

Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Crisis Communication

Crisis Communication and Management
During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Basketball:
Responses from World and Italian Leagues

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Academic Year 2024/2025

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented and disruptive event for the social and economic world. Moreover, global sports organizations faced new and unexpected challenges as crisis communication became critical for maintaining credibility and managing public perception.

This study examines crisis communication strategies during the pandemic focusing on a popular sport like basketball and using a comparative analysis of the strategy pursued by the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the Euroleague (EL) and the Italian landscape with a deepening exploration of the experience of the Federazione Italiana Pallacanestro (FIP), the Lega Basket Serie A (LBA), the Lega Nazionale Pallacanestro (LNP) and the Association of Italian Basketball Players (GIBA).

The thesis employs a comprehensive methodology, combining institutional responses, media engagement analysis, and organizational adaptations during the crisis, in a mixed-method approach, using comparative analysis, institutional crisis communication theory, and original interviews with key stakeholders.

This study aims to uncover the differences and similarities in crisis communication and management across professional and semi-professional contexts. Particular attention is placed on understanding the Italian basketball case, examining how national leagues faced brand-new communication challenges in comparison with organizations like the NBA and the EL, which are more globally involved, and have different economic and social engagements.

Key research objectives include the identification of effective and ineffective crisis communication strategies, evaluating the role of the organizations, players' associations, athletes, and media in message dissemination, and generating insights for global organizations facing new unpredictable and large-scale events. By providing a detailed panorama of the last pandemic-era communication, the thesis aims to contribute both to sports management literature and crisis communication research.

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Introduction

This research examines crisis communication strategies implemented within the basketball sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a comparative analysis of organizational responses across international and Italian basketball leagues. The study identifies effective crisis communication practices that characterized strategic approaches at various competitive levels, contributing to the understanding of organizational resilience in sports context during that disruptive global event.

The theoretical foundation of this analysis draws from crisis communication scholarship, a discipline that presents a fundamental challenge confronting contemporary organizations across sectors. Chapter One determines the theoretical framework through comprehensive examination of the theory, synthesizing established crisis communication models and principles from scholarly sources. This chapter then applies these theoretical constructs to analyze global communication responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining three critical dimensions: institutional communication strategies employed by governments and public health authorities; crisis messaging approaches across economic and cultural sectors; and the evolving role of the traditional and social media platforms in crisis information dissemination. This analysis of real-world communication practices during the pandemic highlights how theoretical principles were applied in extreme circumstances, creating a conceptual bridge to Chapter Two, which narrows the focus to crisis communication in the sports industry specifically.

The research then moves to the sports domain, analyzing strategic communication choices within a sector where communication functions as a critical organizational asset. Chapter Two presents an examination of crisis communication within the sports industry during the pandemic, beginning with a comprehensive assessment of COVID-19's multidimensional impact on sports organizations. The chapter progresses through increasingly focused analyses: first evaluating communication strategies across professional sports broadly, then examining the distinct roles of governing bodies, leagues and teams in coordinating crisis messaging, and finally assessing transformations in fan engagements and media usage during that crisis period. The second part of the chapter narrows specifically to basketball, investigating the unique communication challenges and approaches within this ecosystem. This section culminates in detailed case studies of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Euroleague Basketball, analyzing their distinct communication strategies, organizational responses and stakeholder engagement approaches, before offering a comparative analysis that highlights key differences and similarities between North American and European crisis communication frameworks. This structured progression establishes crucial context for Chapter Three's focused examination of Italian basketball ecosystem.

Indeed, the final chapter presents an in-depth examination of the Italian basketball industry, where a notable absence of formal research and documentation necessitated primary qualitative investigation. Through interviews with top managers and key communication decision-makers across multiple Italian basketball organizations, this research captures the strategic considerations, implementation challenges, and adaptive responses that characterized crisis communication in the national context. The comparative and qualitative methodology employed provides notable insights into organizational decisional processes, stakeholder engagement strategies, and the contextual factors that influenced communication effectiveness.

This research addresses a significant gap in crisis communication literature by applying established theoretical frameworks to the specialized context of basketball organizations in Italy. The investigation benefited from my extensive firsthand experience within Italian basketball ecosystem, having participated at both amateur and professional levels for over a decade, providing unique insider perspective on organizational dynamics often inaccessible to external researchers. This personal background enables more nuanced interpretation of communication challenges while preparing interview approaches with industry stakeholders. Nevertheless, the research maintains analytical rigor through a continuous reference with communication theory, structured comparative methodology and evidence-based assessments that transcend personal connections to the subject matter.

This study ultimately seeks to bridge theory and practice by offering useful insights into future crisis situations. By examining what worked, what didn't, and why across different basketball organizations, the study provides practical guidance for sports administrators while contributing to academic knowledge. The analysis identifies specific communication approaches that helped basketball organizations maintain stakeholder trust during uncertainty, highlights common implementation barriers, and documents successful strategies that helped recovery. These findings offer valuable lessons for both researchers studying organizational communication and sports managers developing crisis plans, providing a foundation for more effective crisis communication in basketball's unique environment and the broader sport industry.

1. Crisis Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In order to establish the theoretical framework for this study, this chapter serves as an introduction to crisis communication theories, investigating scholarship sources and academic publications. In the second part, the emphasis is placed on the application of the theory particularly regarding the aspects that will find a correspondence in the sports domain. This includes the communication within the institutions, the impact on the economic and cultural environments, and the implementation of media and social media communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Definition of crisis communication

“Crisis Communication” refers to the strategies an organization designs and executes in order to prevent, manage, and respond to crisis situations. “Crisis” was generally defined by Coombs in his work “Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding” (2007) as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes”. In the current era, all kinds of crises are always communication crises too, and how individuals, groups, or organizations can anticipate, handle, and respond to them from a communicative point of view is a pivotal aspect during the period of interest (Coombs T. W., 2007).

While historically crisis communication has been seen only as a variable in the process of management, a more recent and correct analysis recognizes it as a key aspect in all the phases: starting from the prevention that focuses on keeping the stakeholders informed and prepared, going through all the updates during the crisis, finishing with the correct and necessary information and lessons learned in the post-crisis period.

Within this context, the “stakeholders” term refers to the emitters and the receivers of the communication message in a broad sense, including all the passive and active actors affected by actions and decisions taken in the process involving the crisis (Brunner, 2019). Following the dictates of the theories, every organization should be concentrated in maintaining informational transparency and implementing all activities to build loyalty, trust, and sustained support, because “crises are driven by the stakeholder perception of the situation” (Coombs W. &, 2015).

