit organizations in Canada.

Literature Review

The following literature review examines the research surrounding shaping public perception, idea shaping, overall executive compensation practices, charity compensation research, and discusses the theories to help better understand perceptions of compensation levels.

Shaping Public Perception

Shaping public opinion may seem like a daunting task given the diverse nature of media outlets as well as the sheer size of audiences around the world, however Blidook (2008) identified that shaping the initial opinion of the general public is fairly easy. Blidook found that the media is a core player in the development and solidification of public perception, as typically the first or most prominent information the public receives forms their overall opinion towards a topic. Blidook (2008) also noted that “in order for the public’s perception of an issue to change, there should be some variance bearing on the nature of the issue itself” (p.356). This shows that while media is highly impactful in developing, shaping and solidifying public perception, the solidified opinions are far more difficult to change, meaning that if a perception has been created inaccurately, it is nearly impossible for the media to correct the opinion afterwards (Blidook, 2008).

McCombs (2011) discusses that while the surface purpose of the media is to signal the existence of major events and issues, the media today does considerably more. As stated by McCoombs (2011), “through their day-to-day selection and display of the news, journalists focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day” (p.1). The prevalence, coverage, length, headline, and location of a story all significantly impact the public's opinion of the importance of a topic, and the perceived accuracy of the story (Shim

& Oh, 2018). The lead story on the front page of every paper, versus a small inside page piece all “communicate the salience of topics on the news agenda” (McCombs, 2011, p.2). Once an opinion has been formed, there would need to be a high prevalence of discussion in key areas of media countering this opinion for the media to even consider changing their views (Blidook, 2008).

The concepts of groupthink and the bandwagon effect are also highly impactful when shaping, setting and solidifying public opinion (Shim & Oh, 2018). In addition, Shim and Oh (2018) also identify the concept of “Fear of Isolation” (FOI) as a key driver of shaping public opinion and difficulty to change it, as once a generally accepted belief has formed, the vast majority of those who do not adhere to the belief will not vocalize their difference in opinion out of fear of being different, isolated or being deemed an outcast.

Public Perception of Compensation

There seems to be little extant literature pertaining to subjective views of executive compensation in any industry. Kuhn (2010) conducted a study of the public perception of executives in standard industries, and found that there was only one research study pertaining to the perception of executive pay from individuals with a subjective point of view. All other discussions of perception of executive compensation found by Kuhn (2010) were of the perceptions of employees within an organization and their relative perception of the executive’s compensation. More recently however, Kuhnen and Niessen (2012) set out to identify the impact of public opinion on CEO pay, and identified that during times of negative press coverage, CEO pay varied significantly, and that negative perception of CEO pay led to limited option grants or

stock options. This finding seems particularly relevant to non-profit organizations given they rely on monies donated by individuals or other organizations.

Compensation in Traditional Industries

Compensation in traditional industries is often geared towards ensuring both internal and external equity. Internal equity refers to the relative levels of compensation between employees within an organization and acts to ensure employees are paid ‘fairly’ in relation to one another. External equity refers to an individual's pay relative to the market averages of similar positions (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019).

There are various ways to determine appropriate compensation levels in traditional industries, however a typical framework includes four major phases of compensation management (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019). In the first phase of determining compensation, an organization must determine their overall compensation philosophy, meaning, do they wish to lead, match or lag the average compensation (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019). Phase 2 involves conducting an in-depth job analysis to ensure they fully understand the skills, performance standards and specifications the job requires (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019). In phase 3, the organization must determine the relative worth or value of the jobs within their organization. In this phase, organizations often use a blend of three major approaches:

1. Job evaluation, where internal equity is most highly valued and an individual is paid primarily based on the relative worth of a position compared to others within the organization (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019);

2. Market-pricing, where external equity is assessed by focusing on determining appropriate compensation based on what their competitors are paying for similar positions by using wage and salary surveys or frameworks within the same labour market (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019); and,
3. Skill-based pay, where pay is based on the range of expertise an employee has, the diversity of skills an employee brings to the organizations, and the level of self-management the employee has (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019).

Finally, in phase 4, an organization combines the job evaluation rankings and the external compensation data to create their internal compensation structures made up of job classes and salary ranges (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019). To do this, organizations typically use a point structure in order to follow specific steps to determine appropriate salary levels for an employee or group of employees doing the same job. The standard point system contains 5 steps (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019).

1. The organization must use the job evaluation to determine what factors are deemed to be compensable or most valuable to the organization, and their stakeholders.
2. The organization needs to examine the level relative of responsibility a position holds within their organization based on the factors determined in step 1.
3. The organization must assign levels of importance for each factor determined.
4. Points are then assigned to each of these levels, and a manual is developed to explain how the points are allocated.

5. Finally the organization puts the point system into effect, allowing them to develop their own internal compensation system (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019).

Overall an organization's compensation system within traditional industries is often highly correlated to organizational performance (Gomez-Mejia, Berrone, Franco-Santos, 2010). Within traditional organizations, organizational performance metrics tend to be very similar across organizations, as things such as overall organizational revenue and number of employees tend to correlate directly with compensation at all levels (Gomez-Mejia, Berrone, Franco-Santos, 2010).

