Leadership in Sports Crisis Management
An examination of crisis communications in ice hockey

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Declarations

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This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **MA INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS MANAGEMENT**.

I have enclosed the letter of exemption from ethical approval or the letter of ethical approval as evidence of Cardiff University's permission to proceed with this research.

I declare that this work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

I further declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Signed ……………………………………………………………. Kieran Peters

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Dear Kieran

Research project title: Title of research project: Leadership in sports crisis management: An examinations of crisis communications in ice hockey

SREC reference: 23/24IPR012

Ethical Opinion

The JOMEC Research Ethics Committee ('Committee')] via its proportionate review procedure and gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above application on the basis described in the application form, subject to the following conditions:

A) Please provide a list of questions or topics that will be asked in the interviews.
B) As you are likely to record the interviews you must complete and return the University's standard operating procedure on audio/video recordings of human participants (attached).
C) You need to supply me with a copy of an invitation that you will send those who you seek to recruit for the interviews.
D) Please use the consent form attached, and make the changes suggested in the comments on that sheet.
E) Please use the participant information sheet supplied and make the changes suggested in the comments and add the information in the [] that is required. Please return the form to me, and do not send this form out until it has been approved.

Amendments and further documentation

Any substantial amendments to documents previously reviewed by the Committee, and any additional documents required must be submitted to
the Committee via **CarneyD@cardiff.ac.uk** for consideration and cannot be implemented until the Committee has confirmed it is satisfied with the proposed amendments.
You are permitted to implement non-substantial amendments to the documents previously reviewed by the Committee.

Monitoring requirements
The Committee must be informed of any unexpected ethical issues or unexpected adverse events that arise during the research project.

Documents reviewed by Committee.
The documents reviewed by the Committee were:
   Document   Version   Date

Ethics Application Form
Consent Form
Participant Information Sheet

Yours sincerely,

Dr Damian Carney

Acknowledgements:

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Abstract:

Ice hockey is a major international sport with the highest level of competition taking place in the countries of Canada and the United States. Despite the great success of the sport, there are multiple issues and crises that occur within organisations and leagues each year. The consistency in which incidents occur raises concern on the quality and execution of crisis management by professional organisations within the sport. Historically, ice hockey players are considered 'tough' athletes, which leads to them not disclosing serious injuries or conveying any emotion when engaging with the media. This aspect of ice hockey culture is seemingly mirrored in their public relations and communications practices, wherein there is a trend of not disclosing serious incidents or allegations and therefore the use of transparency and accountability from leadership is put into question. This study investigates the role leadership has in public relations and communications in professional organisations in ice hockey, specifically analysing their approach to deploying crisis communication and image repair strategies, and if they enforce accountability. Through a qualitative approach involving key figure interviews and content analysis, this study sought out to take a deep dive into ongoings of public relations and communication practices within the sport. The findings identified significant gaps in ice hockey organisations approach to public relations and crisis management, uncovering limited practice of transparency and leadership visibility. It is important to note that the research was unable to obtain first-hand accounts from those working in a public relations or a communications capacity within a professional organisation to uncover the perspective on what a crisis may look like in real time from an internal point of view.

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Chapter 1:

1.1 Introduction

Since 2020, there have been a number of incidents and scandals in ice hockey in both the National Hockey League (NHL) and the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF). In 2021 it was reported that a team employee of the Chicago Blackhawks (North America, NHL) had sexually assaulted an active player on the 2010 roster during their Stanley Cup Championship pursuit. A subsequent investigation revealed that the Blackhawks did not follow due process in reporting the incident and even provided a letter of recommendation for the accused individual's following job where they went on to sexually assault a minor (Clarke 2021). In 2022, an investigative journalist revealed that there were allegations of a group sexual assault committed by multiple members of the 2018 Hockey Canada IIHF Under-20 team, which an investigation later revealed the organisation had been using public funds to settle similar cases out of court (Shilton 2024). At the beginning of the 2023-24 NHL season, a sports podcast reported that Columbus Blue Jackets Head Coach, Mike Babcock, had been violating his players privacy by going through photos in their personal phones during one-on-one meetings. This allegation was vehemently denied by the Blue Jackets, however an investigation by the NHL Players Association uncovered the accusations to be true, resulting in Babcock being forced to resign (Clark 2023).

These incidents are a short list of a long history of crises that have occurred in the world of ice hockey. It is important to note that the examples above were only made public by members of the media or investigative journalists (Clarke 2021; Shilton 2024; Clark 2023). In most cases, the public only hear from an organisation or league in ice hockey once they are seemingly forced to make a statement due to outside pressures. The statement is often one carefully crafted from a legal perspective ensuring the protection of their own assets, subsequently demonstrating limited leadership visibility, transparency or accountability. This brings cause for an investigation into the public relations and communications practices in the sport, especially in times where organisations must engage in crisis management.

Chapter 2 of this study will outline the relevant literature necessary to contribute to the research. Public relations in ice hockey is an area of study that has not been widely covered

by previous academics, therefore a holistic demonstration of the academic research conducted on public relations and communications in the entire sports industry was used to understand the environment in which they operate. In addition, best practices for concepts such as crisis communication in sport, crisis communication strategies, image repair, leadership, sports/ice hockey culture, and social media in sport communication will be covered. The literature review will also utilize case studies from previous academics who have conducted in-depth analysis of crises in sport.

In Chapter 3, there will be an overview of the chosen methodology for the study. A qualitative method was chosen through in-depth key figure interviews and content analysis. The key figure interview participants were chosen based upon their experience working in the ice hockey industry, whether that be in a role within an organisation or from a journalistic perspective. The interviews will help to uncover the current state public relations and communications in ice hockey, the role leadership has in these practices, and explore themes of accountability and transparency. Through a semi-structured approach the following key themes emerged from the interviews to contribute to the research: (1) the current state of public relations and communication in ice hockey, (2) accountability and transparency in times of crisis in ice hockey, (3) leadership's role in communications in ice hockey, (4) If leadership in ice hockey is currently communicating with accountability and transparency in times of crises, (5) post-crisis messaging in ice hockey. The content analysis is focused on the Chicago Blackhawks social media during the 2021 sexual assault scandal, specifically analysing the frequency of communication regarding the incident as well as the use of crisis communication or image repair strategies. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 there will be a presentation of the findings, followed by a discussion and conclusion of the research.

The consistency in which events involving sexual assault and player mistreatment occur in the sport is concerning. The poorly executed public relations practice and response to these incidents brings into question if a negative precedent that has been set. This study will contribute to identifying gaps and areas for improvement in PR practice in the sport and provide education for how improved communication can prevent such incidents from happening in the future.

1.2 Research Questions:

Due to the limited research of public relations and communication practice in ice hockey, the research questions are informed upon uncovering unstudied areas of crisis communication in the sport.

RQ1: To what extent do governing bodies in ice hockey place the importance of accountability on organisations when dealing with an internal crisis?

RQ2: What role does leadership within professional ice hockey organisations take in public relations practices during crisis management?

RQ3: To what extent are crisis management, reputation management, and image repair used within crisis situations in ice hockey?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction:

Research on public relations and communication in sport is a relatively new area of study. Despite academics identifying the importance of effective public relations and communications management in the sports industry, it is widely discussed that it is still a misunderstood field within many professional sports organisations. Previous academic research has not focused specifically on the sport of ice hockey, however there are similar trends of communication issues across the major sports in North America which primarily include American football, baseball, basketball, and ice hockey (Pollard and Pollard 2007). Sports that involve intense physicality that promote cultures of masculinity or 'toughness' have parallels in how these embedded cultures effect communication practices (i.e. ice hockey, rugby, American football). A majority of the negative, or ineffective, communication practices committed can be a direct result of leadership involvement, who in many instances are those who encourage the masculine culture throughout the entire organisation (Alsarve 2022). This section will investigate the study of public relations in the sports industry as well as the prominence of crisis communication, image repair, and reputation management. The effect of sport 'culture' and its effect on communications practices will also be addressed.

This chapter will also provide case study examples of sports organisations who have dealt with crises. The case studies chosen have identified what crisis communication techniques were used in each instance, have analyzed how they were applied, and the extent in which they were successful or unsuccessful. The issues or crises the selected organisations have dealt with are those that directly relate to those the National Hockey League and International ice hockey organisations have been involved in.

In later chapters, there will be content analysis on the social media communication that occurs during a crisis in ice hockey. Therefore, it will be important in this chapter to consider best practice of social media use for sports organisations – especially in times of crisis. Concepts such as social media listening and monitoring have been identified as a major priority for sports organisations by previous academics - these techniques can impact the effectiveness of crisis communications.

2.2 Public Relations in Sport

Harlow, 1976, defined public relations as: "the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics" (Harlow 1976; Broom 2009, p 24). This involves managing issues or problems and helps management of organisations to be informed and responsive to public opinion (Broom 2009, p 24). From this definition, public relations is a core management function, especially for large multinational organisations. The global sports industry's revenue was more than 403 billion (USD) in 2022 and is expected to grow at an annual rate of 9.13% through to 2028 (Gough, 2024). Despite how successful the sports industry is, Hopwood et al. identifies that, "There is a need for further development of public relations and communication strategies, knowledge and understanding of the management of sport." (Hopwood et al 2010, p 3). The rapid growth of the industry has also increased the need for experts who are well practiced in communication as 'sport communication' has become an integral area of the field of sport management (Pederson et al 2021, p 1). As the business of sport grows, sports public relations has also become one of the fastest growing areas of the public relations industry (Littleton and Lesnik, 2012). As athlete salary increases, cost of competition rises, and sponsors seek larger audiences, the PR generated about sports organisations and people subsequently increases. (Summers and Johnson Morgan 2008, p 176). Public relations in sport, however, is complex in nature and layered with multiple stakeholder considerations when taking part in communications; "Sport management needs to be adaptive to change, effectively manage risk, integrate technology advances and build stakeholder intimacy." (Halbwirth and Toohey 2005). It is because of this Hopwood et al. argue, "Sport organisations should manage their publics through a strategic approach to relationship management that can minimise these eventualities." (Hopwood et al 2010, p 4). The complexity of public relations practice within the sport industry cannot be understated and must be approached tactically to ensure the safety of all stakeholders and to effectively protect the reputation of organisations.

Similar to other industries, in sport there must be consideration for both external and internal stakeholders. Including fans, "external publics…include sponsors, the media, funding bodies and investors amongst others, [they] are clearly vital to the success of the sport organisation." (Hopwood et al 2010, p 19). It can be argued that external publics are the most important, as they are the group who contribute to revenue to an organisation, however, Hopwood et al. argue that "Internal publics have a different relationship with the organisation to external

publics and so they are perhaps the most important public" (Hopwood et al 2010, p 19). If people feel they are working for a 'good' organisation and they feel valued, and are communicated with properly, they become a powerful tool for public relations through 'word of mouth' speaking positively of the organisation - generally speaking, everyone wants to work for a company or organisation that does good things (Hopwood et al 2010, p 19). The internal publics have an enormous impact on a sports organisation's success, and potential failure, if they are not communicated with effectively. Unfortunately, much like public relations in general, this is not yet realized by many sports organisations: "In the competitive business world, organisations are becoming acutely aware of the necessity to 'analyse' their publics, which means they utilise professional public relations strategies and tactics to 'get to know' their many publics. Sport organisations, on the other hand, are notoriously bad at doing this and for taking their publics for granted." (Hopwood et al 2010, p 19-20). It is further argued that sport public relations is very much so a 'brand-centric' communication function, specifically designed to advance and manage relationships with key publics (Stoldt et al. 2020, p 2). The under-developed nature of public relations in the sport industry is largely attributed to the lack of understanding of what public relations is as well as the wide assumption that an organisation will continue to have support and engagement from people no matter what has occurred (Hopwood et al 2010, p 19-20).

Due to the importance of identifying publics in sport public relations, there have been definitions created to specifically suit the industry: (1) "Sport public relations is a managerial communication based function designed to identify a sport organisation's key publics, evaluate its relationships with those publics, and foster desirable relationships between the sport organisation and those publics" (Stoldt et al. 2006, p 19), (2) "Sport public relations encompasses all the processes through which a sport organisation can create and develop long-term mutually beneficial relationships with a range of publics" (Hopwood 2005, p 175). Additionally, sport public relations has been argued as being a 'communication-focused practice' wherein healthy relationships are characterized by the level of effective communication between parties (Stoldt et el. 2020, p 2). These definitions emphasize the importance of public relations in sport as a key management function with a high focus on relationships and understanding of key publics. Relationships with key publics are important due to the emotional reaction individuals can have with something as simple as seeing their team's logo eliciting a positive response (Hopwood et al 2010, p 26). This same example could also trigger a negative emotional reaction from an individual who perceives an

organisation of committing some type of wrongdoing, or that they handled a crisis poorly. To further support the emotional and cultural impact sports organisations have on their publics, L'Etang 2006 argues that "Because sport is both international and a part of everyday life it shapes relationships at every level: diplomatic, cultural, economic, organisational, community and interpersonal. Indeed, sport has been depicted as a key driver of socio-cultural, economic, political, relational and moral change." (L'Etang 2006). It is clear that communications within sport is complex in nature due to the impact it has on its publics, this provides more reasoning for sports organisations to take more interest in their public relations practice and operations.