The main stakeholders’ categories involved in crisis communication processes include governments and institutions, as well as companies, public and private organizations, media outlets, and journalists. Beyond that, when the crisis affects a great part of society, the public and all consumers also play a key role. Moreover, in today's landscape, it is essential to consider the impact of social media and influential figures such as opinion leaders. However, in the specific context of a thesis that focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, it happens that, depending on their actions or reactions, the same

stakeholders that we can identify as the recipients of early crisis communication messages, become active agents in shaping the crisis itself from a communicative standpoint. In the complex scenario of a global crisis, indeed, the active stance of stakeholders aiming to address the external negative event responding to previous actions, and the timing of their responses, become crucial factors in orienting the result of the communication strategy, with significantly divergent outcomes.

The primary objective of crisis communication is to effectively manage and reduce the potential consequences of a crisis on the reputation, image, and actions of an individual, group, or organization. A crucial aspect of this process is providing clear and timely input to prevent misinformation and ensure that key messages are accessible to all. Gaining and maintaining the trust of stakeholders is essential, and this goal requires demonstrating transparency and responsibility. At the same time, every effort must be made to minimize any reputational damage. Effective crisis management also depends on strong collaboration across all levels of the organization or individuals involved, ensuring a coordinated response with a unified message. In addition, it is important to contain the escalation of the crisis as much as possible while displaying strong leadership and accountability throughout the process. Finally, post-crisis efforts should focus on restoring normal operations and addressing any reputational harm to facilitate recovery and long-term stability (Brunner, 2019).

In the broader discussion of crisis communication and its objectives, it is essential to distinguish it from related concepts such as crisis management and risk communication. Crisis communication focuses on delivering clear and timely messages during a crisis to inform stakeholders, shape public perception, and preserve trust. Furthermore, crisis management has a wider approach, extending its scope to preparation, response, and recovery through strategic planning and coordinated efforts. In contrast, risk communication is proactive, aiming to prevent or mitigate the crisis, raising awareness, and educating the public about potential risks for the future. While crisis communication reacts to unfolding events and crisis management provides a structured response, risk communication works to minimize threats before they escalate (Brunner, 2019).

Crisis communication can be considered as a new branch of an already existing discipline, born in the 1950s as an area of public relations practice and widely considered as part of larger efforts in issue and reputational management. The growing interest in the analysis of the management of the crisis from a communicative point of view was not supported initially by a coherent body of research literature. This began to change in the 1980s with the first publications of theories and case studies focused on crisis communication (Lachlan, 2019).

However, the most influential and prominent theories of this discipline started to emerge roughly ten years later.

Among them, one of the most important is the “Image Restoration Theory – IRT” by William Benoit, first published in 1995, in which the author analyzes the strategies used by individuals, groups, or organizations to protect or restore their reputation. Benoit in this theory marks the importance of the concept of reputation underlining how people’s perception in these cases means more than reality. The author identifies five principal strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Each of these strategies could be used and elaborated separately, and they are not interdependent. We can find use cases and practical examples of Benoit’s theory application in different situations, while it has been developed by individuals and organizations over time (Benoit, 2014).

Years later, Timothy Coombs elaborated a new theory in this field that was published in 2007, the “SCCT – Situational Crisis Communication Theory”. The focus is on organizations’ capacity to adapt their responses depending on the type of crisis they are facing and the people’s perception of their responsibility. Coombs distinguishes three categories depending on the responsibility perceived: victim cluster (low responsibility), accidental cluster (average responsibility), and preventable cluster (high responsibility). The higher the blame perception, the stronger the involved organization's response needs to be. Coombs argues that, depending on this, the organizations must choose the correct strategy, which could be based on denial, diminishment, rebuilding (the most efficient in cases of evident guilty), or bolstering (Coombs T. W., 2007).

Due to their relative “ancient” date of publication, the original version of both theories missed an analysis of the role of social media in the communication processes, that currently cannot be disregarded, considering the strong influence they have in our times. However, more recently, several scholars have extended the concepts expressed in Benoit and Coombs studies, including the role of traditional and new media either in pre-crisis management or in both crisis handling and post-event communication. Moreover, we can consider that the theoretical positioning of this discipline is still not precise and defined, gaining new perspectives, continuously, with contributions coming from different fields, particularly psychology, sociology, and management.

Both Benoit and Coombs theories and their subsequent extensions will be used in the next chapters as a theoretical framework to describe, explain, and evaluate the crisis management and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency in sports and, in detail, in the basketball world.

1.2 Principles and Strategies in Crisis Management

Crisis management is a well-developed discipline that integrates knowledge from various fields, including medicine, sociology, psychology, engineering, logistics, political science, criminal justice, and communication. Effective crisis management intrinsically relies on a structured and strategic communication framework, as it would be impossible to navigate crises successfully without it. In many instances, “communication is the essence of crisis management” (Coombs T. W., 2007).

Coombs assertion, although stated twenty years ago, can be considered as the theoretical basis to manage crises, particularly in today's digitalized world, which is constantly shaped by the influence of communication, by agreeing that it is impossible to manage a crisis, regardless of its nature, without also addressing it from a strictly communicative perspective.

In this regard, the fundamental principles to keep in mind undoubtedly begin with the need for transparent communication with the public and the transmission of messages in the most immediate and timely manner possible. To achieve this, the creation of a crisis communication protocol can be crucial, a standardized and internalized mechanism that outlines key points and essential steps to follow. Such a protocol ensures a structured response even in crises with widely varying characteristics, all of which inevitably require a reaction that is both swift and reliable.

Moreover, when discussing reliability, we can refer to another pivotal aspect of crisis communication: the credibility and consistency of the transmitted message. This relates to the key concept of "reputation," which is inherently linked to public perception. In their book “Theorizing Crisis Communication”, Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger emphasize the value of surveys and ethnographic research in acquiring a deeper understanding of the target audience’s needs and interests. This approach enables organizations to tailor their crisis communication strategies, ensuring that the message transmitted aligns as closely as possible with the expectations and concerns of the audience (Sellnow, 2021).

Emotional management is also a crucial factor in effectively conveying the right messages during the heightened tension of a crisis. Empathy and emotional regulation are fundamental elements of crisis communication; however, it is important to recognize that they become even more predominant and challenging to control when messages are delivered through certain communication channels that require the direct and personal involvement of the emitter, such as a live TV interview, or an Instagram post. In such cases, even a small detail - such as a facial expression - can significantly influence the audience’s perception and the overall effectiveness of the message.

Building on this idea of diversity in communication channels - particularly relevant in our technologically advanced world - finally I would like to highlight a fundamental principle of crisis communication: the necessity of adapting to one's audience. The flexibility of a message and the ability to reach a broader and heterogeneous public when needed, or a more specific and homogeneous audience in other cases, is often underestimated in times of crisis. However, it is a crucial aspect, especially when considering crises such as the medical-pandemic scenario analyzed in this thesis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, various competent authorities had to tailor their communications to ensure accessibility for all in many instances. At the same time, they also disseminated equally important information using more specialized language targeted at a narrower audience. This approach was essential for conveying critical details while, at the same time, adhering to the key principle of transparency.

Every crisis communication process takes place along a timeline and is then structured into three distinct phases, each characterized by different features, corresponding to different moments and, consequently, varying needs: the pre-crisis phase, the acute crisis phase, and the post-crisis phase.