Charity Sector

While there is vast research pertaining to non-profit sectors, and other humanitarian industries and the social impact of their work, groups most in need, and effective practices when working with populations most in need, there remains little direct research pertaining to human resource activities within the charity sector specifically. Due to this, for the purpose of this literature review, the terms 'non-profit,' 'not-for-profit,' and 'volunteer' will be included with 'charity' research to ensure a complete understanding of similar constructs. The only major difference between these additional terms and the major focus of this study (the charity sector) is tax implications, which is not a variable studied in this paper (Akingbola, 2012).

Charity Sector Compensation

Compensation decisions may be complex in any industry, arguably within charitable organizations these complexities are even further exacerbated. Steinberg (1990) identified that within the non-profit sector the typical employee earns about 33% less than the standard for-

profit worker, even though they tend to be more highly educated and more likely to work in a professional occupation. Steinberg (1990) also noted that the solution to this wage gap is not as simple as increasing salaries, because while increasing pay may correspond to increased productivity, it may also “attract a less-caring and more mercenary worker” (Steinberg, 1990, p.161).

Conversely, some argue that tax exemptions associated with conducting work within the charity sector should allow these organizations to pay their employees far more than they currently do, which would allow for a decreased wage gap (Ito & Domain, 1987). Consequently, organizations within humanitarian sectors often pay their employees just above the ‘reservation wage,’ meaning just above the minimum necessary to attract workers of adequate level (Ito & Domain, 1987). Unfortunately, what charitable organizations may be overlooking is that some propose that a worker who is paid at or below the reservation wage will have “little incentive to work hard” and “can easily obtain a job at the same salary elsewhere” (Steinberg, 1990, p.161). In contrast, and as mentioned above, jobs paying substantially more than the reservation wage will attract employees motivated by monetary rewards, and not the organization’s work (Steinberg, 1990).

The difficulty surrounding compensation within charitable organizations is further exacerbated by the fact that many people believe the intrinsic benefits of working in a humanitarian industry should outweigh the need for monetary rewards (Lefkowitz, 2012). These intrinsic rewards include what Mueller (1975) termed ‘psychic income’ (the joy of altruism, and more prestige in their positions), as well as more standard intrinsic rewards such as autonomy over work, and diverse skill development. This is further complicated by the fact that organizations engaging volunteers often pay their employees lower wages due to the negative

perceptions by the volunteering workforce (Pennerstorfer & Weiss, 2012). In essence, when the vast majority of people working with a non-profit organization give of their time for no monetary reward, it is often perceived poorly when relatively high compensation levels for paid employees are released (Pennerstorfer & Weiss, 2012).

The reality for most non-profits is that the vast majority of positions are government or privately funded, meaning high salaries are rarely an option (Akingbola, 2012). However, not-for-profit organizations still attract individuals seeking a change in career, typically as they are nearing retirement. In these scenarios, individuals will often be looking for employment that satisfies their intrinsic needs to be of service as well as keep busy as they wind down their careers rather than a way to satisfy a need for pay (Schlosser, McPhee, & Forsyth, 2017). Thus, not-for-profit organizations are often able to provide lower salaries, while employing highly qualified candidates (Saksida, Alfes, & Shantz, 2017). However, in terms of remaining sustainable and attracting current members of the workforce this model may not always be effective (LeRoux & Feeney, 2013).

Research by Baber et al (2002) identified that within the American non-profit sector, organizations appear to compensate their executives more highly for actions that are directed toward a charitable objective. This finding adheres to ‘agency theory’, in that the agent (executive) and principal, are working together for mutual benefit. However, as Barragato (2002) notes, before agency theory can be applied in the non-profit sector, one must overcome the formidable task of identifying who the principal is. In the non-profit setting, the principals are generally the donors, board of directors, and other outside agencies (such as governmental agencies). However these principals are typically not the direct beneficiaries of the work being

conducted by the non-profit, so they have less incentive to monitor the performance and resource distribution of the non-profit than those investors of private for-profit firms (Baber et al, 2002).

Oster (1998) delved into investor influence on compensation levels within nonprofits, and found vast differences in executive compensation in charities due to the complexities of shareholder interactions, profit intentions, and organization sizes. Oster (1998) states that “trustees are nervous that raising salaries could tarnish a group’s public image but the counter argument is that we really need to get somebody in here who knows what they’re doing” (p. 219). In other industries, executive compensation is primarily determined by organizational performance (i.e. revenue or profit) or organizational size, however within humanitarian settings, these metrics may not be strong predictors of executive compensation levels (Oster, 1998).

While it is clear that the forces driving compensation in the charitable sector are different than those of standard industries, major driving forces of compensation are not found to be uniform across the diverse subsectors and organizational types within the charitable sector itself (Grasse, Davis & Ihrke, 2014). Organizational mandate, cause, size, frequency of work, and some factors that influence the effective compensation within the sector (Grasse, Davis & Ihrke, 2014). Finding the factors that influence compensation is extremely difficult to do at a scale that would allow for generalizable results, therefore a focus of research in this area is often more towards case studies aiming to analyze individual organizations (Callen, Klein & Tinkelman, 2003). This highlights the nuances of the sector, showing that one distinct compensation practice will not necessarily be effective across the sector (Grasse, Davis & Ihrke, 2014).

Theories of Public Perception

There are three primary elements that surround the creation of public perception caused by the media. These are: framing, agenda setting, and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Each of these elements plays a role in the research, as they fit within the context of analyzing the media available to the public regarding executive compensation in Canadian charities.