2.3 Crisis Communication in Sport

What is unique to the sports industry as opposed to others is the spotlight upon organisations that exposes them to a high amount of praise or scrutiny from the media. "The high degree of media scrutiny that exists within sport means that sport organisations must be strategic in their approach to relationships, monitoring the behaviours of those representing them and implementing issue management, reputation management, and relationship management strategies in order to prevent damage to the valuable organisation-public relationships." (Hopwood et al 2010, p 50). This is especially important in sport as each year is a year of scandal in the industry, wrongdoings occur like clockwork (Billings 2018, p 2). Before going further into crisis communication in sport, it is important to note the elements that make up a crisis. Coleman 2020 argues there are five elements that "need to be in place to make the critical incident or issue into a full-blown crisis" (Coleman 2020, p 28); (1) it is a time of intense difficulty, (2) action must be taken where difficult and important decisions must be made, (3) it is a negative position, potential negative position, or negative change in the position of the organisation, (4) it develops abruptly regardless of preparation, and (5) the issue has an impact on people in some way (Coleman 2020, p 28-29). According to Coleman, if all five of these elements are present, an organisation has a serious crisis that they must attempt to manage (Coleman 2020, p 29). In these situations, public relations and communication strategies are crucial to not only explain the facts of the incident, but also to provide others with a sense that the correct steps are being taken to prevent a similar occurrence in the future (Fortunato 2008). In sport, most of the crises that occur fall into the sub-category of 'reputational crises' which "still has the same five elements that make it a crisis and the impact of it still could be the same, including loss of share price, impact on consumers, employees and communities" (Coleman 2020, p 31). As discussed in 2.2, the

dynamic relationships sports organisations have with stakeholders and publics is complex, this can lead to them being at a higher risk for a reputational crisis. This can be expanded upon through the Hopwood et al. argument which states: "Professional sport requires large investment and to do this it draws on a range of revenue sources. These sources add a layer of complexity to how a sport organisation and its employees (players) are managed. Sponsors, the media, the corporate sector and the broader community may all have conflicting agendas regarding what they wish to achieve through their engagement with professional sport" (Hopwood et al 2010, p 216). These elements provide further evidence to the impact a crisis can have on a sports organisation's reputation through impact on share price, consumers, communities and employees.

Once a crisis develops, Coombs argues that "a crisis creates a need for information. The uncertainty of a crisis produces stress for stakeholders. To cope with this psychological stress, stakeholders need information about what had just happened. Furthermore, stakeholders want to know what is being done to protect them from similar crises in the future - what corrective actions are being taken" (Coombs 2007). This need for information creates a requirement for urgency, organisations must carefully comprise a response or statement in order to maintain trust with their stakeholder groups. A study from Lee and Oh (2022) on the Houston Astros (Major League Baseball) sign steeling scandal during their 2017 and 2018 seasons supported this when the findings found: "the perceived adequacy of the crisis response positively influenced sports fans' perceived trust" (Lee and Oh 2022). Additionally, Coombs persuades that the type of crisis an organisation faces is largely determined by the level of responsibility stakeholders believe the organisation should take for the incident: "A crisis manager tries to establish or shape the crisis frame by emphasizing certain cues…It does matter if stakeholders view the event as an accident, sabotage or criminal negligence. The crisis types or frame determines how much stakeholders attribute responsibility for the crisis to the organization" (Coombs 2007). The level of responsibility determined by stakeholders can be connected to the organisation's history of crises, and whether their reputation leads individuals believe that they could be responsible for it. Coombs further supports this through stating "Crisis history and an unfavorable prior relationship reputation serve to increase the initial assessment of the reputational threat. A victim crisis generates the same reputational threat as an accident crisis when there is a history of crises and/or an unfavorable prior relationship reputation" (Coombs 2007). To combat this, Coombs argues it is important for crisis managers to present new information

that can remind stakeholders of their positive works in order to 'offset' the negatives (Coombs 2007). It is important to reiterate, however, that an organisations reputation is not the top priority during a crisis, "the physical and psychological needs of the stakeholders be the top priority in a crisis. Once stakeholder needs are addressed, crisis managers can turn their attention to other demands such as the organization's reputation" (Coombs 2007).

A case study that highlights the nature of crisis communication in sport is Bruce and Tini's analysis of Rugby League in Australia. As discussed previously, the importance of relationship management with stakeholders needs to be a top priority for sports organisations. This is supported by Bruce and Tini when they argued "in certain situations, a sports organisation may draw upon a crisis response strategy that we term diversion in order to successfully limit the damage to the organisation's reputation. In particular, we suggest that the often intense 'relationship' that fans have with players may allow team sports to focus attention on players (and fans) as innocent victims with the result that negative publicity for the sport is overall reduced" (Bruce and Tini 2008). In this case, they investigated crisis communication strategies used by the Canterbury Bulldogs Rugby League Football Club during multiple off-field incidents (Hopwood 2010, p 41). Similar to the sport of ice hockey, Bruce and Tini emphasize the culture of a physical sport having an impact on communications, stating: "ideologically, rugby league is known as a sport for 'hard men' and its value structure tends to reinforce traditional notions of masculinity such as the ability to inflict and play through pain without complaint, the valorisation of physical force and strength, and the strategic use of violence" (Bruce and Tini 2008). They continue this point by referencing Fearn-Banks (1996) and Kaufman (2005) who argued, "the way in which an organisation engages in crisis communications will reflect its culture which is the result of formal and informal codes of conduct, values, beliefs, practices, norms, jokes, taboos and language" (Fearn-Banks 1996, Kaufman 2005). Fearn-Banks continued to argue that culture highly impacts how individuals behave in certain settings (Fearn-Banks 1996, p 13). In the case of the Bulldogs, Bruce and Tini specifically analysed the crisis communication strategies used when the team was exposed for breaching the league's salary cap by $1 million AUD (Hopwood 2010, p 41), of which included "denial, attacking the accuser, provocation, scapegoating, corrective action and, belatedly, mortification." (Bruce and Tini 2008). Through their analysis they found that the Bulldogs approach to crisis communications "demonstrated little, if any understanding of public relations best practice. Indeed, the Bulldogs' approach to the crisis resulted in an almost complete loss of control over the

organisations image, with the exception of diversion." (Bruce and Tini 2008). The case for the Bulldogs having limited understanding of public relations best practice was further built upon when each of their spokespeople employed did not present the same messages (Bruce and Tini 2008). Ultimately what accelerated the crisis, however, was the denial strategy deployed was quickly revealed to be a lie (Bruce and Tini 2008). This relates directly to events in ice hockey such as the 2010 Chicago Blackhawks (NHL) sexual assault scandal, the 2018 Hockey Canada World Junior's sexual assault scandal, and the Columbus Bluejackets (NHL) crisis involving misconduct of head coach Mike Babcock where the initial statement of denial was quickly proven to be a lie (Clarke 2021; Shilton 2024; Clark 2023). Additionally, there is a trend across professional sports to not learn from past mistakes, this was made evident by the Bulldogs when "less than 2 years later when allegations of gang rape by players exploded onto the front pages of newspapers in February 2004." (Bruce and Tini 2008). This again can be compared to crises in the National Hockey League as incidents continue to occur and attempts at not acknowledging or concealing the issues continue (Schar 2021, p 5; Westhead 2024; Clark 2023).

2.4 Crisis Communication Strategies

For this research it will be important to outline crisis communication strategies and which ones have been qualified as effective by previous academics. It is crucial to have crisis communication strategies in place whether it be as a sport organisation or in another industry. Coleman argues that "The nature of some crises can make them feel incredibly personal both to management and the workers in the business. For an in-house communicator or those working closely with a brand this can be strongly felt, and those emotions, alongside the pressure on the resilience of those involved, can lead to unexpected plans rooted in emotion rather than fact. It requires an ability to be acutely aware of the emotions around the crisis but to be able to step away from it to provide an intelligent and strategic response" (Coleman 2020, p 2). This argument from Coleman further supports the need for effective crisis communication strategies to be in place to be prepared when one may occur. In the beginning stages of a crisis, the timely reaction from the organisation is crucial – the action taken must also be seen as the appropriate one (Coleman 2020, p 49). If possible, the first statement from an organisation in the time of a crisis should be issued within 20 minutes (Coleman 2020, p 56). The crisis will then continue to develop, and a more detailed response will need to be released – this is where it is crucial to be aware of the impact on affected people, they should be referenced showing a focus on the human impact of a crisis (Coleman 2020, p 56). It is

important to note that "Crisis situations can be won or lost on the way affected people are managed, supported and assisted. Affected people can be those involved in the crisis or whose relatives and friends are involved, but they are also the employees of the organization involved in the response" (Coleman 2020, p 56). Due to the focus on people involved in a crisis, Coleman 2020 persuades that organisations can use crisis communication strategies from the military and emergency services, as these industries are well versed, and as a result prepared for a multitude of crisis situations (Coleman 2020, p 57). The military approach includes six key elements (Coleman 2020, p 58):

- Training and learning.
- Right person for the job.
- Clear procedures.
- Hierarchy of decision making.
- Support mechanisms.
- Debriefing.

These strategies place focus on development, training and exercising to ensure the business is in a 'state of readiness' that will assist in providing an effective response (Coleman 2020, p 58). While similar to the military approach, the emergency services approach differs in that they have to be prepared to face additional challenges pertaining to the support of affected people and managing the long-term impact the crisis may have (Coleman 2020, p 61). The emergency services approach includes the following eight key elements (Coleman 2020, p 62):

- Command and control approach.
- Structural support.
- Exercising.
- Role identified in legislation.
- Managing the consequences.
- Focusing on the human aspects.
- Tactical advisors.
- Debriefing.

The command and control approach, otherwise known as the Gold, Silver and Bronze approach (Coleman 2020, p 62), is of relevance due to the questionable role leadership plays in crisis communication in sport, which will be discussed in section 2.6. Coleman argues this approach operates as follows: "The Gold Commander will be a very senior person within the

organization and will set the overarching strategy. They will make the most critical decisions related to the response. They are supported by Silver Commanders who have some decision-making responsibility and Bronze Commanders who will be working tactically on the ground. It can be referred to as strategic (Gold), tactical (Silver) and operational (Bronze)" (Coleman 2020, p 62). As mentioned in section 2.3, in the case of the Bulldogs there was the issue of inconsistent messaging from leadership in the time of crisis which escalated the severity of the situation. Adopting the Gold, Silver and Bronze approach would serve sport organisations well to ensure all those involved in the crisis response are in agreement and are aware of what approach the organisation is taking.

While having a strategic approach planned to execute during a crisis is crucial, what is also important is post-crisis messaging. Depending on the severity of the crisis, and the level of responsibility the organisation must accept, the post crisis messages can range from excuse and justification to full apology (Coombs 2000). "Excuses accept that there are victims but claim no responsibility for them, while justification tries to minimize the harm done by the crisis…Corrective action focuses on repairing the damage from the crisis, thus addressing victims' needs directly. Full apology accepts responsibility and asks victims for forgiveness, once more directly addressing stakeholder concerns. The full apology is the most accommodative because accepting responsibility opens the organization to lawsuits – victim needs are placed above organizational needs" (Coombs 2000). These post-crisis messaging tactics outline what must be done while also raising what potential implications implementing these strategies may entail. The nature of many sports crises can involve player personnel committing wrongdoing that may also carry legal consequences. Therefore, organisations are often hesitant to issue a full apology as it can expose them to potential lawsuits. However, this creates the issue of insufficient accountability and transparency from sports organisations in post-crisis messaging – there must be a level of responsibility taken if the organisation was involved in allowing the issue or crisis to occur. Coombs (2000) argues "organizational misdeeds are wilful violations that carry strong perceptions of organizational responsibility. Generally, as perceptions of organizational responsibility increase, crisis managers need to move away from defensive" (Coombs 2000). This argument supports that crisis managers, as well as leadership, must be aware of the perceptions of organisational responsibility so they can compose the most effective post-crisis response that will benefit the most important stakeholders and publics involved. This is further supported when Coombs argues "If stakeholders strongly believe a crisis exists – a challenge resonates – a denial is ineffective

even if the organization knows it is correct. It is important to remember if stakeholders believe a crisis exists, a crisis does exist" (Coombs 2000). If rumours become an ongoing issue throughout a crisis, it is important that an organisation avoids repeating the rumour in the response, however if stakeholders believe the rumour to be true it is crucial to provide clarification that it is untrue – therefore, an explanation is an effective response (Coombs 2000). It is clear from the evidence provided by Coombs that organisations must take a detailed approach to their post-crisis messaging and deeply consider the implications (both negative and positive) each strategy can entail.

2.5 Image Repair

When a sports league or organisation has a crisis, there is risk of their overall reputation being damaged. Image repair is a theory commonly applied to individual athletes in sport, as their image is constantly vulnerable to controversy and scandal (Brazeal 2008, p 146). It is important that organisations in sport are also aware of this aspect of a crisis and take the proper approach to repair any part of their reputation that has been affected. Image Repair Theory contains strategies and frameworks that can be implemented based on the situation being faced. Benoit persuades that "a damaged reputation can hurt our persuasiveness, because generally trustworthiness in particular is important to persuasion, and credibility can be impaired by fallout from actual or perceived wrong-doing. We may be liable to punishment such as fines or jail time for our misdeeds." (Benoit 2014, p 2). It is evident from this argument that reputational damage can seriously affect one's credibility, something that is of high importance when an organisation engages in crisis communications. Reputation is the consequence of experiences and judgements made by stakeholders, therefore PR itself cannot control reputation – members of one's organisation have great power to influence reputation in what they say in their personal lives regarding how the organisation operates or behaves (L'Etang, 2013). Additionally, it is crucial that an organisation does not react in an improper way when they believe their reputation has been damaged in a negative way; "Those who believe that their face or reputation has been injured or even threatened rarely ignore these perils. When our image is threatened, we usually feel compelled to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies or excuses for our behavior" (Benoit 2014, p 3). Sports organisations may be compelled to react negatively to reputational damage as it has the opportunity to have severe impacts on fan perceptions and threaten teams financially (Brown-Devlin 2018, p 42). As discussed in section 2.4, it is important to understand the implications engaging in communications that involve excuses or a full

apology during a crisis as these strategies can involve further consequences if used ineffectively. According to Benoit, basic image repair theory is simple: "A person or organization accuses another of wrongdoing, and the accused produces a message that attempts to repair that image. However, this basic situation can become more complex in several ways. Sometimes the alleged victim is not the attacker" (Benoit 2014, p 13). The situation can become more complex for sports organisation due to the possibilities of facing negative media coverage, unfavourable reactions from key stakeholders, and financial implications that can impact one's brand (Brown-Devlin 2018, p 42). An example of an image repair situation becoming more complex in the sports industry is the Rutgers University (U.S.) men's basketball team when a coach was accused of verbally berating his players. Members of the coaching staff were forced to resign as well as the Athletic Director for not firing the accused parties sooner. The situation became more complex when the former director of player development sued the institution claiming he was fired for 'whistle-blowing' the situation (Benoit 2014, p 13). This further supports the claim that the victim(s) (which in this case would be the players who were abused) are not always the attackers. Benoit argues there are five broad strategies involved in image repair (Benoit 2014, p 22-29):

- Denial
    - Simple denial
    - Shifting blame
- Evasion of responsibility
    - Provocation
    - Defeasibility
    - Accident
    - Good intentions
- Reducing offensiveness
    - Bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation.
- Corrective action
    - i.e. "Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned."
- Mortification
    - i.e. "I'm so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize."