The first phase, which precedes the crisis itself, is centered on preventing potential damage by developing a well-structured strategic plan. Mitroff and Pearson emphasize that preparedness is what differentiates secure organizations from insecure ones, highlighting the importance of conducting a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). This analysis allows organizations to gain a deeper understanding of their capabilities and vulnerabilities, making them more aware and better equipped to respond effectively (Pearson, 1993).

A crisis communication plan should include clear objectives and predefined tactics ideally developed by a specialized crisis communication team. It must be detailed yet flexible, allowing for adjustments as needed. Additionally, it should clearly outline the internal communication methods within the organization as well as the strategies for engaging with stakeholders. To ensure consistency and authority, the plan also requires formal approval from the executive board.

Finally, as George points out, it is essential to recognize that a crisis plan is a resource rather than a definitive solution to crisis management: *"it is important to remember that the plan is a resource and not a panacea to crisis management"* (George & Pratt, 1997).

This is also the phase in which the Crisis Communication Team (CCT) must be established. Every organization should have a well-defined CCT composed of members from different departments to ensure a diverse range of expertise. The team plays a crucial role in identifying the crisis, developing

the strategic plan from different points of view, and determining how to navigate challenges by effectively implementing the previously drafted plan.

The second phase, previously defined as the acute crisis phase, primarily aims to swiftly verify the occurrence of the event and assess its impact to determine its actual severity. This initial step is crucial, as it enables the prompt implementation of all necessary countermeasures to effectively contain the crisis and minimize its negative consequences.

The implementation of the plan outlined in the first phase represents the best course of action; however, it is essential to acknowledge that modifications may be required to ensure its effectiveness in addressing the specific characteristics of the ongoing crisis.

The primary task in this phase of crisis communication is to transmit accurate, truthful, and timely information about the event to stakeholders. Lukaszewski outlined a structured order for determining which groups should be informed first in such situations (Lukaszewski, 1997).

Initially, those most directly affected by the consequences of the crisis must receive factual updates on the situation. Following this, the organization's employees should be informed. The next group to be addressed includes indirect victims, such as family members, friends, clients, suppliers, governments, and institutions. Finally, communication must be prepared for external media and public communication channels.

The third and final phase corresponds to the period following the crisis itself, during which organizations must be able to thoroughly analyze the event to draw valuable lessons for the future. This stage also involves implementing strategies aimed at restoring reputation if necessary.

The phase begins with the public announcement of the crisis's conclusion, communicated through the same media channels used during the acute phase. The plan will likely undergo modifications, allowing the organization to refine it based on the lessons learned, thus adapting it more effectively to its needs.

This phase may last only a few months, but in some cases, it can extend for years, depending on the severity of the crisis, its impact on the organization's environment, and the organization's ability to manage it during the previous point. Coombs emphasized that this is the stage where managing media and public criticism becomes most challenging for the organization, as it must address questions regarding the causes, blame, and responsibility, as well as the actual effectiveness of the responses implemented in the previous phase. The key tasks of this phase can be summarized in three fundamental stages: salvaging legitimacy, learning, and healing (Ulmer, 2007).

Among the essential skills required today for effective crisis communication management is the ability to navigate the widespread phenomenon of fake news and misinformation, particularly prevalent on social media. Fake news poses a significant risk by fueling panic and undermining the trust that organizations have worked to build through their reputation management efforts.

During the acute phase of a crisis, the uncontrolled spread of misinformation, combined with the inherent challenges of crisis management, can lead to additional complications that the crisis management team must address. For this reason, it is crucial to adopt a rapid, transparent, and direct approach when communicating with stakeholders. One possible solution for organizations is to collaborate with reputable news outlets and fact-checking platforms to ensure the dissemination of accurate and reliable information.

The most common mistakes in poor crisis management generally stem from a failure to adhere to the fundamental strategies and principles previously discussed.

Many issues arise primarily from the absence of a crisis management plan, which forces organizations to react during the acute phase without a predefined strategy, significantly increasing the risk of errors. Within organizations, this often translates into a lack of clearly defined roles, which, in moments of crisis, leads to confusion and uncertainty regarding decision-making responsibilities and accountability.

Responsibility itself is another critical factor that can generate disapproval among stakeholders. Denying the problem, refusing to take responsibility, or wrongly attributing blame to individuals, institutions, or organizations can result in widespread dissatisfaction and a complete loss of trust among those receiving the message.

This idea is closely linked to the previously mentioned principle of transparency. In general, deliberately withholding important information is one of the primary reasons bringing to trust deterioration and crises escalation further.

Another crucial aspect that should not be underestimated is keeping good timing in information dissemination. Silence or delays in providing updates can lead to speculation and misinformation, which, in today's digitalized and highly interconnected world, become extremely difficult to contain.

In this regard, organizations need to recognize the significance of social media, the primary and quickest vehicle for message dissemination today. Underestimating its role can further exacerbate a crisis. More broadly, the improper selection of communication channels and the failure to prioritize the most effective ones can hinder the accurate transmission of the organization's intended message.

To address this challenge, it is crucial to identify the target audience and tailor communication strategies accordingly, ensuring that information remains accessible and relevant to the intended recipients.

Finally, one of the most damaging mistakes in crisis communication is the use of impersonal and excessively cold language, which can convey a lack of empathy toward the public. On the contrary, it is essential to demonstrate closeness and foster a sense of connection that can build trust and engagement when needed.

Avoiding these mistakes and establishing a relationship of trust with stakeholders—while adhering to both theoretical and practical principles previously discussed—is crucial for the immediate and most effective containment of the crisis.

All the details explained so far regarding crisis communication as a discipline will serve as a foundation for analyzing the communication crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected virtually every organization worldwide in different ways.

1.3 Analysis of Global Communication Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the end of 2019, in the city of Wuhan, China, SARS-CoV-2 emerged as the coronavirus responsible for the infectious disease later named COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019). While, at the beginning, China tried to minimize and even negate the severity or rather the existence of a major health disease, within weeks the virus spread beyond China's borders, triggering a global health crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The rapid transmission, primarily through respiratory droplets or contaminated surfaces, led to an exponential rise in infections worldwide. (Ren, 2020)

COVID-19 symptoms range from mild, resembling those of a common flu (such as fever, cough, headache, and fatigue) to severe complications like pneumonia, multi-organ failure, and acute respiratory distress. The disease proved particularly fatal for elderly individuals, those with pre-existing health conditions, and immuno-compromised patients. Hospitals all around the world reached their breaking point quickly, facing shortages of intensive care beds, medical staff, and life-saving equipment. (Ciotti, 2020).