Framing is the concept that “essentially identical decision-making scenarios influence people’s choices and their evaluation of various topics” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Framing also refers to the fact that individuals often segment information into various schemas or beliefs in order to interpret or understand information more rapidly (Goffman, 1974). This means that framing is both a macro and micro level construct that discusses an individual's pre-determined framing schemas, as well as the modes of presentation of information by the media. This combination, along with the fact that the original schemas are heavily dependent on the mode of presentation, means that it is extremely difficult to change an individual's perception of a topic, without constant reframing to adjust their micro-level schemas (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Agenda setting refers to the prevalence of a topic within the media. As stated by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), “there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues... and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences” (p. 11). This means that the information with the highest rate of occurrence, and the highest prevalence in mass media, will have the highest likelihood of influencing a mass audience’s perception. In other words, if the information is highly prevalent and circulated frequently, it has a higher chance of solidifying an individual’s judgements or attitudes due to the “ease in which the instances could be brought to mind” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 208).

Priming refers to the ways in which the media suggests methods to benchmark performance or set standards. If a common theme has emerged through multiple sources of media, an audience could easily be primed into evaluating all future media against the benchmarked perception determined by said theme (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Theories of Compensation

The theoretical frameworks of compensation in standard industries are far more difficult to apply to the charitable sector due to the diversity of stakeholders, business activities, and organizational goals and missions. Grasse, Davis and Ihrke (2014) stated that while there are major theories that apply to executive compensation, in the charitable sector only agency theory and managerialist seem appropriate. Both of these theories apply to this sector due to the theories' acknowledgement and inclusion of stakeholder opinion.

Agency theory involves an agent serving a principal rather than their own interest, and therefore getting rewarded for doing so. In the case of charitable organizations, the executive would be the agent, while governing boards, the public, and recipients (i.e. whoever the organization is working to serve) would all be the principals. The theory would expect executive directors to be rewarded for their performance, "with those who lead more effective organizations being compensated for their efforts" (Grasse, Davis, & Ihrke, 2014, p. 380). With that said, however, ideal behaviors of humanitarian stakeholders may be different than those actually practiced (Guthrie, 1997; Heimovics & Herman, 1990; Herman & Heimovics, 1990). Therefore, while this may remain an applicable theory, the effects and input of principals towards the agents are far more difficult to understand compared to traditional industries due to the varying interests, perspectives, and the desired outcomes.

Managerialist theory may be applicable to the charitable sector though it is typically used in the private sector. In managerialist theory, executives act to maximize their own utility (Berle & Means, 1932; Marris, 1964). While this theory does allow managers to complete activities that may not benefit the organization in order to advance their personal gains, in charitable organizations it is often deemed that the executives will work to maximize organizational effectiveness and outcomes in order to obtain higher compensation (Grasse, Davis & Ihrke, 2014). This theory also fits within the discussion of intrinsic rewards associated with the charitable sector, as completing work and maximizing outcomes would inherently be associated with greater intrinsic and altruistic rewards, therefore potentially translating into a decreased need for monetary compensation (Lefkowitz, 2012).

Theory of Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice

Utilitarianism states that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good (Bentham and Mills, 2014), and the original notion of subsidies towards charitable organizations came about due to the burden they relieved on the government in other ways (Fleisher, 2014). This should therefore mean that organizations who are conducting the most good for those in need should be receiving the greatest ‘special treatment’, through funding, tax cuts, and any other privilege to assist their work in the greatest way possible (Fleisher, 2014). However, due to the unclear definitions by tax scholars on who the underprivileged really are, many organizations are receiving significant tax cuts by merely assisting anyone who is more in need than they are, even if they are in a significantly better social position than the majority of the public (Fleisher, 2014).

While utilitarianism is often used by tax scholars when discussing the tax implications towards charitable organizations, it could also be used to assess public perception towards

executive compensation. First, by definition, the theory of utilitarianism used in the charitable industry context would help establish that the executives who are completing the most good, should also be receiving the highest compensation (Sen & Williams, 1982). This shows that while some compensation levels may be higher than they should be, others may be very well justified due to the level of ‘good’ that their work is doing for the underprivileged. Second, it has already been noted that the impact of public perception can have devastating effects on organizations, and this could continue to be true when assessing public perception on compensation through a utilitarian lens. If the organizations who are achieving the most good for the greatest number of people are the organizations who receive the most benefit, it is important to understand who determines what ‘good’ is being completed. If the public perception is inaccurately one of unjust compensation, it may easily be perceived that the organization is not doing ‘good’ and therefore lose much of the benefits they have received, when in fact the compensation level was fully justified through the actual work completed.

This study focuses on identifying the emerging themes in the media available to the public surrounding executive compensation in charities and analyzing the executive compensation data of Canadian charities to develop a stronger understanding of the actual practice of executive compensation in relation to the media available to shape the public’s perception.

Methodology

This study is comprised of three distinct phases. Phase 1 included a thematic analysis of the available online media articles from North America outlets relating to executive compensation in charitable industries. Phase 2 consisted of an analysis of the executive compensation of Canadian charities. Phase 3 involved a comparison between the compensation information available to the public that may impact public perception and actual compensation levels of executives with charitable organizations. A detailed explanation of each phase follows.

Phase 1

Media can be pivotal in shaping and forming public opinion, therefore an analysis of the content of available online media articles was necessary to better understand if the information the public has access to is telling an accurate story when compared to actual practice. The goal then of Phase 1 of this research was to provide a detailed understanding of the information presented in the media surrounding executive compensation in charitable organizations and determine the relative valance of the media articles. This phase forms Research Question 1:

RQ1: What are the common themes within the online media articles on executive compensation in the charitable sector?