When implementing any of the above strategies, it is imperative one understands their audience before doing so; "Audience analysis means understanding the audiences existing attitudes and beliefs and values that constitute those attitudes... It is vital for a persuader to understand the audience" (Benoit 2014, p 31). There have been additional tactics used in sports, specifically where an athlete is the accused party in which instance they may engage in: (1) stonewalling (slowing down the release of information, avoiding questions/refusing to provide answers), (2) suffering and victimization (regarding themselves as a target of the crisis or a victim), and (3) conforming and levelling the playing field ('everyone was doing it' or that their actions were necessary based on the environment they operate in) (Hambrick 2018, p 138-139). The National Hockey League has a recorded history of engaging in defensive image repair strategies dating back to the league lock out in 2004 in which they engaged in messaging that involved bolstering and attempting to shift blame after their handling of the controversy was widely criticized by the public (DiSanza et al. 2013, p 330-332).

An additional example of image repair strategies being utilized in North American sport is that of the 2012 New Orleans Saints (National Football League) player bounty scandal. In 2012 it was found that the New Orleans Saints football team had a 'bounty' program where in players were paid bonuses to hit players with the purpose of injuring them (Benoit 2014, p 79). The Head Coach and General Manager of the club implemented both mortification and corrective action in their response, taking full responsibility and accountability, as well as declaring that they would never allow it to occur again (Benoit 2014, p 80). Despite the correct approach from the Saints, the fact that the organisation was paying bounties to injure opposing players is not justifiable in any regard (Benoit 2014, p 81). This example can be compared to the scandals such as the 2010 Chicago Blackhawks and the 2018 World Junior Hockey Canada team; they may have eventually taken steps for corrective action, but the acts committed are not justifiable and can be attributed to the broader issue of ice hockey culture. The teams will continue to play games, sell tickets, and have fan support, however their reputations may be forever affected by the events that took place.

2.6 Leadership in crisis communications
Leadership plays an imperative role in crisis communications – the CEO or managing director must be made aware of the crises at the earliest opportunity (Coleman 2020, p 101). Chain of command plays a role in these instances – if a low-level employee is aware of an

issue that could potentially develop into a crisis, it is unlikely they will go directly to the CEO, they will go to their direct superior where it will then, in an ideal world, run up the chain of command (Pederson et al. 2021, p 149). Much like the captain of a sports team, the behaviour of a leader will impact the behaviour of the other players and can be the difference between a successful or unsuccessful season. Coleman argues that "whatever the CEO of a business is interested in or concerned with will get the focus of the rest of the employees. This means that if they show an interest in the work to develop risk management and crisis planning, the rest of the business will prioritize it" (Coleman 2020, p 101). Therefore, it is important that leadership understand that communication is crucial between all members of the organisation, regardless of what their role is (Pederson et al. 2021 p 141). It is argued that an effective leader in times of crises possess the following qualities (Coleman 2020, p 102):

- Motivating
- Consistent
- Decisive
- Compassionate
- Visible
- Ethical
- Resilient
- Effective at communicating
- Skilful at managing expectations

Despite the sports industry being a multibillion-dollar industry, it is evident through the handling of scandals and/or crises referenced in previous sections that said leadership qualities may be absent. According to Burton et al., "The dynamic growth of professional, public, and private sports organizations has increased the demand for effective leadership requiring a sophisticated set of skills to manage modern day programs. While it is easy to assume leaders in the sport management industry have been adequately taught the finer points of leadership to handle requirements of increasingly complex business, the reality is quite different" (Burton et al 2018). Inadequate leadership in times of crises can heighten the severity of the situation as "leaders are responsible for understanding communications, show how to use it strategically, and recognizes its importance in helping to build and maintain internal and external organizational trust" (Burton et al 2018) and "the leader's role in implementing appropriate and timely communication strategies can payoff in driving more

positive outcomes" (Burton et al 2018). It is evident that leadership must be fully versed in communications practice and strategic implementation and cannot simply 'sit back' as the situation unfolds. Coleman suggests that "A CEO that is not visible from the early stages of a crisis will be viewed as hiding from the problem, which will reflect on the organization's response" (Coleman 2020, p 105). Additionally, in being consistent with the themes of crisis management pertaining to not holding the organisation's reputation as the top priority during a crisis; "The leader must be focused on doing the right thing in developing the response to the crisis and not on trying to protect the reputation of the company" (Coleman 2020, p 105). Similar to how a sports team operates, in crisis management effective teamwork is key – however the leader must take responsibility, especially if there are difficult decisions to be made (Coleman 2020, p 108). The leader is not only accountable for the issue(s) but also the organisation's response to it (Coleman 2020, p 108). While it is crucial for the leader or CEO to be present and the primary spokesperson, the communications team must ensure they are effectively trained to deal with interviews, community meetings, shareholder and stakeholder meetings, and employee engagement (Coleman 2020, p 110). Finally, the communications team cannot simply put words into leadership's mouth, they must be authentic in their response and communications to all stakeholders and publics (Coleman 2020, p 111). It is crucial that leadership is educated on how to operate in times of crisis so they can build and maintain trust with their publics and properly manage key relationships.

2.7 Culture

It should not be overlooked the impact culture can have on communication practices. In the context of sports, different sports have different cultures – especially depending on the physicality and perceived masculinity involved in participating as an athlete. Culture, "is a group's shared collective values, attitudes, beliefs, customs and thoughts…an emergent property of how group members communicate." (Barnett and Lee 2002, p 277). Culture in the context of sport has the opportunity to divide or unite communities, cities and countries, as well as deliver significant economic benefits to locations that may host 'mega' sporting events such as the Olympics or a World Cup (Tench and Waddington 2021, p 529).

It is important to outline the culture of ice hockey for the purpose of this research. The National Hockey League has been historically plagued by their 'traditionalist' culture, something that has made implementation of new PR, marketing, or branding strategies difficult (Batchelor and Formentin 2008, p 158). This traditionalist culture is also

indoctrinated in the young athletes of the game. Burry and Fiset argue that "Athletes who make it to the upper echelons of professional ice hockey in North America are indoctrinated into the beliefs, norms, and rituals of the sport from an early age. These practices are often highly restrictive, and can eventually lead to reduced autonomy and eventual commoditization" (Burry and Fiset 2020). With players being viewed as commodities, their on-ice performance takes top priority which can lead to inappropriate behaviour potentially being ignored, "As on-ice performance is the primary focus in the business of hockey, high-performing players and coaches who engage in deviant activity can be conveniently ignored. This process is essential to commoditization, as it further restricts the options of commoditized individuals and subjugates them to the will of the organisation with exceptions being made for some" (Burry and Fiset 2020). Athletes in the sport often find it difficult to discuss mental and psychological pressures they face as they are conditioned to "simply grit their teeth and remain silent." (Alsarve 2022). This has created a toxic culture within the sport, "though the on-ice product may be exciting, many of the dynamics that take place behind the scenes are deviant, immortal, and in some cases, illegal" (Burry and Fiset 2020). By excusing negative behaviour(s), it enables the 'win-at-all-costs' mentality which is a problematic issue in elite sport (Burry and Fiset 2020). This cultural issue within the sport was evident in the investigative report of the 2010 Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal where in it was recounted by General Manager, Stan Bowman, that when management was made aware, in the midst of pursuing the Stanley Cup Championship, that a team employee was alleged to have sexually assaulted a player – the Head Coach appeared angry, emphasizing that it was 'hard for the team to get to where they were, and they could not deal with this issue now.' This was echoed by the Head of Hockey Operations declaring, 'the Blackhawks might never make it this far in the playoffs again, and that they needed to think about when to handle the issue' (Schar 2021). For an organisation in any industry, this is a clear violation of operational and ethical procedures. However, it is clear from this statement from the former General Manager of the Blackhawks that considerations for these procedures were not seen as a priority, the main priority was winning the championship. Additionally, this information did not become public until 11 years after the scandal occurred, which supports the argument from Burry and Fiset regarding ice hockey culture that "When publicly exposed, rather than confronting the issue, the response is often denial, damage control, and continued silence that is only broken once there is damage to an organisation's public image" (Burry and Fiset 2020). This identifies the broad conflict in ice

hockey regarding the constant mishandling of issues and crises – a large contribution to this conflict is the culture of the sport and its impact on communication practices.

2.8 Social Media in Sport Communications

All industries and business have had to adjust to the digital age and social media. This has specifically changed public relations and communications practices in recent years. Specific to sport, "social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become a 'disruptive force in sport communication today'" (Abeza et al 2021, p 346). For the purpose of this research, it will be important to understand what occurs on social media during a crisis for a sports organisation and how these organisations should be operating on these sites. First, it is crucial that organisations engage in both social media listening and monitoring. Social media monitoring is defined as the "systemic process of understanding, analyzing, and reporting insights and conversations on reputation, brand position, community health, and the opinion of key audience members" (Freberg 2018, p 86). Social media listening is where "organizations seek to learn, explore, and 'uncover emerging trends, opportunities, activities, and issues' that could impact the [sports organization] either positively or negatively'" (Abeza et al 2021, p 365; Freburg 2018, p 96). It is key to note that social media monitoring is the more quantitative approach, where as social media listening is the qualitative approach (Abeza et al 2018, p 365). Both strategies play a crucial role in an organisation's response and communications on social media during a crisis in both assessing and evaluating the situation. In assessing what is happening on social media, "[the] plan must be informed by the reality of what is happening. The best place to find this information out is on social media, so a key step of [the] plan should be to enact a social listening plan and use the information the listening plan provides to inform your crisis communication work. Do not trust the first information you find on social media, verify the source first" (Abeza et al 2021, p 363). Conversely, in evaluating the situation, one must "determine if the plan worked. To do so you should track key benchmarks (e.g. social media sentiment, stock prices, media mentions) to know if your strategy is having the intended impact and to evaluate how your plan worked (or did not) during a crisis" (Abeza 2021, p 363). Both assessment and evaluation are key for an organisation's response on social media throughout and following a crisis. Evaluation will also properly prepare an organisation in the event of a future crisis.

As discussed in section 2.4, an organisation's timely response is crucial to how stakeholders and publics will react. As times have changed in the digital age, sports organisations have

used social media as their main form of communication in times of crisis (Abeza 2021, p 368). Abeza et al. argue that when a sports organisation is dealing with a crisis; "the absence of any statement and/or action from the team would result in the story staying in the news cycle longer than necessary and increase the reputational damage to the organisation. Whereas a quick statement (e.g. putting the player on leave) will help reduce the media focus on the issue and team, and perhaps switch attention to the broader issues around the crisis (e.g. domestic violence in society)" (Abeza et al 2021, p 365). As evidenced by this argument, a timely response on social media can severely impact the nature of a crisis in terms of the amount of reputation damage it will inflict on the organisation, as well as the amount of continued media coverage it will attract. Additionally, many crises will create a need for change, which is something the party at fault must take seriously (Abeza 2021, p 365); "The key is to first respond and then to work through the change that is needed to address the longer-term change in a parallel process. [based on an athlete arrest example] The first step could be releasing a statement about placing the athlete on immediate leave. This could be followed up with a message indicating that the athlete is no longer with the team (should there be more evidence brought forward) and statements from management published about a zero-tolerance policy for domestic violence arrests in the organization" (Abeza 2021, p 365). It is important to be on top of these updates on social media as the sentiment of users can change very quicky based on new information being made available; "initial response from social media users may be positive, and then once more information becomes available, the content could turn negative very quickly. Based on this example, social media monitoring can be used to identify when the sentiment turns negative" (Abeza 2021, p 365). Organisations must have a deep understanding of what their stakeholders and publics want from them when communicating on social media – monitoring and listening tactics then become crucial. As Hopwood argues, "Social media demands an understanding of how organisations will interact in a continuing dialogue between themselves and their stakeholders – from fans to community to sponsors to internal staff. Expertise in this area will be less concerned with immediate challenge based objectives and more with long-term nurturing and development of both the relationship between the organisation and the stakeholders as much as it will be in enabling intra-stakeholder communication" (Hopwood 2010, p 202). Proper utilization of social media by sports organisations cannot simply be enacted in times of crisis, it is a constant business operation that they need to be working on. If their conduct through social media communications is consistent and reliable, it will help

to build trust with their stakeholders and publics - a relationship dynamic that will prove to be useful when a crisis does occur.