On March 11, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced that SARS-CoV-2 met the criteria to be classified as a pandemic. The crisis extended far beyond public health: within weeks, governments imposed drastic containment measures, including nationwide lockdowns, travel bans, school and business closures, and social distancing mandates. The global economy suffered a severe shock, with millions of workers losing

their jobs, industries grinding to a halt, and international supply chains collapsing. Meanwhile, uncertainty and fear fueled the spread of misinformation, forcing institutions to develop clear and effective crisis communication strategies.

Beyond its unparalleled health and economic impact, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the way societies function, highlighting the crucial role of timely, transparent, and strategic communication in managing emergencies.

1.3.1. Institutional Communication

Communication in a crisis is a key factor, thus requiring great attention, reweighting, and a precise plan to follow, to be balanced with a compelling need for timeliness. Within a pandemic topic, and in the extreme urgency derived from the late recognition of the severity, the pressure increased quickly, while society was in desperate need of sanitary and behavioral information, willing to find a disposal, a message, a notice anywhere provided it was immediately usable. "Be first. Be right. Be credible" is the fundamental principle for a risk communication strategy, and more than in any other context, it was a rule to follow (Seeger & Reynolds, 2020).

The communicative role of institutions during health crises is crucial, as they are official and publicly recognized entities. Their authority generates trust and respect in citizens, who expect to receive verified and correct news about the situation, the necessary prevention, and treatment measures while requiring expert and truthful forecasts. However, as described by Emiliana Mangone in her "Risk communication: the Covid 19 pandemic", the relationship between the institutions and citizens can be challenging, as the imposition of measures that are often highly restrictive for the population may lead to significant discontent if not accompanied by clear information explaining the reasons and needs behind these interventions. In this context, the same article distinguishes between the "profane world" and the "sacred world", to highlight the inherent differences within the population, recalling the divide between doctor and patient. It is not conceivable to fill all the gaps of the so-called laymen, but it is essential, through effective communication, "to train, orient, and expand individuals' knowledge to foster critical and analytical problem-solving abilities, enabling them to evolve into autonomous subjects responsible for their own choices." (Mangone, 2020).

Effective communication in this pandemic context refers to the use of every medium able to intercept the entire population. Governmental agencies, authorities, and institutions, such as the WHO or the different national Health Ministries, however, primarily relied on "traditional" and already experienced methods like press conferences and official statements. These approaches, considered the most conventional, implicitly reinforced, in their intentions, their fundamental authority and

credibility, affirming their role as trusted guides and reliable sources for the public. In this context, the use of data and statistics consistently strengthens messages, by providing clear, unequivocal support for communication. During the pandemic, the evening bulletin became crucial for the population, representing the primary source for understanding the real trend of COVID-19 (Mangone, 2020).

Despite a progressive convergence in communication techniques, notable differences remain in how various countries choose to inform their citizens. While the timing and management of the health crisis played a crucial role in shaping communication strategies, significant inequalities can be identified.

China, as the first country to face the issue, adopted a policy of strict control over its citizens, driven by its distinctive governmental system. Initially, he downplayed the severity of the situation, even punishing doctors who attempted to warn about the risks. As the situation escalated, China implemented a distinctive containment strategy that differed significantly from Western approaches. Instead of using military force to enforce quarantines, the government deployed an intricate network of local institutions. This included resident committees, property management companies, homeowners' associations, and various government agencies that created a comprehensive "grid governance" system.

The government's approach was highly decentralized, organizing the response to the increasing pandemic across multiple administrative levels, from departmental to neighborhood scales. Citizen "volunteers" played a crucial role in this system, being tasked with enforcing public health measures such as mask-wearing, contact tracing, and lockdown compliance.

From a communication standpoint, in the early phases of the crisis, China faced a strong communication problem, mainly due to their internal organization: local governments were pushed to manipulate or hide epidemic-related information from the central government and failed to take timely measures, with the aim to control social stability, just before the Chinese New Year, "because social stability is an important indicator for their performance evaluation". (Yexin, 2021). Later, the coercive capacity of the governmental authorities led to a controlled narrative. They limited transparency, censoring all forms of criticism and opposition while promoting an official and dominant narration glorifying this Chinese model. While this approach generated internal cohesion, it also undermined public trust, as citizens became increasingly aware of their restricted intellectual freedom, and the forced, unconditional support for official decisions. (Ren, 2020)

The United States soon found itself struggling with the crisis, which can be analyzed through different phases. During the initial "contagion onset", the Trump administration minimized the severity of the pandemic, comparing it to the flu, even disseminating misinformation about masks, vaccines, and other preventive measures. Tensions also emerged between the administration and key public health institutions, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), regarding the information to be shared with the public and the accuracy of reported data. We assisted at a sort of politicization of health issues: while labeling the virus as a "Chinese virus", and trying to give the responsibility of the pandemic to China to hide the late responses of his administration, he moved the public focus to a division between "us" and "them", blaming both China and its citizens. (Gollust, Nagler, & Franklin Fowler, 2020). Furthermore, the media landscape reflected the same divisions, with some networks, like Fox News, supporting governmental positions, while others, such as CNN, adopted a contrasting approach, emphasizing concern, and giving great resonance to health authorities' statements. In the lockdown phase, the situation did not improve, the measures adopted were very fragmented, with important differences between states, which generated large protests, constantly fueled by an uncontrollable flow of false information. Moreover, in this scenario, the public was exposed to divergent information, for an intelligible selection of media sources based on one's political worldview. (Gollust, Nagler, & Franklin Fowler, 2020).

As noted by Kapuchu and Moynihan, the crisis management might have been better if the pandemic did not appear in the election year and just after the conclusion president's impeachment. At that time Trump was ready to distance anyone viewed as potentially adverse to his political success: a senior official of Center for Disease Control was excluded from the decision board after he predicted, in early 2020, that a pandemic was coming, thus triggering, in the view of President Trump, a stock market drop. While Trump's success was significantly based on his communication skills, he did not succeeded in using this expertise in driving with coherent messages the population, which could not hold strong beliefs on the pandemic event. He could have used his capacity to drive a sense of unity, to promote safe behaviors, and to share sacrifice. While initially using this communication register, he was soon tempted to return to his proven style, based on conspiracy, division and blame avoidance. (Kapucu & Moynihan, 2021).

In 2021, with the new Biden administration, the White House's position on the crisis radically shifted, and consequently did communication strategy. However, the previous contrasting positions of the government and public health authorities had already fostered growing distrust, leading a part of the population to strongly oppose health measures. The uncontrolled circulation of fake news, both on

the web and through other channels, played a key role in shaping risk perception and influencing the decisions of American citizens.

Moreover, within Europe, dissimilar communication strategies are highlighted.

Spain and Italy, among the hardest-hit countries, had a very challenging approach, initially struggling with ineffective and counterproductive public messages. However, subsequently, both nations adopted a more structured and direct approach, successfully rebuilding public trust. Within this strategy, they also tried to engage more closely with the population by using diverse communication channels. For instance, Italy's Ministry of Health actively used social media to enhance awareness, while Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte emerged as the authoritative voice of Italy's pandemic response. His evening television addresses became a ritual offering clarity in a time of diffuse uncertainty. Conte balanced policy announcements with empathetic messages, deliberately employing the collective "we", thus transmitting a sense of unity and mutual responsibility. These broadcasts served as emotional anchors during the crisis, providing both practical guidance and psychological reassurance, helping to build trust that was eroded by early missteps. (Wodak, 2021).