Hypothesis 1: The themes within the online media articles will depict a relatively high frequency of negative views towards executive compensation in the charitable sector.

Data collection.

To collect the articles for this in-depth media analysis the Business Source Complete database was used to search for publicly available online media articles pertaining to executive compensation in the charitable sector. In particular, online sources published from 2013 to

present were included in this research to ensure relevance to the compensation data analyzed in Phase 2. Search terms to identify the articles included: ‘charity compensation,’ ‘charity executive compensation,’ ‘non-profit executive compensation,’ ‘executive compensation,’ ‘charity,’ ‘charities pay,’ ‘charity executive pay,’ ‘charity executive remuneration,’ and ‘charity remuneration.’ Due to the lack of available articles specifically in Canada, articles from the United States was also included as the charitable sector, and articles discussing it, are expected to be similar in nature.

Data analysis.

In order to uncover themes from the media articles identified using the search terms noted above, I applied the seminal principles of thematic analysis as identified by Braun and Clarke (2012). The steps of thematic analysis were as follows:

1. Familiarization

The first step of thematic analysis is for the me to familiarize myself with these data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I completed this through reading and reviewing the articles numerous times, and making initial notes and comments on all of the articles to capture a complete understanding of each article.

2. Coding

Once I reviewed each of the articles, I summarized the notes, and comments to highlight facts, sentences and phrases and labeled each with a ‘code’. I then placed codes into groups based on their similarity. These data groups allowed me to have a condensed overview of the common topics that arose in the articles.

3. Generating Themes

I placed the codes and data groups into thematic groups. These groups were more general than the initial codes, such that several codes were able to be placed into thematic groupings. At this step, I discarded many codes as they were either too vague or were not relevant to these data (often because they did not appear repeatedly). At this time some codes also became elevated to thematic groups, because of their relation to and overlap with other codes. For instance, the thematic group of 'Justification' arose from the codes 'Justification of salary level' and 'Unjustified compensation,' as the core of both of these codes centered around the theme of justification.

4. Reviewing Themes

I reviewed all of the themes that emerged to ensure they were relevant to the research question. I then discarded some themes that emerged were not related to the purpose of this study.

5. Naming and Defining Themes.

The final step of thematic analysis consisted of naming and defining the themes to be sure each theme was clearly presented (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Table 1 illustrates each of the thematic groups, related concepts, and number of instances each appeared to better highlight the prevalence of each theme within the analyzed media articles.

Table 1

Thematic Group Coding

| Thematic Group | Codes | Specific Instances |
|-----------------|---|--------------------|
| Justification | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Justification of salary level▪ Unjustified compensation | 107 |
| Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Conflict of Interest▪ Governance▪ Salary Trends▪ Wage Gap▪ “Why work in the sector” | 135 |
| Public Interest | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Impact▪ Individual example affecting all▪ Lack of transparency▪ Perception | 169 |

The thematic groups were defined as follows:

Justification: This theme relates to all codes and instances that discuss concepts relating to the justification of compensation. This includes things like justifying adequate compensation, and arguing that compensation is unjust.

Management: This theme relates to all codes and instances that discuss management practices, management activities, or topics that are related to how organizations are managed within the charitable sector. This includes things like discussions of wage gaps, overall governance, board involvement, and reasons for working in the sector.

Public Interest: This theme relates to all codes and instances that directly discussed public perception on compensation in the charitable sector. For instance, discussions of transparency and social impact were included in this theme.

To analyze data for Phase 1 of this study, the thematic groups, codes and specific instances were evaluated and further coded to determine the positive or negative valence of the media articles with regards to public perception. Each item was given either 0 (negative) or 1 (positive). If the article was neutral and merely informative without taking a formal stance, it was coded with a 2. This analysis provided an overall tone of media articles within the sector, as well as a total number of instances of positive, negative, and neutral articles.

Findings.

Phase 1 consisted of a review of a total of 147 individual articles. Overall 46% (68) articles were negative towards executive compensation in the charitable sector, 29% (43) neutral, and only 24% (36) positive. Due to this, Hypothesis 1 was supported as the majority of articles negatively depicted executive compensation in the charitable sector. Each grouping is further explained below.

Positive

In total 78% (28) of the positive articles had a keen focus on material related to the justification category, by arguing that while executive compensation is very high, the positive impact of the work completed should be taken into account. There was also a heavy focus in the positive group on the wage gap that exists between standard industries and the charitable industry, with 42% (15) of articles reviewed discussing the topic. For example, Chertavian (2013) stated that “our pay scale will never be able to compete with investment banks, but that

doesn't mean a prospective employee shouldn't be able to envision a prosperous future" (para. 5). This instance was coded as positive, as the author argued for more adequate compensation in the sector and justifying the argument in the ability to retain and attract prospective employees. Although this example discusses the current picture of compensation negatively, it is taking a positive stance on the need for adequate compensation practices in the charitable sector.

Neutral

The neutral articles reviewed (43) were all highly informative in nature, meaning they do not take a stance either for or against the compensation level. While these articles are neutral towards the emerging themes and tones that I identified for this study, they are still important to note as they seem to portray information to the public in a manner that does not invoke strong opinions or feelings on the topic of executive compensation. For example, Donnellan, 2018 discussed the need for compassionate leadership and executives within charitable organizations, however, did not discuss compensation directly.