Chapter 3: Methodology:

3.1 Introduction

To understand the methodology chosen for this research, it is important to review the research questions. Firstly, the research questions are largely based upon opinions on the current scope of business practices within the sport of ice hockey. This perspective falls into the successful research application of qualitative research where one seeks to not only discover people's experiences but also understand what is important for them (Silverman 2021, p 3). Qualitative research is a popular choice in communication research, particularly when it comes to investigating managed communication related to organisations, people and society (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p 6). This is due to researchers seeking to gain the perspective of those being studied, wanting to know the implications of the knowledge they have, and the impact public relations and communications may have in society (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p 6). The interest of researchers in this context is the "voices and perspectives of stakeholders and practitioners engaged in communication at different levels, including the interpersonal, organizational, professional and societal" (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p 6). This approach comes with its limitations as 'emotions' play a part in subjects answers or the results one receives, therefore this approach assumes that these 'emotions' are readily available when a set question is proposed to the subject(s) of the research (Silverman 2021, p 4). This leads into further criticisms of qualitative research that claim it is too subjective, difficult to replicate, includes problems of generalization, and can have a lack of transparency (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p 12). While these criticisms are valid, for this particular research the qualitative approach is important due to how public relations practices in sport, and more specifically ice hockey, can deeply affect the interpersonal relationship with stakeholders and publics which can lead to a lack of trust between parties. Therefore, gaining perspective from individuals closely connected to the sport is integral to the research process to understand how public relations and communication practices within ice hockey effect society. It is because of this reasoning that key figure interviews have been chosen for the purpose of gaining this perspective.

In addition to key figure interviews, content analysis was conducted to understand the frequency of communications from an ice hockey organisation and the language used in statements in times of crisis and to understand; (1) whether they approached the situation

with accountability and transparency, and (2) the crisis communication strategies implemented. To narrow the research, one specific incident will be examined for the content analysis: the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal. The chosen area for analysis will be posts on 'X' (formally known as twitter) and will examine the response from both the Chicago Blackhawks organisation and the National Hockey League. The chosen method is qualitative content analysis which will be expanded upon further in section 3.3.

3.2 Research Questions:

RQ1: To what extent do the governing bodies in ice hockey place the importance of accountability on organisations when dealing with an internal crisis?

RQ2: What role does leadership within professional ice hockey organisations take in public relations practices during crisis management?

The first two research questions are largely based upon unexplored aspects of the current state of business operations pertaining to communications in ice hockey. To investigate this, key figure interviews were the chosen method as they offer a qualitative approach to uncover beliefs or attitudes of important individuals in a chosen field (Franklin 2009, p 121). In this particular case, interviewees were chosen based on their experience working in ice hockey in some capacity and/or covering the sport from a journalistic perspective. Interviews are a successful method when one wishes to better understand the "constructs interviewees use as a basis for their opinions and beliefs about a particular situation, product or issue" (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p 222). Easterby-Smith et al. further expands on this reasoning in arguing that interviews are appropriate when the "step-by-step logic of a situation is not clear" (Easterby-Smith et al 2008). This applies to RQ1 and RQ2 as there is limited academic research investigating these aspects of public relations and communications in the sport of ice hockey, which leads to their processes being unclear. These findings will contribute to research on PR and communications practice in times of crisis through accounts and opinions of those who have worked closely with the sport.

RQ3: To what extent are crisis management, reputation management, and image repair techniques used within crisis situations in ice hockey?

The strategies and techniques such as crisis management, reputation management, and image repair, were expanded upon in Chapter 2. In order to examine whether these concepts are being utilized in the sport of ice hockey, content analysis must be conducted on instances of crises in the sport. As mentioned in 3.1 to narrow the research, the specific event that will be analysed will be the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal. This research will be looking at both the Chicago Blackhawks and National Hockey League's communications throughout the crisis on the social network site 'X'. The findings of this research question will contribute to discovering if ice hockey organisations and governing bodies are properly managing crisis situations threw use strategies that are proven to be effective by previous academics.

3.3 Key Figure Interviews

The key figure interviews were conducted using the in-depth interview technique which is a "one-to-one method of data collection that involves and interviewer and an interviewee discussing specific topics in depth" (Hennink et al. 2020, p 116). During an in-depth interview, the interviewer asks questions in order to motivate the interviewee to share their perspective(s) (Hennink et al. 2020, p 116). Prior to engaging in key figure interviews, it is first important to understand the three basic types of interviews (Franklin 2009, p 121):

- Structured – in which a predetermined set of questions is posed in a set order.
- Semi-structured – in which there are some predetermined questions but there is flexibility to tailor the delivery to respondents' answers, and to add themes that were perhaps initially not anticipated.
- Unstructured – in which the role of the interviewer is minimal, simply opening up the topic of debate to the respondent and allowing the exchange to flow freely.

For this research the semi-structured approach was chosen where interviewees received a set of proposed questions prior to the interview that were followed throughout the process, however the conversation and questions could be shifted depending on the participants answers throughout the interview. Semi-structured interviews are more often the primary source for a qualitative research project and are scheduled for a specific day and time to properly conduct (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). Prior to the execution of the interviews the participants were sent an information sheet detailing the purpose and goals of

the research with a set outline of questions/themes that would be followed throughout. The topics and questions outlined for the participants were as follows:

- Your opinions of the current state of public relations and communications in ice hockey and the National Hockey League.
- Past examples of crises in the National Hockey League/International Hockey and whether you believe they were handled effectively.
- What role you believe leadership plays in crisis communications in the sport.
- Your current view on the 'culture' of ice hockey and whether it may affect communication practices within the sport.
- To what level you believe accountability and transparency are conveyed in public relations/communications in ice hockey.
- To the best of your knowledge, do ice hockey organisations utilize crisis communication strategies?
- Do you believe there is a trend of poor crises management in the sport?
- What recommendations you have to improve public relations and communications practices within the sport going forward (if any).
- If ice hockey organisations effectively execute image repair.
- If ice hockey organisations execute post-crisis messaging effectively (i.e. steps to improve in the future/communicating steps taken to prevent similar crises from occurring again, etc).

This is what is referred to as an 'interview guide' which is a tool that is essential in order to 'guide' the process (Hennink et al. 2020, p 118). When comprising the interview guide, it is important for the central section to include the key questions; these questions are the essential questions for the research and are specifically placed there to allow time to build rapport (Hennink et al. 2020, p 120). The questions and themes above were chosen to elicit opinions and beliefs on the current state of public relations and communications in ice hockey while also drawing upon academic concepts in crisis management and public relations in sport that were outlined in Chapter 2. As the interviews were semi-structured in nature, the questions were not always followed in order, however it was up to the interviewer to maintain the theme. Interviewees were selected based upon their experience working in or in relation to the sport of ice hockey - whether that be in a media capacity or in a management position for an organisation. The purpose in doing so is related to previous academics arguing that the

sample of interviewees should "be fairly homogenous and share critical similarities related to the research question" (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). The aim of this section of the research is to better understand the point of view(s) and opinions of those closely connected to the sport in regards to crisis management and communication practices, something Miller and Glassner (2021) have credited qualitative interviewing as a method to execute this calling it a "particular useful method for examining the social world from the points of view of research participants" (Miller and Glassner 2021, p 58). Miller and Glassner also recommend that researchers should be members of the groups they are studying for in-depth interviewing in order to better understand the subjects life experiences (Miller and Glassner 2021; Collins 1990; Taylor et al. 1995). The primary researcher of this project has both played and worked in ice hockey at a high level of competition which assists in understanding the communities the interviewees understand and frequent.

The interviews were conducted virtually as all participants reside in North America, as that is where ice hockey is most prominent and where the top professional league (NHL) is located. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed – it also important to note that it is best practice and ethical to obtain consent from participants for recording the session as well as using their quotes in the research. The information sheet and consent forms sent to interviewees were previously approved by the Cardiff University Ethics Committee.

3.3.1 Sample

Prospective interviewees were targeted based on their experience in working professionally in the game of ice hockey, being a pr/communications professional in ice hockey, or a journalist who primarily reports on the sport. A total of two subjects were interviewed for this research; Participant one (P1) is a sports journalist based in Canada with multiple years of experience writing for media outlets such as Sportsnet (Canadian sports broadcast) and the Economist. Participant two (P2) is a mental performance coach for an international governing body of ice hockey (competing in the IIHF) with multiple years of experience both playing and working in the sport.

3.4 Content Analysis

To conduct the content analysis section of this research, a use of qualitative content analysis will be necessary. Qualitative content analysis was chosen due to it being suitable for

analysing textual data of various types like "interviews, focus groups, documents, tweets, and the like" (Schreier and Atkinson, 2020). Qualitative content analysis is widely used across social sciences, especially in media and communication studies (Schreier and Atkinson, 2020). This method is considered less deductive in the way it has less prominence on mutually exclusive categories and focuses more on recurring and emerging themes (Huxley 2020). Themes in this context are referred to as a "sentence (or sentence compound), usually a summary or abstracted sentence, under which a wide range of specific formulations can be submitted" (Berelson 1971, p 138). Themes have also been described as the "subjective meaning and cultural-contextual message of data" (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove 2019). The themes examined in this content analysis are the crisis communication and image repair strategies previously outlined in Chapter 2. Examining the frequency in which these tactics were utilized will assist in understanding whether ice hockey organisations and governing bodies properly implement them in times of crisis. To further support the research, the frequency in which the crisis was mentioned or acknowledged by the organisations in question over a specific time period will be examined to investigate their transparency and if they were accountable for their actions. The Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal was the chosen event to be included in this content analysis as it was a major crisis in the sports industry and was widely covered in sport and mainstream media (See Appendix I).

Qualitative research is rarely replicated due to its subjective nature, the study could be replicated by other researchers, however, they would be unlikely to achieve the exact same results as the qualitative method largely depends on one's own characteristics, the background leading to a conclusion, and what one observes (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p 79). This is important to note as the primary researcher manually analysed the context of each tweet and determined when necessary what crisis communication strategies or image repair techniques were used – another researcher could conduct the same content analysis and interpret the language differently which would result in different conclusions.

3.4.1 Sample

A content analysis can quickly become uncontrolled if the goals are unspecified (Lai and To 2015), therefore it is important to note the sample for the analysis and the reasoning behind it. The sample for this research was taken from two separate X accounts: The Chicago Blackhawks (@NHLBlackhawks) and the National Hockey League (@NHL). The Chicago

Blackhawks were chosen as the incident occurred within their organisation and the scandal involved an employed member of their coaching staff as the accused party, and the victim was a player on their active roster. The National Hockey League's response was equally important to analyse as the Blackhawks are an organisation who competes in their league and is governed by the NHL. In the context of sport, fans 'rooting' for their team is more than passive consumption, it is an expression of their identity – when they follow their team's posts on social media, the text matters to them, they engage with it and invest and gain a sense of their place in the world (Dimitrov, 2008). For this reasoning, content analysis of X during a crisis is important to understand the relationship management and engagement with fans at that time. The two separate time periods were chosen resulting in a total of four months for the Blackhawks (13 May 2021 – 14 July 2021; 1 October 2021 – 30 November 2021) and 84 days for the National Hockey League (13 May 2021 – 30 June 2021; 25 October 2021 – 30 November 2021). The use of X's advanced search capability was utilized to analyse the posts each day within the time period above. This specific period was chosen to align with the scandal being reported on by the media (Clarke 2021):

- May 13, 2021 – a former Blackhawks player accused a former member of sexual assault.
- June 17, 2021 – Report surfaces of allegations that the Blackhawks refused to file a police report when they were made aware of the incident.
- June 28, 2021 – The Blackhawks announce the launch of an independent investigation into the incident that occurred in 2010.
- October 26, 2021 – The General Manager of the Blackhawks, Stan Bowman, resigns and the organisation is fined $2 million (USD) by the National Hockey League following the release of a report by U.S. law firm Jenner & Block detailing their findings on the incident.

The analysis was conducted from when the above information was made known to the public to measure the urgency in which the league and organisation addressed the crisis. It was equally as important to continue the analysis in the days following the news being reported in the case that neither the league nor the organisation acknowledged the crisis as well as a method to measure any post-crisis messaging and image repair techniques utilized.

3.4.2 Unit of Analysis

Content analysis will be conducted to investigate whether organisations and the governing bodies of ice hockey properly execute crisis communication and image repair strategies as well as the amount of accountability and transparency they communicate with their stakeholders. The specific league and organisation being examined is the National Hockey League and the Chicago Blackhawks during a crisis that involved a sexual assault of an athlete under contract of the Blackhawks during the 2010 Stanley Cup playoffs (the NHL's championship). 'X', formally known as twitter is the platform where the analysis will take place as the NHL and its organisation's use the site to frequently post news, team updates, and interact with fans. All the data collected will be taken from the two accounts (@NHL and @NHLBlackhawks) during the time period where the scandal reached mainstream media.

3.4.3 Units of measurement

Chicago Blackhawks posts on X:

1. **Tweet Date** – The date the tweet was posted will be categorized here to look at whether the Blackhawks responded/acknowledged the crisis in accordance with the timeline of the media and investigative journalists reporting on the incident.

2. **Mention of crisis/incident** – To examine whether the Blackhawks acknowledged the incident. This can include the mention of an internal investigation being launched, Kyle Beach or John Doe (the victim, who was referred to as John Doe until they publicly came forward), the incident that occurred in 2010, that they are aware of allegations made against the organisation, etc.

3. **Regular content** – The Blackhawks X account is a source of information for fans, the general public, and any other individuals who may seek information about the organisation. They frequently post updates regarding game scores/results, player signings, engaging content for fans, promotional content, etc. This is categorized as it can be interpreted as 'business as usual' while the incident/scandal was being reported on by the media.