Germany, lead by its Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the other hand, adopted a highly transparent communication strategy from the outset. The approach focused on the dissemination of scientific details to reinforce the credibility of official sources, ensuring that completeness of information remained a top priority. Wodak notes how the Germany Chancellor communication strategy resembled that of a caring mother explaining a complex crisis to her children step by step, with the help of medical experts, rather than presenting herself as the sole authority figure. As a complement to this approach, the daily lectures on YouTube, delivered by Berlin's Charité Hospital virologist Christian Drosten, contributed to an authoritative and comprehensive explanation of the situation, that attracted millions of viewers internationally. (Wodak, 2021).

The decision-making of the German government was made transparent. Merkel typically presented measures as organized lists and emphasized collective responsibility, avoiding alarmistic scenarios or threats. She provided detailed explanations that acknowledged the crisis's complexity while at the same time promoting national unity through inclusive messaging and genuine empathy. At the same time, Merkel openly recognized that these emergency measures contradicted democratic principles and violated fundamental rights, explicitly characterizing them as "an imposition on democracy". She addressed citizens respectfully as equals, structuring her talks with broad context before detailing specific measures. While thanking both officials and the public, she occasionally revealed personal emotions, as when expressing gratitude for collective efforts to protect the elderly. (Wodak, 2021).

In conclusion, many countries, including those not mentioned, initially faced challenges in approaching the crisis, often minimizing its scale. However, they managed to regain the trust of their citizens through the dissemination of information in a transparent and consistent manner. Countries like Germany and Australia which adopted a scientific approach to communication from the start, benefited from strong public adherence to health measures, leading to a faster and more effective pandemic containment. On the other hand, excessive politicization, as seen in the United States, proved to be a highly obstructive factor to the real effectiveness of essential health protocols.

As previously noted, one of the biggest challenges for governments and official bodies during the crisis was managing the uncontrolled spread of information, often misleading for the public. Where medical and health organizations and dedicated bodies received government support, it was easier to control flow of information and distinguish between fake news and content from official sources. This allowed the generation of a more consistent information for the citizens. In contrast, in cases like the United States, news of all kinds, often false, spread uncontrollably, sometimes downplaying the danger and other times exaggerating it, with the ultimate goal of sensationalizing the news. The WHO has frequently resorted to the use of the term "infodemic" to describe this uncontrolled spread of information. This is not just an issue related to the pandemic, but a constant concern for national governments in general. However, it becomes especially critical during times of severe crisis, where disinformation can lead to severe consequences. In such times, widespread collaboration is essential, and this can only be possible through information that is as comprehensive and homogeneous as possible among the public.

From the institutions' role standpoint, another crucial concept that emerged strongly during the global health crisis was the challenging balance between public safety and individual freedom. While we already mentioned the numerous protests during the initial lockdown in the US, this issue resonated globally, not only concerning lockdown measures but also regarding many other policies, particularly vaccines. Emiliana Mangone (Mangone, 2020) stressed that "no effective decision can be taken without prior and correct information". The so-called 'state of exception' grants extraordinary powers to the bodies responsible for making certain decisions and was frequently invoked during the pandemic. However, the delicate balance between citizens' rights and their freedom to make personal choices has raised concerns about the scope of the measures implemented under the state of emergency (Hyland-Wood, 2021).

In conclusion, communication remains central. It is essential that communication provides the knowledge bases that foster trust in institutions among the public, while also enabling them to recognize when their individual freedom has been undermined by an excessive abuse of power.

1.3.2. Communication in Economic and Cultural Sectors

During this severe crisis, all the companies within the global commercial network remain involved. The restrictive measures adopted by national governments, in accordance with WHO guidelines, have created considerable challenges for nearly all commercial activities. As a result, these businesses have needed to engage their stakeholders to maintain relationships and mediate the current crisis situation (Sardanelli, 2020).

Sardanelli's paper highlights the importance of communicative honesty among major companies. While this approach may be easier to adopt when the crisis is exogenous and originated from an external challenge, there is a common perception that companies generally prefer to downplay issues in the eyes of their stakeholders. However, analysis of corporate communications and press releases throughout the pandemic reveals that many of them chose transparency, seeking to foster mutual understanding with their interlocutors.

To foster a sense of shared difficulty among stakeholders, it was essential for the company's CEO to communicate directly. Taking the lead in crisis communication and explaining future plans to customers, they proved a strong commitment to transparency and leadership.

The emotional aspect has played a crucial role in corporate communication, with many companies changing their advertising approach, to adopt a decidedly less aggressive tone, instead focusing on raising awareness about the crisis, or encouraging respect for imposed measures. Additionally, many companies chose to play an active role in supporting the community, with financial and operational support.

Another important tool has been the extensive use of digital channels. While websites and emails have been widely used and enhanced, social media have played a key role in maintaining relationships with stakeholders. Various campaigns, slogans, contests, or interactive activities on social media allowed companies to stay in touch with the customers while demonstrating an active engagement and a commitment to improvement.

The "digital world" has emerged as a critical issue for companies during this difficult period: many companies, regardless of the business, had to provide enhanced digital solutions to address the needs of a wide range of stakeholders, like chatbots and dedicated FAQs. In this context, good communication becomes crucial to maintaining stakeholder trust.

During what was arguably the most challenging phase of the pandemic, several companies have demonstrated an enhanced commitment to corporate social responsibility, employing different

strategies focused on support, education, and community engagement. Considering the fashion industry, the Armani group converted its Italian factories to produce disposable medical gowns and donated 1 million euros to the Civil Protection various hospitals, including Luigi Sacco, San Raffaele, Istituto dei Tumori in Milan and Spallanzani hospitals in Rome. Other fashion houses, like Dior, Gucci, Prada and H&M also contributed and took action to raise awareness and provide tangible support by producing masks and gowns for healthcare personnel. Beyond fashion, Airbnb promoted an extensive initiative to support health workers and rescuers, offering them clean and affordable apartments. The Dallara group (renowned as an excellence in Italian motorsport engineering) contributed by designing and manufacturing a valve that enabled the Decathlon snorkeling mask to be adapted into a lung respirator for COVID-19 patients who did not require intubation (Schmidt, 2020).

From a communication standpoint, Nike and Coca-Cola implemented two noteworthy strategies. Nike launched a social campaign with the slogan "Play Inside, Play for the World" aiming to raise awareness among its customers, encouraging them to adhere to social restrictions while keeping their passion for sport. Meanwhile, the Coca-Cola company took a creative approach by spacing out the letters of its logo on a billboard in Times Square in New York, thus conveying a message of simple, visible, and consistent social unity, with the slogan "Staying apart is the best way to stay united".