Negative

On the negative side of news coverage on executive compensation in charitable organizations, the media noted issues like unjustified compensation levels compared to overall organizational budgets, and an overall lack of transparency. In total 26% (18) of these negative articles contained some form of call to action to increase overall transparency of how compensation works within the industry or for a salary cap to be implemented in order for donors to 'avoid being scammed' (see Arnold, 2018). In addition, 24% (16) discussed the concept that 'if people are to work in this sector, they should be doing it for the cause, and not for money',

failing to realize that many socially driven organizations are failing to pay their employees livable wages (see Long, 2018).

It is also interesting to note that 12% (8) of the negative articles all discussed one particular individual who is being accused by media outlets of personally profiting off of the hardship of others (see Baker, 2018). The articles depict this particular instance to be highly unjustified, and have used it to create a false generalization towards the broader population of charity executives.

Phase 2

Once I completed a thematic analysis of the relevant online media articles surrounding executive compensation in charitable organizations, the goal for Phase 2 was to explore the average executive compensation levels within the Canadian charitable sector.

I collected data from the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) for all charitable organizations in Canada. This study analyzed the relationships between compensation and all other data available through Canada Revenue Agency, including organizational revenue, number of full- and part-time employees, total compensation budget, and total part-time compensation. The following research questions guided the analysis of this phase:

RQ2: What is the relationship between compensation and organizational revenue?

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant positive relationship between compensation and organizational revenue.

RQ3: What is the relationship between compensation and number of full-time employees?

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant positive relationship between compensation and number of full-time employees.

RQ4: What is the relationship between compensation and number of part-time employees?

Hypothesis 4: There will be a significant positive relationship between compensation and part-time employees.

RQ5: What is the relationship between compensation and total compensation budget?

Hypothesis 5: There will be a significant positive relationship between compensation and total compensation budget.

RQ6: What is the relationship between compensation and total part-time compensation?

Hypothesis 6: There will be a significant positive relationship between compensation and total part-time compensation.

Data collection.

I used data from CRA to explore the relationships between various organizational data noted in the research questions above. These data were collected by obtaining all of the current financial records for all registered charities in Canada. These data included the organization's legal name, total number of full-time employees, total number of part-time employees, number of employees in each compensation bracket, total part-time compensation, total overall compensation expenses, and total organizational revenue. The data set was cleaned to ensure that only the highest paid individual was included for each organization, with the assumption that this individual would be the primary executive within the organization. This provided a total sample size of nearly 50,000 organizations. The compensation amounts were divided into the compensation brackets identified by the CRA, therefore compensation amounts for this phase are in brackets and not specific dollar amounts. The CRA compensation brackets are shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Compensation Brackets*

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1 | 0 - 39,999 |
| 2 | 40,000 - 79,999 |
| 3 | 80,000 – 119,999 |
| 4 | 120,000 – 159,999 |
| 5 | 160,000 – 199,999 |
| 6 | 200,000 – 249-999 |
| 7 | 250-000 – 299,999 |
| 8 | 300,000 – 349,999 |
| 9 | 350,000 + |

Once these data were compiled and reviewed, it was cleaned to ensure only relevant and accurate information was being analyzed.

Data cleaning.

The initial data set, containing the information of nearly 50,000 charities in Canada, was further cleaned to remove all blanks and error entries. The true sample size was reduced to approximately 20,000 organizations (n=19,436). Further data cleaning was achieved by following the best practices outlined by Pallant (2001). I ensured no duplicate entries existed, and ensured a value of one was set for the individual at the highest compensation bracket per organization. This allowed for all organizations to be analyzed based on having one key executive, and ensured no other employee salaries were included to falsify or skew the results.

Data analysis.

To analyze the CRA compensation data all information was entered into SPSS, totaling over 50,000 data points. Descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlations were run on relevant variables contained in the CRA data.

Findings.

Based on the executive compensation data in Canadian charities from the CRA, organizational means were as follows:

Table 3

Canadian Charity Organizational Means (CRA data)

| Factor | Mean |
|------------------------------|----------------|
| Compensation Bracket | 2.37 |
| Revenue | \$9,236,789.51 |
| Full-Time Employees | 60.81 |
| Part-Time Employees | 78.65 |
| Part-Time Compensation Spend | \$1,317,142.93 |
| Total Compensation Spend | \$5,284,772.64 |

Table 3 shows that while the average organizational revenue is nearly \$10,000,000 the average compensation bracket is 2, translating to just \$40,000-\$79,000 annually. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2020) identified that the average Canadian CEO earns approximately \$800,000 annually. This means that the average executive compensation in the charitable sector is approximately just 1/20th of the Canadian CEO average.

When looking at the frequencies of compensation brackets to examine if the average salary bracket was skewed by several outliers in terms of low salary brackets, the opposite

occurred. Low compensation is the norm and high compensation is instead slightly skewing these data. Table 4, below, presents the frequencies of each compensation bracket based on an analysis of the CRA data.

Table 4.

Compensation Bracket Frequencies and Percentages

| Bracket | Compensation Range | Frequency (n= 19,436) | Percentage |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 0-39,999 | 4288 | 22 |
| 2 | 40,000-79,999 | 9043 | 46.5 |
| 3 | 80,000-119,999 | 3623 | 18.7 |
| 4 | 120,000-159,999 | 1217 | 6.6 |
| 5 | 160,000-199,999 | 495 | 2.5 |
| 6 | 200,000-249,999 | 334 | 1.7 |
| 7 | 250,000-299,999 | 172 | 0.9 |
| 8 | 300,000-349,999 | 116 | 0.6 |
| 9 | 350,000+ | 148 | 0.8 |

This analysis shows that 87.2% of all executives earn within brackets 1, 2, or 3, with the highest percentage falling in bracket 2 (40,000-79,999), as the overall average suggested.