4. **Promoting social cause/activism** – Any posts promoting a social cause and/or activism (i.e. supporting the military, cancer awareness, promoting/highlighting diversity within the organisation or community, equality initiatives, etc) will be included. This can be considered a form of bolstering, highlighting the good deeds/actions by the organisation while there is news of their wrongdoings being reported on in the media.

5. **Denial –** Any posts in which the organisation denies knowledge of the incident or that the accusations are false will be included.

6. **Bolstering –** As this incident involved the assault of an athlete under contract with the organisation, any posts that involve the organisation highlighting positive treatment or their commitment to protecting their players/athletes will be included.

7. **Apology –** Any posts including an apology, which could be directed to the victim(s), fans, employees, sponsors, sexual assault survivors, etc.

8. **Corrective action –** Any posts where the Blackhawks indicate corrective measures for the future of the organisation, what/if they are providing/offering help for the victim(s), changes made to the organisation to ensure a similar incident will not occur again.

9. **Mortification –** Any posts where the organisation uses mortification (i.e. accepting full blame, remorse).

10. **Diversion** – Any posts where the organisation attempts to shift focus away from the crisis to a different subject or theme.

11. **Defensive** – Any posts where the organisation is defensive of the allegations made against them.

12. **Empathetic** – Any posts where the organisation conveys empathy towards the victim(s), fans, players, employees, etc.

13. **Addressing fans** – Any posts directly addressing fans, this can be posts without mention of the incident. The fanbase is a major stakeholder group and an important relationship for sports organisations to nurture.

14. **Mention of victim** – Any posts that specifically mention the only identifiable victim from the incident, Kyle Beach or John Doe, who came forward through telling his story to an investigative sports journalist.

15. **Addressing media** – Any post where the organisation directly addresses the media, this can include news outlets or journalists who were reporting on the scandal. If they did so, this could be an example of attacking the accuser.

16. **If Crisis mentioned; mention of leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)** – Any post that mention the leadership group who were employed at the time of the crisis. This can be an indicator of the organisation being accountable for the individual's actions as well as being transparent with their stakeholders on who was involved.

17. **Statement from leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)** – Any posts including statements from the leadership group who were employed at the time of the crisis.

National Hockey League posts on X:

1. **Tweet date** - The date the tweet was posted will be categorized here to look at whether the NHL responded/acknowledged the crisis in accordance with the timeline of the media and investigative journalists reporting on the incident.

2. **Mention of crisis/incident** – Any posts where the NHL mentions or acknowledges the crisis/incident. This can include acknowledging the scandal, that they are aware of the allegations made against the Blackhawks, mention of the legal investigation regarding the incident, mention of the victim(s), etc.

3. **Promoting social cause/activism** - Any posts promoting a social cause and/or activism (i.e. supporting the military, cancer awareness, promoting/highlighting diversity within the organisation or community, equality initiatives, etc) will be included. This can be considered a form of bolstering, highlighting the good deeds/actions by the organisation while there is news of their wrongdoings being reported by the media.

4. **Criticism of Blackhawks leadership** – Any posts where the NHL specifically mentions members of the Blackhawks leadership group (coaching staff, general manager, ownership). This will be important to note as it will indicate whether the league held the leadership group of the Blackhawks accountable for their actions regarding the handling of the incident.

5. **Mention of victim** - Any posts that specifically mention the only identifiable victim from the incident, Kyle Beach or John Doe.

6. **Addressing fans** - Any posts directly addressing fans, this can be posts without mention of the incident. The fanbase is a major stakeholder group and an important relationship for sports organisations and leagues to nurture.

7. **If crisis mentioned; mention of Blackhawks leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership** – Any posts mentioning members of the Blackhawks leadership group by name. This will contribute to investigating the extent to which the NHL holds organisations accountable and is transparent with their fans and stakeholders.

8. **Follow-up action** – Any posts where the NHL communicates any follow-up action(s) in wake of the incident/crisis. This will assist in measuring how much the NHL communicates with transparency in times of a crisis.

9. **Addressing players/athletes** – Any posts where the NHL specifically addresses a message to their player personnel. The incident involved a player that was under contract with an organisation that the NHL governs – this will help measure how transparent they are with their athletes during a crisis. It is worth noting that a communication of this nature could have strictly been made internally, however it is still worth measuring if they would address these stakeholders publicly.

10. **Corrective action** - Any posts where the NHL indicates corrective measures for the future of the league and the organisations they govern. What/if they are providing/offering help for the victim(s), changes made to the league/organisational policies to ensure a similar incident will not occur again.

11. **Empathetic** - Any posts where the league conveys empathy towards the victim(s), fans, players, employees, etc.

12. **Apology** - Any posts including an apology, which could be directed to the victim(s), fans, employees, sponsors, sexual assault survivors, etc.

13. **Denial** - Any posts in which the league denies knowledge of the incident or that the accusations are false will be included.

The content analysis will be manually coded using the binary scale measuring 'Yes' as 1 and 'No' as 0 for each unit of measurement.

3.5 Limitations

The research is contributing to the field of public relations and communication in the sport of ice hockey, an area of study that has not been widely covered by previous academics. It does not, however, come without its limitations. Interviews are traditionally recorded and transcribed for analysis (Franklin 2009, p 122). However, where previous researchers may have recorded interviews in person, the interviews for this research had to be conducted virtually due to the participants residing in North America. Due to this aspect, connectivity issues posed a threat to the transcription of responses from interviewees. Recruiting participants for this research was also difficult as individuals who are employed by the National Hockey League or an NHL organisation were hesitant to take part as the research questions are critical of the approach they take to public relations and communication practices. The researcher did contact Rick Westhead, the investigative journalist who first

reported on the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal; Westhead agreed to the interview, however due to his work obligations, time unfortunately did not permit to conduct the call. Additionally, it is important to note that individuals do and say different things in different situations – an interview is a particular kind of situation (Taylor et al. 2016, p 105), the researcher cannot assume that the participants would not answer the questions differently should they be asked to them in a separate situation.

X was the chosen site for the unit of analysis due to the frequency in which the NHL and the Chicago Blackhawks communicate on that platform. Given an extended time frame it would benefit the research to expand the content analysis to team/league website and other social networking sites to examine whether different communications were posted. Additionally, the research would benefit from examining further scandals/incidents and crises that have occurred in the sport of ice hockey to analyse if the response has been consistent across multiple crises. Finally, given further time, responses to posts on X that mentioned the crisis would have been beneficial to analyse to examine the sentiment of fan reactions to the handling of the incident.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Key Figure Interview Findings

The findings from the in-depth interviews were categorized by themes to present the data in a more structured way. The themes from the interviews are consistent with the goal of the research and include the following: (1) the current state of public relations and communication in ice hockey, (2) accountability and transparency in times of crisis in ice hockey, (3) leadership's role in communications in ice hockey, (4) If leadership in ice hockey is currently communicating with accountability and transparency in times of crises, (5) post-crisis messaging in ice hockey.

The current state of public relations and communication in ice hockey:

To establish a foundation of the conversation at the beginning of the interviews, it was important to gain an understanding of the participants current view of public relations and communications practice within the sport. When P2 was posed this question, they responded:

> "Yeah, I think now it's probably gotten better because they realize you can't withhold anything. And if you do, then it's going to multiply… So I do think that there's sort of the mindset of getting in front of everything right away. I don't know that they release the details, but they get in front of the issues at least"

P2 continued in referencing this change in practice could be attributed to the change in culture or business practices overtime, and that legal implications could also be a factor:

> "I guess they're protecting the privacy of the victims. But I do think that's the kind of thing where…people need to know. Not because they're being nosey, but they need to know what's frowned upon behaviour…was it an alcohol thing? Did he hit on someone's wife? There are so many things…I mean, you mentioned the culture of hockey where I think the more it's out, the more it [the culture] changes."

This imposes a need for more transparency when an incident occurs in order to communicate to stakeholders what 'frowned upon behaviour' is in the sport and that there is a no tolerance policy. The incident they are referencing is a separate instance that occurred within the Chicago Blackhawks organisation in which a player's contract was terminated following inappropriate behaviour, however what had occurred was never disclosed to the public

(Myers, 2023). P1 had a similar viewpoint, indicating that PR in ice hockey does not appear as genuine.

> "They don't know what to do…hiring lawyers and these PR firms, they kind of get ahead of it but that doesn't work either because it just looks like it's checking the alleged assailant…You know that it's not genuine when you hire a lawyer or you hire a PR firm and get ahead of it."

P1 provides an interesting viewpoint in that when an organisation hires an external party for public relations during a crisis it can potentially communicate that they are doing so simply to protect their own asset or the alleged assailant. In summary, both interviewees indicate that they do not believe that PR and communications practices in ice hockey are being executed to an adequate extent.

Accountability and transparency in times of crisis in ice hockey:

With P2's unique position as a mental performance coach in the sport, much of their role involves educating on inappropriate behaviour to prevent incidents/crises from occurring in the future. An important piece of this education is referencing past incidents to learn from the mistakes, as well as why accountability and transparency is imperative. In discussing a specific course that they conduct for player personnel they stated:

> "In the course there's this book, 'Black Box Thinking', it talks about airplanes when they crash. The reason there's so few crashes is because every airline gets access to the black box information. So everybody benefits from the mistakes, everybody knows everything, and then they can all try to make sure that they don't do it. They don't replicate, there's no covering it up. So for me this is the same thing, people will benefit from knowing what happened, right? I know it's tricky with privacy, but there's not enough because you need to know what happened. Like you need to know, the boys [players] need to know what is inappropriate."

When asked if the same method of education could benefit those in leadership positions P2 continued by stating:

> "They absolutely need to [have the education]. They need to hear it and learn too…and then they go, 'yeah, that makes sense.' And who teaches them is really important."

P1 provided a different perspective in discussing aspects of accountability and transparency when an organisation is communicating during a crisis:

> "I understand you're trying to protect the players. The player is presumed innocent, right? Yes, you're going to do that. But I mean, you should give the [player] an opportunity to even speak in his own words… But it'll never happen because organizations are going to protect their assets and have been forever. And it's going to continue to happen."

This response is consistent with the themes in the interviewee's opinions on the current state of PR and communications in the sport, where an organisation places more importance on protecting their assets than they do on accountability and transparency. P1 also offers an interesting perspective where they imply that in the case of a player being accused of wrongdoing, the public should hear directly from them – not a spokesperson or PR representative. P1 continued further on the subject of transparency by stating:

> "I think transparency is one of those tools they've played with. People use the word, but are they actually committed to transparency? And the hockey community is the perfect example."

P1 expanded on this point by specifically referencing the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal,

> "I find it hard to believe that nobody knew what was going on."

Leadership's role in communications in ice hockey

This theme was essential to gain perspective on the importance of leadership involvement in communication practices. P2 states that:

> "It plays a huge role…the people in the leadership positions, when they get out at the very beginning and say 'this is so important to us now' and this is 'the most important thing', communicating it right away and up front is really important. It's really good when there's a firm warning."

They continue in articulating that it is important in these instances for leadership to hold themselves accountable to the standards they set and communicate to their stakeholders,

> "They say this is not acceptable, but then…they're doing a lot of things where I think then they lose the players."

This is important to note as it indicates that leadership in ice hockey is not consistently abiding by the standards they set for player personnel, which as a result can cause them 'lose' the players and raise risk for future incidents to occur. Additionally, P2 referenced the hierarchal affect in which the message is not delivered by the correct party,

> "It's got to come from the top, when it comes from a messenger 50 rungs down the ladder who's 'boring' then I don't even know if they hear anything."

This offers an interesting perspective in that P2 emphasizes that it is not only crucial that the message comes directly from leadership, but the individual must deliver the message with purpose in a way that it is engaging for the intended audience.

If leadership in ice hockey is currently communicating with accountability and transparency in times of crises:

P2 offered their perspective on this subject regarding the sport of ice hockey in the context of both international play and the National Hockey League, which involve two separate entities who govern different organisations. In terms of the international governing bodies, they stated:

> "I think if we're talking leadership at Hockey [Country] from what I've seen, I think they've done an awesome job with the men's national teams and the people at the top there. I think since everything came out there, they've done amazing.
> They're really, really trying to do a good job."

When shifting focus to the National Hockey League they said:

> "Leadership in the NHL? I don't even know how to say it because like I said, I don't know all the legal implications, but I don't think they're doing an amazing job. I think they're way better at being at presenting issues, but not at being more specific, so they've got room for improvement. I do think they've gotten better and I don't think it's going to get worse. I don't think it can go back [to the state it was before]."

Post-crisis messaging in ice hockey:

The interview/discussion with P1 shifted to post-crisis messaging where they referenced the leadership of the Chicago Blackhawks (specifically Head Coach, Joel Quenneville) at the time of the sexual assault scandal:

"Let's say Joel Quenneville 2010, right? What does that reinstatement look like? That he apologized? But it never should have took you, I don't know what is it about 10 years to actually give an apology. Like is it genuine? So for the post crisis management, I think people don't really think of accountability."

P1 continued by expanding on the importance of organisations being genuine in their communications, especially in post-crisis messaging:

"I think post crisis management is critical and I only look at one specific thing that it has to come off as genuine and not wait until they're [the accused party] charged. So that kind of leaves the public… just wondering like, OK, what are the details, did you do this? You're in the court of public opinion if you want to look like you're a decent human being, get ahead of it."

In this response P1 was once again referencing the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal and the extended time it took members of the leadership group to issue genuine apologies to those affected.