However, corporate communication campaigns must be backed by genuine organizational engagement from companies. When media messages stand alone, without a substantial follow-up, they often generate counterproductive effects among stakeholders. It is the case of McDonald's Mexico which attempted a similar approach to Coca-Cola by spacing out its iconic golden arches. Nevertheless, its action was strongly criticized, as it starkly contrasted with the lack of support given by the company to employees and local communities. More broadly, this case illustrates a general pattern: companies that limited their action to superficial messages while disengaging from a real commitment and reacting in a "selfish" way in times of crisis, experienced significant reputational damage.

The culture and entertainment industries have been among the hardest hit by the crisis caused by the pandemic. Due to their inherent characteristics and operational needs, their sectors suffer important damage. Both adopted significant countermeasures to avoid the collapse of their sectors, by adapting their approach and bringing innovations that remain relevant today (Spada, 2020).

With few exceptions (notably print journalism which was considered an essential and irreplaceable resource), virtually all cultural space and activity experienced an abrupt halt and demanded a significant shift in strategies.

In response to the crisis, most culture and entertainment companies moved towards increasingly digital and interactive offerings, designed to bridge physical distance. Museums and theatres developed accessible online experiences, while publishers enhanced their online platforms.

Furthermore, governments worldwide adopted emergency measures providing financial support to businesses and workers, recognizing the societal importance of culture and entertainment during the lockdown crisis.

The initial priority for cultural institutions, however, was to promptly and transparently inform their audience about closures and operational limitations. They primarily used their websites and social media, to publish regular updates about their status. For subscribers, institutions employed more personalized communication channels such as emails and newsletters, to maintain direct contact during the disrupting period.

Moreover, cultural institutions faced the critical challenge of maintaining audience engagement during closures. As previously mentioned, the first essential step was establishing effective digital communication, thus entailing innovation. Organizations developed distinctive interactive experiences, including viral challenges and the use of hashtag campaigns, while also collaborating with artists who helped maintain visibility and interest in their work. Additionally, institutions utilized surveys to gather stakeholders feedback regarding future contents and events.

The tourism sector was another industry profoundly impacted by the pandemic and the resulting restrictive measures, experiencing a drastic decline in demand due to travel restrictions and border closures. Consequently, companies operating in this sector faced significant challenges in maintaining effective communication with their customers.

Also in this context, the primary priority for businesses within this sector, including hotels, tour operators, and airlines, was to inform their customers about social restrictions and the unavoidable consequences. Communication channels such as emails, push notifications, and website updates were used, especially to address issues related to cancellations, vouchers, and refunds. Efforts to maintain customer relationships were made through empathetic campaigns, aiming to emphasize understanding and flexibility, specifically by offering the option to cancel or reschedule reservations. The attempt to maintain a relationship with its customers was carried out through empathetic campaigns, which demonstrated understanding and flexibility, specifically with the possibility of often canceling and rescheduling reservations.

In the period following the peak of the crisis, when travel limitation measures were eased, tourist facilities adjusted to new safety protocols and promoted checks and tests upon arrival and departure,

in accordance with safety guidelines. These measures were consistently highlighted by establishments, as they became a crucial communication strategy to attract new and returning customers. Overall, the goal was to convey a careful approach towards guests, prioritizing their health as well as the well-being of the staff they would encounter. Communicating this reassurance became a critical focus for all businesses belonging to the tourism sector.

In conclusion, it is important to note that, despite numerous efforts to adapt, many challenges have remained for the establishments, even as restrictions gradually eased. In particular, travelers have become more cautious making it difficult for businesses to expand beyond their established customer base.

The post-pandemic approach for most facilities has been to personalize their offerings as much as possible and place greater emphasis on details, such as sustainability practices.

1.3.3. The Role of Media and Social Media

Traditional media such as television, radio, and print played a crucial role. Indeed, they acquired a greater degree of reliability during the pandemic, as they were perceived as more reliable offering a more transparent communication compared to the “new media”, and more tied to official and verified sources.

This aspect is especially evident during the height of the crisis, with lockdowns in place across the most affected countries. In his article *"Infodemic and Comdemic: Institutional Communication and the Challenge of COVID-19,"* Centorrino underlines how the increased use of traditional media by the public paralleled the "institutional comeback" of that period (Centorrino, 2020).

The primary role of these platforms has been to inform the public with reliable information, which is crucial for fighting misinformation and fake news prevalent on social media. To achieve this, they extensively used experts interviews, direct coverage of official press conferences, presentation of official data, and thorough reporting.

Furthermore, significant emphasis was placed on awareness campaigns led by governments and health administrations focusing on reaching the broadest possible segment of the population. The educational component has been equally important, helping people understand the importance of adhering to safety measures and the effective functioning of vaccines.

Moreover, traditional media, through the aforementioned reports and beyond, have acted as watchdogs, overseeing government decisions. Investigative journalism has been crucial in identifying

issues within the healthcare system and emergency management across various European and non-European countries.

Television, as a traditional media channel, gained significant advantages during the crisis, especially during the lockdown period, with the population confined to their homes. This increase was driven not only by greater availability of free time but also because television news and analysis were perceived as substantially more trustworthy than information circulating on social media platforms during this challenging period.

"Being forced to stay indoors has definitely affected the media diet of Italians, bringing back to the fore practices that had lost popularity. Suffice it to say that in the period 9 March-3 May 2020, the average audience for national TV grew by 37% (+3.8 million), reaching 14.4 million viewers throughout the day." (Centorrino, 2020).

Print media like newspapers and magazines played an important role in analyzing the pandemic and its management, offering more in-depth and authoritative analysis often missing in other media formats. In many cases, these publications improved their digital services to reach a broader audience, while maintaining the integrity of their content.

Finally, radio remained an essential communication channel, especially for people with limited digital access, delivering real-time information while representing a source of entertainment and leisure.

The pandemic underscored the deep connection between modern society and social media, particularly regarding their capacity for rapid information dissemination. As Merchant and Lurie observed, "With social media, information is shared through a network in a faster way around the globe, even faster than the pandemic virulence". Additionally, social media's capacity to interconnect individuals, paired with its constant presence in people's lives, further reinforced its role during this period (Merchant, 2020).

Among the various social media platforms, Twitter was the most widely used for accessing information about the pandemic. It is important to note that Twitter had already been extensively utilized by the scientific community prior to the emergence of COVID-19 (Collins, 2016). Though considered relatively reliable, Twitter still faced challenges with misinformation control similar to other platforms.

Governments and healthcare organizations decide to rely primarily on Twitter but also on Facebook and Instagram to communicate official announcements, restrictions, and prevention measures,

considering these platforms as the most effective solution for their constant user engagement, acting as a primary source of information for a significant portion of the population.