Next, Pearson’s Correlations were run to help provide insight into the research questions.

The results of the correlational analysis are as follows:

Table 5*SPSS Correlation Results*

| | | Correlations | | | | | |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------|-------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| | | COMPBRAC | REVENUE | FullTimeEmp | PartTimeEmp | PTComp | TOTComp |
| COMPBRAC | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .235** | .256** | .176** | .118** | .238** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 19438 | 19330 | 18922 | 15404 | 14885 | 19325 |
| REVENUE | Pearson Correlation | .235** | 1 | .848** | .684** | .908** | .969** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 19330 | 19331 | 18827 | 15338 | 14824 | 19229 |
| FullTimeEmp | Pearson Correlation | .256** | .848** | 1 | .648** | .737** | .896** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 18922 | 18827 | 18923 | 15053 | 14549 | 18839 |
| PartTimeEmp | Pearson Correlation | .176** | .684** | .648** | 1 | .765** | .719** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 15404 | 15338 | 15053 | 15405 | 14675 | 15362 |
| PTComp | Pearson Correlation | .118** | .908** | .737** | .765** | 1 | .882** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | | .000 |
| | N | 14885 | 14824 | 14549 | 14675 | 14886 | 14861 |
| TOTComp | Pearson Correlation | .238** | .969** | .896** | .719** | .882** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 19325 | 19229 | 18839 | 15362 | 14861 | 19326 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the correlation results presented in Table 5, the findings in relation to each research question are as follows:

Table 6*Research Question and SPSS Correlation Findings*

| Research Question | SPSS Correlation Result |
|---|-------------------------|
| RQ2: What is the relationship between compensation and organizational revenue? | 0.235** |
| RQ3: What is the relationship between compensation and number of full-time employees? | 0.256** |
| RQ4: What is the relationship between compensation and number of part-time employees? | 0.176** |
| RQ5: What is the relationship between compensation and total | 0.238** |

| | |
|--|---------|
| compensation budget? | |
| RQ6: What is the relationship between compensation and total part-time compensation? | 0.118** |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Based on the findings above, Hypothesis 2-6 were not supported as there are no significantly positive relationships found between executive compensation or any of the factors analyzed.

When considering whether each organizational metric reported in CRA filings was related to the compensation bracket for the executive, there was not a significant relationship. This shows that there is real complexity for charities when determining the compensation of their executives.

Next, I analyzed the average organizational metric at each compensation bracket, including: revenue, full-time employees, part-time employees, part-time compensation spend, and full-time compensation spend. This analysis is highly useful to organizations as it allows them to compare their organizational metrics to see into which compensation bracket an organization of their size fits. As such, I present one of the first frameworks for charity sector practitioners to use to analyze their executive compensation data in relation to Canadian averages. The results are presented below in Table 7.

Table 7*Average Organizational Performance Metric by Compensation Bracket.*

| Comp. Bracket | Comp. Range | Revenue (\$) | Full-Time Employees | Part-Time Employees | Part-Time Comp. Spend (\$) | Full-Time Comp. Spend (\$) |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | 0 - 39,999 | 266,759 | 13 | 60 | 41,181 | 96,222 |
| 2 | 40,000 - 79,999 | 788,812 | 10 | 17 | 121,567 | 417,172 |
| 3 | 80,000 – 119,999 | 3,330,830 | 27 | 45 | 642,562 | 1,876,681 |
| 4 | 120,000 – 159,999 | 13,307,323 | 97 | 116 | 1,674,627 | 7,810,498 |
| 5 | 160,000 – 199,999 | 38,566,838 | 321 | 220 | 3,819,065 | 25,978,554 |
| 6 | 200,000 – 249-999 | 72,915,319 | 474 | 305 | 4,921,593 | 42,036,871 |
| 7 | 250-000 – 299,999 | 83,277,212 | 519 | 393 | 6,752,252 | 50,870,673 |
| 8 | 300,000 – 349,999 | 130,567,286 | 643 | 694 | 13,665,516 | 73,001,975 |
| 9 | 350,000 + | 467,676,007 | 2,109 | 2,388 | 71,940,484 | 256,321,469 |

Phase 3

Phase 3 of my thesis research consisted of repeating the quantitative analysis presented in Phase 2 to analyze the compensation practices of the businesses discussed in the specific articles examined in Phase 1. Once analyzed, the compensation data and findings were compared to the actual Canadian averages presented in Phase 2 to determine if the compensation being reported in the media accurately reflect actual practice in the industry.

Data collection.

To collect the data for Phase 3 of the research I went back through all articles analyzed in Phase 1 to and made note of the name of each of the organizations discussed. Then, I conducted a detailed analysis of each of these organization's websites to identify their annual reports and published compensation data.

Data cleaning.