4.2 Content Analysis Findings

Chicago Blackhawks posts on X

A total of 749 posts were sent by the Chicago Blackhawks X account (@NHLBlackhawks) in the span of two separate periods for a total of four months in 2021 (13 May 2021 – 14 July 2021; 1 October 2021 – 30 November 2021). From 13 May 2021 – 14 July 2021, there was no mention or acknowledgement of the accusations made against the organisation, the launch of an internal investigation, or the news of the organisation refusing to file a police report when they learned of the incident in 2010 (See 3.3.1). From 1 October 2021 – 30 November 2021, the Blackhawks mentioned/acknowledged the incident in three separate posts which were sent in the days following the release of the Jenner & Block investigation findings and subsequently the resignation of their General Manager (See 3.3.1). The following figure demonstrates the strategies used and personnel mentioned in the posts acknowledging the incident:

Figure 1:

Posts when crisis is mentioned/acknowledged
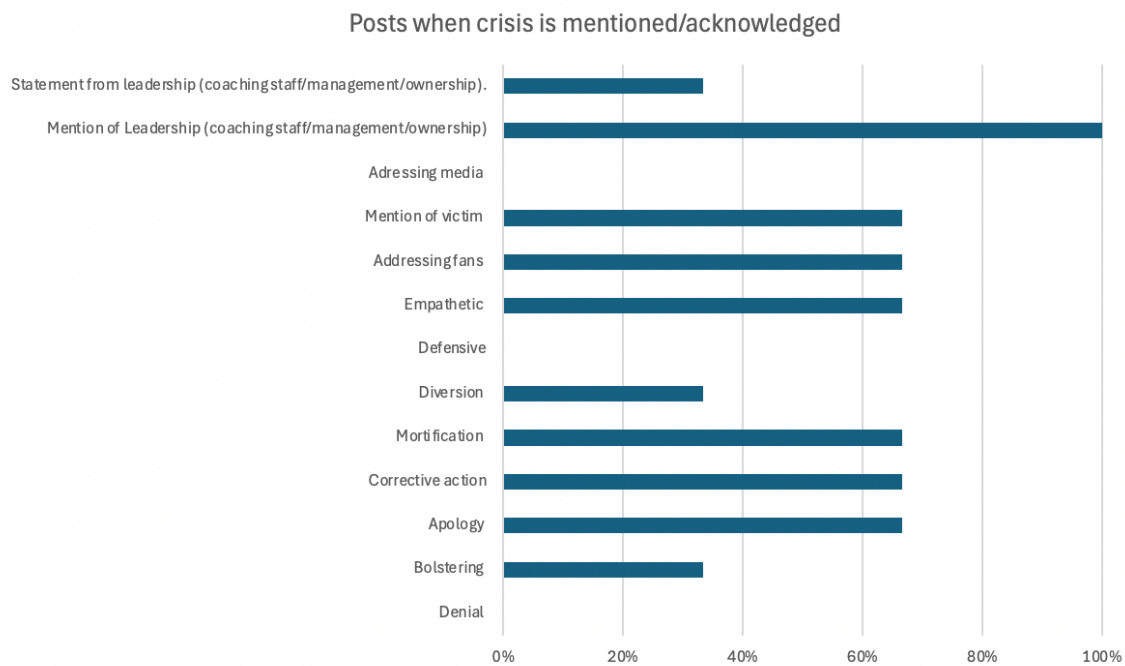
Posts that acknowledged the crisis contained themes such as mortification, corrective action, an apology, and language that was empathetic at a rate of 66%. The Blackhawks directly mentioned the victim and addressed fans at the same rate of 66%. These themes display a level of accountability and transparency in their communication when they did mention the incident. There was, however, defensive tactics used with themes such as bolstering, and diversion used in 33% of the communications. The first post mentioning the crisis addressed the public, and specifically the fans, following the release of the findings from the investigation into the incident in which they acknowledged the victim, apologized, and used corrective action, mortification, and bolstering (See Appendix H). The second post regarding the incident specifically mentioned the victim by name while also stating that they are implementing a new leadership team (See Appendix H). The organisation did mention leadership in 100% of the posts, however, only 33% of the messages were directly from leadership (See Appendix H). Overall, out of the 749 tweets analysed from the sample period, 0.04% addressed or acknowledged the incident.

The National Hockey League's posts on X

As the National Hockey League overseas and covers all 32 teams in their league, they post at a higher volume than an individual organisation such as the Chicago Blackhawks. A total of 2,409 posts were sent from the National Hockey Leagues X account (@NHL) in the span of

two separate time periods for a total of 84 days (13 May 2021 – 30 June 2021; 25 October 2021 – 30 November 2021). Despite statements and acknowledgement from the Chicago Blackhawks regarding the incident, as well as the resignation of their General Manager, the NHL did not mention nor address the incident in any capacity. This includes no mention or apology to victim who had come forward, who was an athlete competing in their league, at the time of the assault.

The findings for the content analysis were intended to generate more data, however the minimal response regarding the incident in question from both the league and the organisation generated less data than initially anticipated. Despite the absence of available data from this analysis, this still contributes to the overarching goal of the research which will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Key Figure Interviews Discussion

Through following the semi-structured interview approach (see 3.2) when conducting the key figure interviews, five themes were established from P1 and P2: (1) the current state of public relations and communication in ice hockey, (2) accountability and transparency in times of crisis in ice hockey, (3) leadership's role in communications in ice hockey, (4) If leadership in ice hockey is currently communicating with accountability and transparency in times of crises, (5) post-crisis messaging in ice hockey. These themes help to generate an understanding of the current landscape of communication practice in the sport, identify potential avenues for improvement, and present the challenges the current practices can lead to. The themes established from the interviews helped to contribute to the goals of both RQ1 and RQ2 in providing insight into the use of accountability and transparency in the sport as well as the role leadership has in communication practice at high level organisations.

While the interviews revealed mixed perspectives on the current state of public relations and communication practice within the sport, both P1 and P2 were mainly critical of the current approaches. P2 indicated that practices have improved in the sport in the sense that organisations are realizing they can no longer ignore issues or withhold information, however a gap still remains in providing details to their publics regarding issues or incidents that occur. P1 was even more critical in their view of PR and communications in the sport, indicating that organisations or leagues often come off as disingenuous – potentially placing more importance on protecting their assets rather than truly being accountable for any perceived wrongdoings. This supports the overarching issue in public relations in sports as argued by previous academics (See 2.2) where in despite the success and rapid growth of the industry, there still remains an inconsistency in communications practice and substantial room for improvement. It is clear from these accounts from both P1 and P2 that these practices are still misunderstood by those in leadership positions in sport, specifically in ice hockey. Sports organisations are infamous for taking their publics for granted (See 2.2), both interview participants reveal that in ice hockey the undervaluing of genuine communication and transparency can largely contribute to this issue.

Expanding specifically into the theme of accountability and transparency, P1 and P2 believe it is a concept that is inherently important in the sport, but not consistently practiced to the full extent. P2 offers a useful analogy derived from their position working in the sport with 'black box thinking', wherein they insist that sharing information/details from incidents or crises can only benefit as it is crucial for learning and preventing similar occurrences in the future. As the argument from Coombs (2007) outlined (See 2.3), a crisis creates a need for information, stakeholders need to know what occurred and what is being done to learn from any mistakes that were made to prevent it from happening again. This is exactly where adopting 'black box thinking' can contribute to maintaining a trusting relationship with stakeholders during and post crisis. This concept can especially contribute to the culture of the sport in educating young players on this way of thinking from a young age, helping them to understand the consequences of intolerable behaviour. Those who end up working in the sport of ice hockey in a professional capacity were often once players themselves, having the next generation of leadership in the sport equipped with this foundation would be extremely valuable. P1 reverted to the argued disingenuous nature of communications in the sport, insisting that the priority is on protecting assets over being accountable for one's actions. As discussed in 2.7, this can be attributed to the culture of the sport where in players and athletes from a young age are reduced to commodities and there in assets for the professional organisation they eventually compete for. As also discussed in 2.7, this leads to a cycle of not confronting an issue, denial, damage control, and continued silence. They continued to argue that while transparency is a concept they believe is discussed at length in the sport, it is often not truly practiced.

As crises form in the sport of ice hockey, leadership's role is crucial. P2 argues that for communication in crisis situations, or issues management, to be effective it is essential it comes from the top level of leadership. It is of their opinion that often the message is delivered by members of the organisation who are not in senior positions, which in turn can result in the goal of the communication being ineffective. This is where adopting the Gold, Silver and Bronze approach (See 2.4) of crisis communications would serve ice hockey organisations well where each member of a leadership team has clearly defined roles and goals to execute in their communication strategy. Previous academics have emphasized the importance of leadership visibility in crisis situations (See 2.6) as a leader who is not visible can be observed as hiding from the issue at hand which can reflect heavily on the organisations perceived response. P2 additionally notes that in cases specific to ice hockey,

leadership in organisations often do not abide by the standards they themselves set, which can easily lead to minimal trust between parties and significantly raises the risk of the same incidents occurring again in the future. The arguments presented by P2 suggest that leadership in the sport is often inadequate, which Burton (2018) argued in section 2.6 as something that can heighten the severity of a crisis.

As P2 works with governing bodies in ice hockey at the international level of competition, they could only speak on the effectiveness of leadership in crisis situations in the NHL from an observer's point of view. They did, however, argue that at the international level, specifically with the men's national teams, leadership/management has made significant progress in improving their practice of communication. Shifting focus to the National Hockey League, P2 argued that holistically the league still struggles with releasing information in a timely manner and communicating with transparency. While progress is clearly being made in some leagues or governing organisations in the sport, there is still room for improvement in others. The testaments from both P1 and P2 indicate that the National Hockey League focuses on protecting reputation in times of crisis, something that previous academics highly advise against (See 2.5).

Finally, P1 highlighted the need for post-crisis communication, discussing the need for genuine communication in a timely fashion. P1 specifically addressed the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal as an example criticizing the delay in making a formal apology to the victim and fans. According to P1, the delay in issuing the apology does nothing but diminish any genuineness intended and simply damages the organisation's reputation further. P1 drew on the theme of genuineness, its importance in communication practice, and the minimal use it seems to have in the sport. Using the example of the Chicago Blackhawks, one of the most successful teams in the National Hockey League, highlights the broad issue in the sport of failing to address crises promptly and with sincerity and transparency.

5.2 Content Analysis Discussion

The content analysis helped to understand an ice hockey organisation and league's response to a crisis in real time. The findings helped contribute to RQ3 in understanding their use of crisis communication strategies. The Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal and their

subsequent response through posts on X provide insights into how professional sports organisations address their publics during a crisis, handle severe allegations and attempt to repair reputational damage. The findings specifically highlight a lack of urgency, transparency, and mixed messaging in their crisis communication strategy. While the analysis of the National Hockey League's response on X did not generate data of statistical significance, their silence on the scandal quite possibly has more negative impact than anything they could have posted.

The analysis exposed a major delay in the Blackhawks acknowledgement of the incident, the accusations made against the organisation, and the launch of an investigation regarding their mishandling in reporting the case. Over the span of four months, the Blackhawks had sent 749 posts on X, with only 3 of them (0.04%) acknowledging the incident. The limited acknowledgment or release of details regarding the scandal further supports the findings from the key figure interviews (See 4.1), where both participants were critical of the lack of transparency in communications practice in the sport, specifically pertaining to the NHL. This can particularly affect the level of trust between sports organisations and their fans as the adequacy and urgency of the response to a crisis has a significant impact on trust with stakeholders (See 2.3). An organisation being aware of the human impact during a crisis is crucial (See 2.4), silence from the Blackhawks can be perceived not only as a defensive tactic, but also an absence of empathy and compassion for those who were affected. The approach from the Blackhawks in this case supports the viewpoints from the interviewee's critical view of ice hockey leadership; placing more importance on asset protection than genuine communication, accountability and transparency (See 4.1).

While the Blackhawks did employ crisis communication, image repair, and post-crisis strategies, there was mixed messaging in their approach. Shifting strategies during crisis communications has been proved to be unsuccessful as evidenced by the case study on the Canterbury Bulldogs Rugby League Football Club (See 2.3). The initial acknowledgement and statement (See Appendix H) did utilize best practice techniques including mortification, corrective action, and apology. However, the Blackhawks also deployed defensive tactics, which for sport organisations has proved to reflect negatively for a response (See 2.3). The attempt at highlighting the organisation's commitment to following policies set to protect their employees and athletes from acts such as sexual assault (See Appendix H) is neither effective nor justifiable as the report released by law firm Jenner & Block detailed the

opposite was true (See 2.7). Including this strategy in their statement regarding the incident potentially diminishes the apology and any corrective actions that they claimed to be committed to. The organisation did include a mention of the leadership team in 100% of the posts regarding the crisis, however there is a disconnect in which only 33% of the statements came directly from an individual in leadership (See Figure 1). This inherently goes against the best practices for leadership during a crisis in which leaders being visible in these instances is crucial (See 2.6). The Blackhawks response does demonstrate that ice hockey organisations do engage in crisis communication and image repair strategies, however there is still room for improvement in the way that they are utilized. The delayed acknowledgement and limited leadership visibility additionally contributes to the findings from the key figure interviews in which accountability and transparency are ongoing issues in crisis response in the sport.

The National Hockey League's complete silence on the topic of the incident was not an intelligent approach. With the intense nature of the scandal and the involvement of an employee and athlete of an NHL organisation, the NHL's silence on the issue can be viewed as though they are attempting to avoid the topic in hopes that it will go away in time. This is consistent with the themes gathered from the interviews in which P1 and P2 were both critical of the NHL's practice of transparency and sharing information with the public (See 4.1). This can also be viewed holistically as evasion of responsibility (See 2.5) and can potentially be interpreted by publics as showing a lack of empathy for the victim. The approach by the NHL could have been their attempt at protecting their reputation by limiting the amount of information released on the topic to halt any discussions or discourse online, however in crises this approach tends to do the opposite and is not recommended by previous academics (See 2.4). While the Blackhawks did utilize crisis communication strategies, the NHL's approach indicates much room for improvement in crisis communication practices, as also argued by the interview participants (See 4.1).