Instagram and TikTok especially excelled at facilitating the transmission of a unitary message, fostering empathy and a sense of community. Celebrities and influencers played a key role in this effort, through live broadcasts to maintain connections with followers and convey a sense of unity.

These social media also became powerful tools for awareness campaigns among the population and mobilizing activism through solidarity initiatives and fundraising. Even the spread of viral hashtags such as “#VaccinateTheWorld” effectively mobilized users around important causes.

Such digital engagement helped in alleviating "pandemic fatigue" - the exhaustion, frustration, and demotivation resulting from pandemic hardships and their associated restrictions.

As emphasized throughout the article by Venegas-Vera, social media usage carries both benefit and significant risks that are not easy to challenge on these platforms (Venegas-Vera, 2020).

While the issue of controlling fake news was certainly present even before the pandemic, it became more acute during COVID-19 crisis given the critical nature of health information and the public's tendency to seek for confirmation of existing beliefs, in the shortest possible time, often at the expense of proper fact-checking. This unprecedented challenge prompted Cristina Tardáguila, Associate Director of the International Fact checking Network (IFCN), to call COVID-19 “the biggest challenge fact-checkers have ever faced”.

As Morcellini argues, contemporary society lacks a true "immune system" against misinformation, it is disintermediated and disoriented, with people constantly seeking consensus, at the expense of truth. Furthermore, the spectacle-driven nature of modern media dominates the information landscape (Morcellini, 2020).

In this context, the spread of fake news is significantly facilitated contributing to what has been termed an “infodemic”, an overabundance of information, both reliable and unreliable, that makes finding trustworthy sources extremely difficult.

According to Morcellini, we can distinguish between three types of fake news. The first consists of those with a playful nature, with the goal to amuse the user through satire, though the boundary between fiction and reality on social networks is often easily misunderstood. The second category includes fake news with criminal intent, designed to organize scams through deception aimed at the weakest categories in this period of uncertainty. Finally, the most worrying include politically

motivated content. In such cases social media users are openly deceived by transmitting misleading news, steering thought away from reality through deceptive information (Morcellini, 2020).

The issue of misinformation has never been underestimated; on the contrary, significant efforts have been made to address it. Government bodies, health organizations, and official sources have worked diligently to distinguish their information from unverified sources. Media literacy campaigns were launched to help people recognize reliable sources, although their success is to be evaluated over time. Fact-checking platforms such as Facta and Open collaborated with social networks to remove or reduce the visibility of misleading posts and videos, receiving government support. From a legal and regulatory standpoint, stricter penalties were introduced for disseminating fake news.

Journalists and their ethical responsibility have been central in combating this problem. This requires verified accuracy in reporting while avoiding sensationalist language, that might cause unwarranted alarmism and clearly distinguish between opinions and facts. In the pandemic context, it was essential to give appropriate visibility to experts and scientifically credible figures, who could publicly explain complex concepts in an accessible and comprehensible language.

Finally, it is essential to emphasize that the communication strategies adopted by institutions, corporations, and organizations in response to the pandemic crisis, together with the challenges posed by the resulting restrictions, have permeated every sector and aspect of social life. These choices have not only shaped public discourse but have also influenced societal behaviors, economic strategies, and cultural dynamics, demonstrating the far-reaching impact of crisis communication across multiple domains.

The sports sector, both at the amateur and professional levels, was also significantly affected, impacting not only its recreational function but also its broader societal role. Restrictions prevented both the practice of sports and attendance at public events, creating challenges that placed considerable pressure on sports organizations. Unprepared to address the crisis with a structured and comprehensive strategy, these organizations had to navigate unprecedented disruptions and adapt to rapidly evolving circumstances.

2. Crisis Communication in the Sports Industry During the Pandemic

This chapter analyzes crisis communication in the world of sports during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first part of the chapter examines the impacts on the sports ecosystem in general, with particular attention to the professional context. Using both references to scholarship publications and official documents from the involved organizations, it establishes a parallel between the crisis communication theory described in the previous chapter and real cases concerning strategies, stakeholder engagement, and media usage. In the analysis, particular attention is given to the different roles of government entities, public organizations, and private clubs that have influenced decision-making strategies, communication styles, and stakeholder management during the crisis period.

This analysis serves as an introduction to the second part of the chapter, where two real cases of the main global sports organizations in basketball are examined: the NBA and the Euroleague. The comparison of the different experiences, highlights the similarities and differences due to distinct organizational structures and cultural contexts, which have influenced the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies.

2.1. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Sports Industry

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the global sports industry. As highlighted at the end of the previous chapter, every aspect of the sports world had to undergo reforms and develop emergency management strategies. Basketball, along with its related organizations, was no exception, though the responses and strategies varied significantly between countries and even within leagues, depending on the available resources. However, the entire sports industry was forced to reassess its operations, first managing the immediate and disruptive crisis and then adapting its strategies to a new environment with essential safety protocols, and measures for all involved.

Even sports organizations found themselves navigating completely unfamiliar circumstances during the pandemic, facing both widespread uncertainty and the challenge of false information circulating widely. Operating under constraints imposed by governmental authorities, scientific advisory boards, and health organizations, the sports sector was compelled to transform its communications strategy to address unprecedented decisions like event postponements. In this regard, the IOC (International Olympic Committee) historic decision to delay the Tokyo Olympics, the first such postponement in the modern era, represents the most profound example of this new reality.

The suspension of competitions was one of the first impacts of the crisis on the sports world. As early as March 2020, various sports federations, with the support of governments, decided to halt the championships. These decisions have been inevitably influenced by state-imposed restrictions, which

generally prohibited the organization of public events and mandated the closure of sports facilities. (Beech & Chadwick, 2021).

During this initial phase, it was crucial for organizations to maintain direct and transparent communication. The combination of clear information and timely message delivery, ensured they retained the trust of their audience. This approach aligns with Coombs' theory (Coombs T. W., 2007) and was further influenced by the intervention of state authorities, which played their role in decision-making and, consequently, relieved leagues, federations, clubs, and sports industry organizations of accountability.

Moreover, sports organizations tried to produce constant updates to preserve fan loyalty, recognizing that their audience was less engaged with a world unable to deliver its usual offering. To address this challenge, a significant shift toward digital communication became a crucial strategy that clubs and sports organizations, as a whole, have tried to adopt.

Three of the most prominent organizations in the sport industry, namely the NBA for basketball, the FIFA for soccer, and Formula 1 for motor racing, have undertaken awareness campaigns in various ways, highlighting the significance of working closely with health authorities and the media. Formula 1, in particular, set an example of maintaining audience engagement through innovative virtual events and e-sports initiatives. This clearly demonstrated the importance of leveraging new technologies for effective crisis communication. (Hutchins & Rowe, 2021).

The stop of competitions inevitably created a state of uncertainty, requiring various sports federations to determine whether and how to proceed. This situation brought to significant disparities, driven by differences in available resources, not only across different sports, but also between countries.