All of the 147 articles in Phase 1 were analyzed to determine whether a specific organization or individual was identified. In total, 93 of the articles failed to mention specific individuals or organizations, and were primarily discussing the nature of compensation in charities rather than in specific instances. This left an actual sample of 54 organizations for Phase 3 of research. These 54 organizations were then analyzed to identify as much of the information presented in Phase 2 from CRA records as possible. For the majority of organizations noted in the online media articles (87% or 47 organizations) only organizational revenue and executive compensation data was available. As a result, only those relationships between these factors were compared to the Canadian averages of these metrics from the CRA data available on charitable organizations. Research Question 7 was as follows:

RQ7: What is the relationship between actual compensation levels within charitable organizations and the compensation within charitable organizations levels noted by the media?

Hypothesis 7: Actual compensation levels will be significantly lower than the compensation levels reported by the media.

Data analysis.

Once the data had been cleaned, the compensation and revenue data for the organizations was studied to find correlations and averages in the same manner as Phase 2. All data was input into SPSS following the best practices proposed by Pallant (2001). The findings were then compared to the Canadian averages for charity compensation identified in Phase 2. To fit with the results of Phase 2 the compensation amounts were placed into the compensation brackets as defined in Phase 2.

Findings.

By analyzing the compensation and organizational revenue of the organizations from Phase 1 it was clear that the media is heavily focusing on outlier organizations, as the averages were far higher than that of the Canadian norm for the charitable sector. The average reported compensation bracket was 8.15 (mode=9) compared to just 2.37 (mode=2) based on the findings of actual practice from Phase 2. According to these data provided by Statistics Canada, only 148 (0.007%) organizations in Canada reported compensation in the 9th bracket, however of the 47 media articles, 95% (45) reported were in this compensation bracket.

The revenue of the organizations profiled in the online media sources was also significantly higher than that of the Canadian average. In Canada, the average charity's revenue, as identified in Phase 2, was \$9,236,789; however data from the 47 articles identified the average revenue as \$405,138,595, which translates to amounts that are over 40 times greater than the Canadian average, meaning Hypothesis 7 was confirmed.

This finding shows that the negative perception towards compensation in the charitable sector may be caused by misinformation. By primarily reporting on the highest earning portion

of the charitable sector, the public has had their perception swayed to believe that this is the norm within the industry. In addition, the reported revenue and compensation brackets of the noted organizations in the media articles do align with the Canadian averages in the framework developed in Phase 2 of this research. Overall then individual executive compensation levels noted in the articles are largely outliers when considering reported executive compensation levels for charitable in Canada. However, in terms of their organizational size, it appears they are in fact being compensated within an appropriate compensation bracket.

Discussion

The findings from each of the three phases of research combine to show a clear disconnect between the information provided to the public through the media and the actual executive compensation in Canadian charities. In relation to RQ1 (What are the common themes within media articles on executive compensation in the charitable sector?), when observing the concepts and categories that arose from the media articles available to the public, it is evident that many focus exclusively on negative elements surrounding executive compensation in the charitable sector. This included themes such as the fact that high salaries are the norm, high salaries should not be justified in the charitable sector, and that if one is interested in working in the sector one should care more about the cause than their own financial wellbeing.

To understand if high salaries were actually the norm in Canadian charities, Phase 2 identified that the average executive compensation in Canadian charities was far below the standards in other sectors, and in relation to RQ2-RQ6 (What is the relationship between compensation and organizational revenue?, What is the relationship between compensation and number of full-time employees?, What is the relationship between compensation and number of part-time employees?, What is the relationship between compensation and total compensation

budget?, What is the relationship between compensation and total part-time compensation?), results showed that none of the factors assessed correlated positively towards an executive's compensation bracket. This is surprising, as Gomez-Mejia, Berrone, and Franco-Santos (2010) identified through their research that in traditional industries, organizational performance tends to correlate directly with compensation practices. This lack of correlation between the organizational metrics and executive compensation analyzed in RQ2-6 could, however, be explained by the theory of Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice as proposed by Fleisher (2014). The lack of correlation may be caused by the fact that no measures of external equity currently exist, and therefore instead 'good' work gets rewarded, based on the internal value the work has to stakeholders (Fleisher, 2014). In traditional industries, organizations often use various methods to determine both internal and external equity of compensation (Schwind, Uggerslev, Wagar, & Fassina, 2019), however the lack of research within the charitable sector has led to organizations needing to focus on internal equity, and rewarding executives based on internal performance measure, as opposed to utilizing information on similar organizations to ensure equity within the sector. The framework proposed in this paper allows organizations to incorporate a level of external compensation within their compensation practices for the first time.

Through addressing RQ7 (What is the relationship between actual compensation levels within charitable organizations and the compensation within charitable organizations levels noted by the media?), the analysis revealed that the relationship between the actual executive compensation practices within the Canadian charitable sector and the public information available within the media articles is highly misaligned; overall the information provided to the public does not accurately reflect the Canadian averages in this sector. Phase 3 identified that the

compensation being publicized by the media are far above the Canadian average for the sector, and due to the fact that the majority of media available to the public discusses charity executive compensation so negatively, the true industry norms are likely heavily misunderstood, and misrepresented. This is related to the findings of McCoombs (2011) and Blidook (2008), as the need for eye-catching headlines often surpasses accurate reporting on the norms.