The content analysis on both the Chicago Blackhawks and NHL's X accounts during the Blackhawks sexual assault scandal in 2021 exposed real issues in their approach to crisis communications, leadership involvement during a crisis, and their practice of accountability and transparency.

Chapter 6: Conclusion:

6.1 Research Summary

The findings of this study provided the researcher with insights into the ongoings of crisis communication and public relations practice in the sport of ice hockey. The qualitative approach allowed for the collection of experiences of those connected to the sport as well as a detailed analysis of the strategies used in times of crisis. The research was able to expose areas for improvement and broad issues of communication in ice hockey from both critical views from key figure interviews and the errors made by both the NHL and the Chicago Blackhawks in their communications on X. The aim of the research was to investigate the practice of public relations and communications in ice hockey and the execution of accountability and transparency, crisis management, and leadership. Through in-depth interviews and content analysis, this study brings forth valuable insights into the current landscape of how governing bodies in the sport of ice hockey navigate public relations and communications in times of crisis.

RQ1: To what extent do governing bodies in ice hockey place the importance of accountability on organisations when dealing with an internal crisis?

Although the researcher was not able to investigate a crisis from an internal point of view during a crisis, the interviews propose that governing bodies do not consistently enforce practices of accountability on organisations; it appears that there is more importance placed on protecting assets and reputations than the idea of genuine accountability and transparency. This idea was further supported through the content analysis through revealing both the Chicago Blackhawks and National Hockey League engaged in limited communication with their publics throughout their crisis. As highlighted in the literature presented for this research (See Chapter 2), these practices can lead to further reputational damage, loss of trust with stakeholders and does not demonstrate empathy or consideration for the human element of a crisis. This identifies a need for improvement in the sport and highlights the broad issue of the underdeveloped nature of public relations in the sports industry.

RQ2: What role does leadership within professional ice hockey organisations take in public relations practices during crisis management?

The involvement of leadership in ice hockey organisations during a crisis was discussed in length throughout the interview process. Both participants not only identified that leadership execution and visibility is of vital importance during a crisis but also in practices of transparency, in so all members of the organisation and the public can learn from past mistakes. The content analysis revealed a lack of direct communication, and even silence, from leadership during and post crisis, demonstrating little accountability and visibility. This demonstrates that there is an underlying disconnect in the role leadership should play in crisis and the extent to which they implement proper leadership practice. This research highlights this issue and identifies areas for improvement in leadership's role in public relations practice in the sport.

RQ3 To what extent are crisis management, reputation management, and image repair used within crisis situations in ice hockey?

This study further provides insights into the use and practice of crisis communication strategies, image repair, and reputation management. The in-depth interviews revealed a critical viewpoint into the limited genuine actions or authenticity of communication efforts in the sport. P1 argued that professional organisations in the sport are far more concerned with asset protection as evidenced by hiring outside legal counsel or PR firms to comprise responses for them. The content analysis identified that organisations do in fact deploy recommended crisis communication/image repair strategies such as corrective action, mortification, and apology. However, in the same instance they also utilized defensive tactics such as bolstering and diversion which are tactics that are historically proven to be ineffective. Further, the silence from the NHL as a governing body demonstrated negligence of any form of crisis communication strategy. The inconsistent strategy suggests poor crisis management planning and execution which are not recommended best practice. This study highlights room for further public relations and communications education, particularly on strategic implementation in times of crises in ice hockey.

6.2 Limitations

Despite outreach to public relations and communications professionals in ice hockey, the researcher received limited response for participation. This could be attributed to the study

being critical of the current practices in the sport, or legal implications of any current league employees speaking on this topic or past incidents. As mentioned in 3.4, the researcher did get in contact with Rick Westhead, the investigative journalist who was the first to report on the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal and subsequently followed the story with crucial updates for the public. As the researcher was attempting to secure a time and date for the interview, a new scandal involving Soccer Canada had developed (Westhead 2024) which Westhead was covering, resulting in unfortunate scheduling conflicts that did not resolve.

Additionally, the study initially sought out to conduct content analysis of multiple crises in ice hockey, as well as discourse and sentiment analysis of fan response, however this would have resulted in excess data that would not have fit within the requirements of this dissertation. Time constraints also contributed to further scandals and discourse not being analysed.

6.3 Future Considerations

This area of study would benefit from future academics conducting key figure interviews with public relations professionals working in ice hockey to gain insight into the internal communication practices during a crisis, and the direct role leadership has in PR in the sport. Further content analysis conducted on other crises outside of the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal and sentiment analysis of fan reaction to these incidents would greatly benefit this research.

The culture of ice hockey has long contributed to behaviours of silence and coverups. These behaviours bleeding into crisis communications not only negatively impact stakeholders, but also affect the mental health of the victims of a severe incident. This is an important area of research that should be explored further by other academics to correct this behaviour and identifies the need for ice hockey organisations to place more importance on accountability and transparency.

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Appendices:

<u>Appendix A: Participant information sheet:</u>

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Leadership in sports crisis management: An examination of crisis communications in ice hockey.

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others, if you wish.

Thank you for reading this.

1.   What is the purpose of this research project?
The purpose of this research project is to gain further understanding on (a) what extent governing bodies in ice hockey place the importance of accountability and transparency on organisations when dealing with a crisis, (b) what role leadership within professional ice hockey organisations take in public relations practices during crisis management, (c) how the culture of the sport potentially impacts communication practices and (d) what extent crisis management, reputation management, and image repair techniques are used within crisis situations in ice hockey.

2.   Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited because of your relevant experience in the sport of ice hockey, journalism, communications and/or public relations.

3.   Do I have to take part?
No, your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, we will discuss the research project with you [and ask you to sign a consent form]. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons and it will not affect your legal rights.

You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the research project at any time, without giving a reason, even after signing the consent form.

4.   What will taking part involve?
Taking part will involve a 25-30 minute interview that will be recorded for the purpose of transcribing answers to the research assignment.

Topics of the questions asked will include:
- Your opinions of the current state of public relations and communications in ice hockey and the National Hockey League.

- Past examples of crises in the National Hockey League/International Hockey and whether you believe they were handled effectively.
- What role you believe leadership plays in crisis communications in the sport.
- Your current view on the 'culture' of ice hockey and whether it may effect communication practices within the sport.
- To what level you believe accountability and transparency are conveyed in public relations/communications in ice hockey.
- To the best of your knowledge, do ice hockey organisations utilize crisis communication strategies?
- Do you believe there is a trend of poor crises management in the sport?
- What recommendations you have to improve public relations and communications practices within the sport going forward (if any).
- If ice hockey organisations effectively execute image repair.
- If ice hockey organisations execute post-crisis messaging effectively (i.e. steps to improve in the future/communicating steps taken to prevent similar crises from occurring again, etc).

5. Will I be paid for taking part?
No.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?
The benefits of taking part will be contributing to academic research in public relations and crisis communications in the sport of ice hockey, a topic that has not been widely covered by previous academics.

7. What are the possible risks of taking part?
The research will involve analysing incidents that include the 2018 Hockey Canada sexual assault case, the 2010 Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault case, and others similar. These events contain potentially triggering information and can be discomforting. It is important you are made aware that the interview will potentially involve discussion surrounding these events.

8. Will my taking part in this research project be kept confidential?
All information collected from (or about) you during the research project will be kept confidential and any personal information you provide will be managed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please see 'What will happen to my Personal Data?' (below) for further information.

9. What will happen to my Personal Data?
The data being collected will include your name, occupation and other past employment experience should you wish to share it.

Cardiff University is the Data Controller and is committed to respecting and protecting your personal data in accordance with your expectations and Data Protection legislation. Further information about Data Protection, including:

- your rights
- the legal basis under which Cardiff University processes your personal data for research
- Cardiff University's Data Protection Policy
- how to contact the Cardiff University Data Protection Officer
- how to contact the Information Commissioner's Office

may be found at https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection

Personal data will be stored until the end of this dissertation research: January 2025

After [January 2025] the research team will anonymise all the personal data it has collected from, or about, you in connection with this research project, with the exception of your consent form [including details of any other person data which must be retained]. Your consent form [including details of any other personally identifiable information which must be retained] will be retained for [January 2025] and may be accessed by members of the research team and, where necessary, by members of the University's governance and audit teams or by regulatory authorities. Anonymised information will be kept for a minimum of [6 months] but may be published in support of the research project and/or retained indefinitely, where it is likely to have continuing value for research purposes.

10.   What happens to the data at the end of the research project?
The data will be shared internally at the University during the evaluation of the project.

11.   What will happen to the results of the research project?
The results will be included in a masters' dissertation which may be available in one or more of the libraries of Cardiff University for public inspection.

12.   What if there is a problem?
If you wish to complain or have grounds for concerns about any aspect of the manner in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this research, please contact Kieran Peters via PetersK2@cardiff.ac.uk. If your complaint is not managed to your satisfaction, please contact Chair of JOMEC's Research Ethics Committee) (Dr Damian Carney) via CarneyD@ cardiff.ac.uk.

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for it.

13.   Who is organising and funding this research project?
Kieran Peters – Research student.

14.   Who has reviewed this research project?
This research project has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the JOMEC Research Ethics Committee.

15.   Further information and contact details
Should you have any questions relating to this research project, you may contact us during normal working hours:

Kieran Peters via PetersK2@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix D: Partial transcript with Participant 1 – Journalist:

Q: What do you think the current state of public relations and communications in hockey in the National Hockey League is like right now?

P1: "They don't know what to do, but I mean, you know, the only way we kind of like it, it is the what hiring lawyers and sort of these PR firms, they kind of get ahead of it but that doesn't work either because it just looks like it's the checking the I guess the alleged assailant. So I mean those are issues that I think they'll tackle probably in the next year.

You know that it's not genuine when you hire a lawyer, you hire PR firm and get ahead of it."

Q: There has to be a level of transparency and accountability at that level too. Do you think that is practiced?

P1: "I get it. I understand you're trying to protect the players. The player is presumed innocent, right? Yes, you're gonna do that. But I mean, you should give the obsolete an opportunity to even speak in his own words, or I would."

But it'll never happen because organizations are going to protect their assets and have been forever. And it's going to continue to happen. It's just transparency. You nailed it. I think transparency is one of those tools they've played with. People use the word, but are they actually committed to transparency? and the hockey community is the perfect example."

[referring to the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault scandal] I find it hard to believe that nobody knew what was going on."

Q: From your perspective as a journalist, can you talk more about hockey players having a trusted journalist they can share information with?

P1: "I think for the players to know that they have a guy who actually cares, they can utilize them as that tool. I think that's important."

Q: Can you share your opinion on crisis/post-crisis messaging?

P1: "Yeah, I think now there has to be almost. It's in like community thing, because, OK, let's say Joel Quenneville 2010, right? What does that reinstatement look like? That he apologized. But it never should have took you, I don't know what is it about 10 years to actually give an apology. Like is it genuine? So for the post crisis management, I think people don't really think of accountability."

"But yeah, I do think that for this this whole issue, the transition or for this whole matter in terms of like PR and media tools, I think post crisis management is critical and I only look at one specific thing that has to be has to come off as genuine and not wait until they're charged."

"So that kind of leaves the public or for the first scholars, academics like us in that we're just wondering like, OK, what are the details, did you do this? You're in the court of public opinion if you want to look like you're a decent human being get ahead of it."

Q: What is your opinion on the NHL's use of social media:

P1: "It's dry, the posts are usually it's a press release or it's another signing."

Appendix E: Partial Transcript with Participant 2 – Mental Performance Coach:

Q: In your opinion, what is the current state of public relations and communications in ice hockey:

P2: Yeah, I think now it's probably gotten better because they realize you can't withhold anything. And if you do, then it's going to multiply. So I do think that there's sort of the mindset of getting in front of everything right away. I don't know that they like release the details, but they get in front of the issues at least. Let's say Corey Perry last year. I mean, there's always a ton of rumours about why he was sort of dismissed from Chicago, but nobody knows exactly why."

So I guess they're protecting the privacy of the victims. But I do think that's the kind of thing where, yeah, I see it at my school all the time. Like, people need to know. Not because they're being nosey, but like they need to know what's frowned upon behaviour. Was it an alcohol thing? Did he hit on someone's wife? There's so many things that I think are, I mean, you mentioned the culture hockey where I think the more it's out, the more it changes. And I do think a lot of the young players are afraid now because it's out.

I don't know if afraid is the right word, but they're more cautious. They're more aware because it's out there. If there's a bad behaviour cause sometimes you got to be so specific with these kids, like saying something we will not tolerate or that's inappropriate. They don't know what inappropriate means, so you got to be more specific. So I do think the culture has gotten better, they're not hiding people when they commit certain acts. But I also think that they, again, maybe this is a legal thing, they could be more specific."

Q: What role does leadership have in communications in ice hockey?

P2: "It plays a huge role. Let's say the events I just did with Hockey [Country], like the people in the leadership positions, when they get out at the very beginning and say this is so important to us now and this is the most important thing; It's like communicating it right away and up front is really important. It's really good when there's a firm warning."

They say this is not acceptable, but then they're doing a lot of things where I think then they lose the players. Then there's like a one-hour presentation from a guy who's, you know, not that entertaining.

It's got to be forceful and when the people in leadership positions do it, it's really effective. It's got to come from the top when it comes from like a messenger like, you know, 50 rungs down the ladder who's boring then I don't even know if they [the players] hear anything."

Q: The current state of the culture of ice hockey?

P2: "A lot of it comes from like the GTHL and I don't want to totally narrow that out, but that's the players that I see. That culture is not gotten a lot better. There's a lot of entitlement."

Q: How important is accountability and transparency in communications in ice hockey?

P2: "So I do teach this course now for Hockey [Country]. Any coach that's coaching has to take it. It's like a sports site course where I try to teach about communication and all that. In the course there's this book 'Black Box Thinking' it talks about airplanes when they crash. And the reason there's so few crashes is because every airline gets access to the black box information. So everybody, benefits from the mistakes, everybody knows everything. Then they can all try to make sure that they don't do it. They don't replicate. There's no covering it up. So for me this is kind is the same thing where people will benefit from knowing what happened, right? And I'll go back to, I know it's tricky with privacy, but there's not enough because you need to know what happened. Like you need to know, the [players] need to know what is inappropriate."

They need to know why something's inappropriate. Cause like let's say, total speculation, let's say Corey Perry, maybe he was unfaithful to his wife, which some people are, and maybe he was, but that doesn't get you kicked off the team. But if it's with an employee and they said, well, it was consensual and then they young kids learn that, but it's not consensual because you're in a position of power. As a star player on the team, you're in a position where somebody could be consenting but not for the right reasons, but to please you and make sure that you're not upset with the team."

They [young players] don't understand how consent could necessarily be related to something else besides someone just saying 'oh yeah, I'm attracted to you' and that's where transparency helps. It helps you learn and then it's got to be discussed almost like a case study with them [the players] as opposed to, yeah, it was printed in the newspaper that they're never going to read. They need more."

Q: Does educating leadership on the importance of accountability and transparency and what they can and can't do benefit in the same way as doing so for the athletes?

P2: "Yeah, absolutely. I think it's also to help them too."

"Let's say it's former players. Even if they went to college, a lot of times, they may not know a lot of that stuff. They may not even know exactly why something's not consensual or is

consensual. And there's almost this intolerance to that kind of information, because there's been, you know, like the woke, let's say we call it the woke culture and because that is pushed so hard, there's almost like, a resistance to listen to anything like this.

"So yes, they absolutely need to. Like they need to hear it and learn too, for their own. And then they go, 'yeah, that makes sense'. But who teaches them is really important.

"You know, I think Brian Burke has done a lot for the LGBTQ community because he's not your typical representative from the community. So when you hear him, you go OK, there's, there's someone else who I assumed was probably far right leaning based on the way that he was. I just think it helps to have others break this thing and calling on other spokesman for that other than just hearing about it from the same people all the time who maybe alienate those people that are more resistant to listening."

Q: Do you believe leadership in ice hockey is currently executing accountability and transparency in times of crisis?

P2: "Yeah, I think if we're talking leadership at Hockey [Country] from what I've seen, I think they've done an awesome job with the men's national teams and the people of the top there. I think since everything came out there, they've done amazing. They're really, really trying to do a good job.

Leadership in the NHL? I don't even know how to say it because like I said, I don't know all the legal implications, but I don't think they're doing an amazing job. I think they're way better at being at presenting issues, but not at being more specific, so they've got room for improvement. I do think they've gotten better and I don't think it's going to get worse. I don't think it you can go back there.

So I think they're doing OK in in terms of the NHL and like I said, I think Hockey [Country] has been getting much better. They've shown really good signs of improvement and an effort and their prioritizing it to a point where I think it's almost hard for the players because there's so much of it like two years ago in the midst of all this stuff, when I was doing the [Tournament] in 2022 in the summer there was so much where I was like man, these guys are going to forget they're here for hockey tournament because there was much education on it."

They're really trying. They're definitely trying, so that's good."

Appendix F: Chicago Blackhawks X posts coding sheet:

Tweet Date	Mention of incident/crisis	Regualar content	Promoting social cause/activism	Denial	Bolstering	Apology	Corrective Action	Mortification	Diversion	Defensive	Empathetic	addressing fans	Mention of victim	Addressing media	If crisis mentioned; Mention of Leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)	Statement from leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership).
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
14/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
19/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
19/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
19/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
20/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
20/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
21/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
21/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
22/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
22/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
22/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
22/05/2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
23/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
23/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
23/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
23/05/2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
23/05/2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
24/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

Table 1

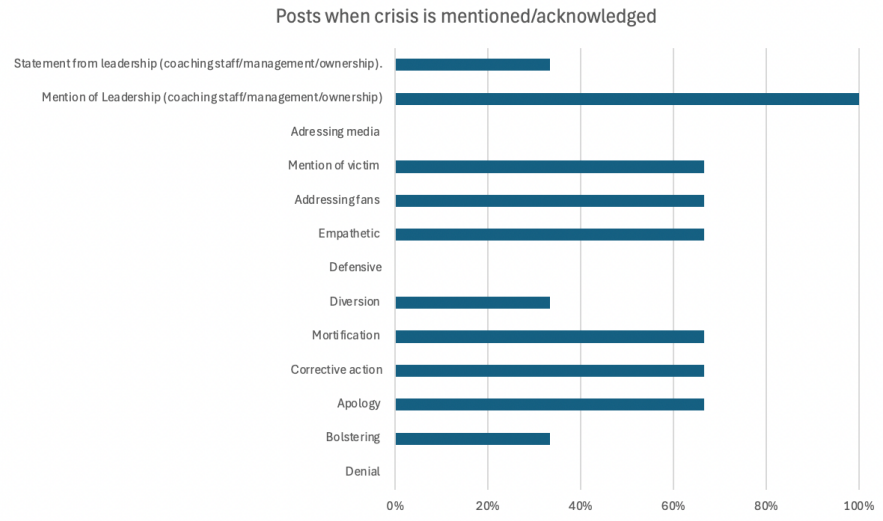| Tweet Date	Mention of incident/crisis	Regualar content	Promoting social cause/activism	Denial	Bolstering	Apology	Corrective Action	Mortification	Diversion	Defensive	Empathetic	addressing fans	Mention of victim	Addressing media	If crisis mentioned; Mention of Leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)	Statement from leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership).
10/26/2021	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
10/26/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/27/2021	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
10/27/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/27/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/28/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/29/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/30/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/30/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/30/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/30/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/30/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/30/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/31/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/31/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2

Tweet Date	Mention of incident/crisis	Regualar content	Promoting social cause/activism	Denial	Bolstering	Apology	Corrective Action	Mortification	Diversion	Defensive	Empathetic	addressing fans	Mention of victim	Addressing media	If crisis mentioned; Mention of Leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)	Statement from leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership).
11/5/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
11/6/2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/6/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
11/7/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/7/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/7/2021	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/7/2021	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/7/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11/7/2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3

Tweet Date	Mention of incident/crisis	Denial	Bolstering	Apology	Corrective Action	Mortification	Diversion	Defensive	Empathetic	addressing fans	Mention of victim	Addressing media	If crisis mentioned; Mention of Leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)	Statement from leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership).
10/26/2021	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
10/27/2021	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
11/6/2021	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1

Mention of incident/crisis	0.40%
Denial	0%
Bolstering	33.33%
Apology	66.66%
Corrective action	66.66%
Mortification	66.66%
Diversion	33.33%
Defensive	0%
Empathetic	66.66%
Addressing fans	66.66%
Mention of victim	66.66%
Adressing media	0%
Mention of Leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)	100%
Statement from leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership).	33.33%

Posts when crisis is mentioned/acknowledged

Appendix G: National Hockey League X posts coding sheet:

Tweet Date	Mention of incident/crisis	Regular content	Promoting social cause/activism	Criticism of Blackhawks leadership	Mention of victim	Addressing fans	If crisis mentioned; mention of Blackhawks leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership	Follow up action	Addressing players/athletes	Corrective action	Empathy	Apology	Denial
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
14/05/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tweet Date	Mention of incident/crisis	Regular content	Promoting social cause/activism	Criticism of Blackhawks leadership	Mention of victim	Addressing fans	If crisis mentioned; mention of Blackhawks leadership (coaching staff/management/ownership)	Follow up action	Addressing players/athletes	Corrective action	Empathy	Apology	Denial
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30/11/2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Appendix H: Chicago Blackhawks statements addressing the crisis:

1/2

By **Chicago Blackhawks**

October 26, 2021

A Letter to our Fans, Partners and Community --
The Blackhawks are more than just a hockey team. We are a community that is built upon the trust and support of our fans, players, employees, and partners.
That trust was shaken when disturbing allegations recently came to light about our handling of sexual misconduct that occurred eleven years ago. When we learned of these detailed allegations as part of recent public reports, our ownership initiated an independent investigation led by the law firm Jenner & Block to determine what occurred and how our organization responded.
Jenner & Block has delivered their findings to the organization and the report can be read in full here:
https://jenner.com/Chicago_Blackhawks_Investigation_Report
. [Content warning: The report contains graphic descriptions that some may find upsetting or offensive.] The report details very troubling events that occurred in 2010 and outlines the Blackhawks' knowledge and treatment of those events at that time.

It is clear the organization and its executives at that time did not live up to our own standards or values in handling these disturbing incidents. We deeply regret the harm caused to John Doe and the other individuals who were affected and the failure to promptly respond. As an organization, we extend our profound apologies to the individuals who suffered from these experiences. We must -- and will -- do better.
What we do off the ice is equally as important as anything we do on it. Our ownership and leadership teams are committed to ensuring that the Blackhawks adhere to the highest ethical, professional, and athletic standards. We will not tolerate behavior that is antithetical to our values from any member of the organization, nor will we accept the type of inaction that allows such issues to continue unchecked.
Since 2010, we have implemented numerous positive changes throughout our organization, especially over the past year -- including more clearly defining organizational structure, alongside the hiring of new personnel who demonstrate our values and bring the right subject matter expertise in the areas of compliance, human resources and mental health & wellbeing.

It is clear the organization and its executives at that time did not live up to our own standards or values in handling these disturbing incidents. We deeply regret the harm caused to John Doe and the other individuals who were affected and the failure to promptly respond. As an organization, we extend our profound apologies to the individuals who suffered from these experiences. We must -- and will -- do better.

What we do off the ice is equally as important as anything we do on it. Our ownership and leadership teams are committed to ensuring that the Blackhawks adhere to the highest ethical, professional, and athletic standards. We will not tolerate behavior that is antithetical to our values from any member of the organization, nor will we accept the type of inaction that allows such issues to continue unchecked.

Since 2010, we have implemented numerous positive changes throughout our organization, especially over the past year -- including more clearly defining organizational structure, alongside the hiring of new personnel who demonstrate our values and bring the right subject matter expertise in the areas of compliance, human resources and mental health & wellbeing.

We have policies, procedures and practices in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our employees, including policies that require leaders to report any suspected or actual harassment reported to them or which they observe, as well as processes to appropriately handle and investigate any reports of misconduct of any type by employees or third parties.

We have reviewed and modernized our employee handbook to ensure best practices, including our Anti-Harassment, Discrimination and Retaliation Policies.

The entire Blackhawks organization participates in mandatory annual anti-harassment and anti-discrimination trainings and, as part of that, we clearly communicated several mechanisms for reporting of concerns including internal and third-party options such as the NHL's anonymous hotline operated by Deloitte.

We believe these actions underscore and solidify our commitment to ensuring that the failures of the past will not be repeated. We intend to win championships without ever compromising our integrity.

To our fans, employees, players, partners, sponsors, and the entire Blackhawks community - Thank you for standing by us. As we move forward, we are committed to continuing to earn your trust and support both on and off the ice.

Chicago Blackhawks ✔
@NHLBlackhawks

A statement from the Chicago Blackhawks

A STATEMENT FROM THE CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

First, we would like to acknowledge and commend Kyle Beach's courage in coming forward. As an organization, the Chicago Blackhawks reiterate our deepest apologies to him for what he has gone through and for the organization's failure to promptly respond when he bravely brought this matter to light in 2010. It was inexcusable for the then-executives of the Blackhawks organization to delay taking action regarding the reported sexual misconduct. No playoff game or championship is more important than protecting our players and staff from predatory behavior.

The Blackhawks have implemented numerous changes and improvements within the organization, including hiring a new leadership team that is committed to winning championships while adhering to the highest ethical, professional, and athletic standards.

● **CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS**

11:42 PM · Oct 27, 2021

💬 1.2K   ↻ 1.6K   ♡ 2.1K   🔖 46   ⬆

Chicago Blackhawks ✔
@NHLBlackhawks

CEO Danny Wirtz:

STATEMENT FROM BLACKHAWKS CEO DANNY WIRTZ

"It has been an extremely difficult couple of weeks for our organization, and we have had to come to terms with a number of necessary changes. As we look to move forward, we know we must earn back the trust of our fans, and we are grateful for the support of our entire community as we work to do just that. On the ice, Interim General Manager Kyle Davidson has our full confidence and autonomy to make hockey decisions, and we support him on this coaching change. We appreciate all that Jeremy has brought to the Blackhawks, and we look forward to working with Derek as our interim head coach while we work to rebuild our permanent hockey operations leadership."

Appendix I: Media articles on Chicago Blackhawks scandal:

Blackhawks president resigns and team fined after sexual assault probe

- Blackhawks GM resigns, team fined after sexual assault probe
- NHL hits club with $2m fine for failure to respond to allegations
- Stan Bowman was also GM of USA men's Olympic hockey team

Agencies

Tue 26 Oct 2021 23.31 BST

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CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

A Recap of What Happened After the Blackhawks Sexual Assault Report Was Released

Published October 28, 2021 • Updated on October 28, 2021 at 7:28 am