These media articles collectively have the potential to shape a falsely negative perception towards compensation in the charitable sector by the general public, one in which will take significantly more research and accurate media to amend. When looking at the theories of public perception in relation to the findings of this study, it is clear that theories around shaping and solidifying the public's perception are already at work, as the articles that have been analyzed primarily discuss executive compensation in a very negative lens. For years the public has been primed, and their schema's have been formed around the negative perception of compensation within the charitable sector due to the quantity and prevalence of negative articles. As Blidook (2008) identified, there now needs to be significant effort committed by the media, the public and scholars to amend this solidified inaccurate perception. Correcting this false perception is vital to the success of organizations in this sector, as an organization may face extreme difficulty attracting top talent into the sector to truly drive their mission if they must either pay below Canadian averages for comparable roles in other sectors or face backlash by the media and public for adequately compensating their executives.

Implications

To Scholarship

The media's focus on executive compensation within the charitable sector is shaping the narrative in a highly negative way. For charities to be able to survive and achieve their missions and to help members of society most in need, it is important to depict the actual information and combat the inaccuracies presented by the media. To my knowledge, this research study is one of the first to analyze executive compensation and public perception within the charitable sector, acting as a building block towards future research needed to further examine the impact of false perceptions of executive compensation within the charitable sector.

Through the three phases of this study, this research has significant implications to various fields of scholarship. First, this research builds upon general compensation research as it provides one of the first frameworks to benchmark compensation brackets in Canadian charities based on their organizational metrics. While more work is needed to fully develop this framework, it is a significant first step. Second, this research is extremely important to the field of human resource management, in terms of compensation management. The impact public perception may have on compensation is something very rarely discussed, and is in need of significantly more research. This study provides the groundwork for more research on this topic.

The third contribution of this study is the implications for the field of public perception research. This study, to my knowledge, is one of the first to analyze potential public perception as shaped by the media, to actual practice, by discussing the information available to the public on executive compensation in relation to the actual compensation practices within the charitable sector of Canada. While studies have been completed in compensation research and perception

research discussing the impact of the internal perception of executive compensation on an organization's compensation practice, the impact of the public's perceptions as being formed by the media has not been well established. There has also been vast research on the forces that go into forming, shaping, and solidifying public perception (such as McCoombs, 2011, Blidook, 2008, Shim & Oh, 2018 and Kuhn, 2010), but little work on the actual impact that this perception can have towards a sector .

Finally, this research provides one of the only studies directly analyzing all data available through Statistics Canada on compensation within the Canadian charitable sector. This information is extremely impactful to future research within the charitable sector as it provides a framework for generating more relevant information on compensation within the sector. Importantly, this can help organizations make the best use of the funding they have available, and may assist them with combatting inaccurate information presented by the media.

To Practice

Not only is this research highly impactful to scholarship, it is also extremely important to the practice of actual charities in Canada. First, this research is applicable to practice as it provides a framework to help determine the appropriate compensation bracket for an executive based on other organizational metrics. By using and evaluating this information, the uncertainty surrounding compensation within this industry can be somewhat alleviated as organizations can compare themselves to Canadian norms.

This research also allows organizations to understand that the negative perception typically associated with compensation in the charitable sector has been developed by the media through presenting outliers that do not accurately represent the Canadian norm. This study is a

call for more charities in Canada to be more transparent and vocal in their compensation activities to help present the actual picture of compensation to the general public. Transparency in terms of creating compensation levels may well set charitable organizations up for better success with donations, and ultimately this is what they require for success and longevity.

Limitations and Future Research

While this research is highly important to both scholarship and practice, there were limitations that are avenues for future research.

One of the limitations of this research is that the compensation data available through Statistics Canada included compensation ranges rather than precise salary information. The range within each bracket is also large, so even when looking at the Canadian average in the 2nd bracket for example, it could mean an average of \$40,000 or an average of \$79,000. The difference between these is fairly large and more precise information may impact the findings. Collecting and analyzing more detailed information on the compensation practices in Canada is an area for further research.

This study relied on archival secondary research. No primary research was conducted in analyzing specific compensation amounts, or public opinions. In terms of public opinion, no primary research was conducted as this research focused on the media stories and how these may shape public perception, rather than the perceptions themselves. The goal of the research was to see if the information provided to the public was accurate when compared to actual practice. While this approach was highly beneficial to this study, future research focusing on actual public perceptions would further add to the literature.

Time was also a limitation of this study, as the Statistics Canada information was provided based on data from only 2018. This means that only one year of information was analyzed. Furthermore, the public perception articles came from a range of dates, with the oldest being from 2013. While these are still within acceptable proximity to the Statistics Canada data, there may be some variance due to the year and corresponding organization's performance, or prominence in the news at the time.

Additional research that provides practitioners with a clearer picture of the metrics available to determine an executive's compensation is needed. While this study presented the first framework of its kind, more research is needed to test, refine, and implement it within the charitable sector to ensure accuracy and effectiveness. This would help Canadian charities alleviate the need to justify their compensation, become more informed on the compensation norms in their sector, and allow them to compensate fairly to attract and retain top talent. This research could also be used to help reshape the public perception that has been reported by the media.

Finally, while the theories referred to in this paper provide a solid foundation for better understanding the perception of executive compensation in the charitable sector, future studies should build upon the breadth and depth of the application of these theories within the context of compensation in the charitable sector.

Conclusion

Through three phases of research, this study has identified the emerging themes and also inaccuracies in the media available to the public surrounding executive compensation in the charitable organization sector, and has analyzed the executive compensation data of nearly

20,000 Canadian charities to develop the first framework of its kind to be used in the charitable sector.

While this study has shown that additional research is needed to truly understand the executive compensation practices within the Canadian charitable sector, it acts as a significant first step towards amending the perception of the public, and ensuring accurate information is presented to the public.

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