The economic sector emerged as one of the most profoundly affected areas within the sports industry during the crisis. Clubs, leagues, and sponsors experienced almost unimaginable challenges. Financial difficulties led some companies to bankruptcy during the pandemic, while others chose to cease operations in subsequent seasons. Many organizations were forced to drastically scale back their expenditures, threatening the viability of numerous sports projects. Sponsors, as the primary economic engine for the sustenance of sports initiatives, played a decisive role in this crisis. Their financial difficulties, often driven by external factors unrelated to sports, led to a reduction or complete withdrawal of their contributions. The closure of stadiums and suspension of competitions had far-reaching consequences, which studies like the report of the European Commission of 2020 have quantified in losses amounting to billions of dollars.

Chadwick also highlighted how the loss of income from television rights, ticketing and sponsors in that period seriously compromised the existence of numerous sports organizations. (Beech & Chadwick, 2021).

For instance, the NBA, managed to avoid the complete cancellation of its season, by revising and adapting its product. However, despite these efforts, the league experienced a revenue drop of approximately \$1.5 billion (Woods & Butler, 2020). Similarly, major European soccer leagues, although able to complete their seasons in most cases, suffered substantial financial losses. These losses were primarily driven by the absence of ticketing revenue and the renegotiation of broadcast contracts, which had to be adjusted across all European states.

In the soccer world there are several examples of effective communication strategies largely attributable to the resources available to clubs and the presence of organized corporate structures within them. Even in cases where the crisis severely challenged clubs, better preparation enabled them to manage communication more effectively. A notable example is the Spanish club Barcelona, which promptly reacted to their financial issues by applying transparent communication. The club openly shared its decision to renegotiate player contracts downwards as a measure to cope with the crisis. (Beech & Chadwick, 2021).

Overall, the most effective strategy for sports organizations was to swiftly adapt to a new economic landscape, emphasizing digital approaches that enabled them to diversify their revenues. (Hutchins & Rowe, 2021). A critical aspect of this was the ability to boost earnings by monetizing the production of digital content and creating innovative virtual events to engage fans as substitutes for traditional events. Formula 1 exemplified this by organizing virtual races that simulated the Sunday grand prix, successfully maintaining fan engagement while generating additional revenue. (Wenner, 2021).

Another important consideration is the impact the crisis has had on the lives of individuals involved in sport. In their book "Philosophy, Sport and the Pandemic", Fry and Edgar, dedicate the opening section to examining the "dilemma" of whether sports practices should continue despite the challenges posed by the crisis. (Fry & Edgar, 2022). Nicholas Dixon and Andrew Fiala, in particular, focus on the significance of team sports for young people, emphasizing their educational role above all. The concept of paternalism, restricting the choices available to young people, emerges with relevance, recalling the anti-paternalistic John Stuart Mill viewpoint, which asserts that adults should have autonomy over health-related decisions, provided these decisions do not infringe upon others. The authors stress that such autonomy does not extend to young people, as they are considered incapable of making certain decisions. The chapter concludes by focusing on Mill's "Harm Principle" (Mills, 2015 (original published in 1859)), noting that, during a global emergency as the COVID-19

pandemic, applying the principle becomes challenging. In such circumstances, individual choices inevitably have repercussions for the broader community.

The impact of the pandemic on postponed sports events has been particularly significant for professional and semi-professional athletes, whose career opportunities have been disrupted. For many athletes across various disciplines, adapting their preparation, which was entirely centered on a major event like the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, proved to be a challenging task.

In such a complex situation, effective communication became a vital tool for sports organizations. By addressing the anxieties and uncertainties faced by stakeholders, transparent and empathetic messaging helped to mitigate negative effects. Strong communication strategies provided a sense of stability and reassurance, fostering trust and engagement within the sports community during unprecedented times.

Furthermore, when championships were able to resume, athletes faced a heightened risk of injuries. This was largely due to insufficient preparation following the forced stop and the highly condensed schedules designed to complete the season while aligning the next one with standard timelines. Major global leagues across various sports stressed the importance of maintaining fitness during this period. Many actively engaged their fanbase by showing how professional athletes continued their training at home in anticipation of the restart. However, especially in team sports, staying in optimal "match-shape" proved to be a significant challenge. The NBA, for instance, launched the "Stay Ready" campaign, emphasizing the importance of athletic training even during the lockdown period. (Hutchins & Rowe, 2021).

The previously mentioned shift toward digital platforms is evident in the increasing popularity of streaming sports. While the opportunity to watch one's favorite sport on streaming and on-demand platforms is no longer considered as a novelty, this transition has certainly been accelerated by the demands that arose during the pandemic crisis. Platforms like DAZN, ESPN+ and Amazon Prime Video have secured a significant portion of television rights, leveraging the ability to offer on-demand content, together with exclusive insights. This flexibility and innovative approach have been central to their success.

Broadcasters aimed to reassure their existing users while attracting new audiences by emphasizing the quality of their services and promising an increasingly diverse offering tailored to fans feedback. Maintaining a forward-thinking and innovative approach was equally important, demonstrating their ability to adapt to challenges and engage their audience effectively. Formula 1 stands as a prime example of a successful crisis communication strategy, as the launch of the e-sports series "F1 Esports

Virtual Grand Prix" helped to fill the gap left by canceled races and sustained fan involvement. (Woods & Butler, 2020).

The entire digitalization process, frequently discussed throughout the chapter, naturally ties to the increasing use of social media. In the first chapter, we emphasized their significance and the necessity of using them effectively, as a consistent and transparent source of information, especially during a time of widespread misinformation and diffused fear, like the pandemic. In the realm of sports, social media proved to be indispensable. Above all, they served as the most accessible tool for maintaining communication, as they applied in the same way to clubs, leagues and sponsors, and, in general, social media functioned as the primary medium for crisis communication.

Building upon this approach, the next step involved leveraging platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok to stimulate deeper connections with fans and enhance engagement. These platforms also served as a means to showcase how beloved sports were adapting their lives in compliance with the imposed restrictions. This strategy also conveyed encouraging messages often paired with charitable initiatives. Notable examples include global sport stars Cristiano Ronaldo and LeBron James, both of whom significantly increased their presence on social media, reinforcing the perception of authenticity and cultivating a sense of closeness with their fans. (Hutchins & Rowe, 2021).

Clubs also reassessed their social media strategies, not only increasing their presence, but tailoring their approach to align with the circumstances. The focus was on creating interactive content, such as organized challenges or Q&A sessions with players. A notable example is Liverpool FC, a leading English Premier League team, which launched the #LFCAtHome campaign. This initiative included various challenges and engaging content aimed at sustaining fan involvement during a time when traditional live events were unavailable. (Beech & Chadwick, 2021).

Since 2020, the sports industry has witnessed inevitable changes in its traditional consumption patterns, marked by a redefined approach to utilization and an increased focus on digitalization. Today, leading organizations in the sports sector seamlessly integrate digital tools, innovative platforms, and social media channels into their operations, positioning them as indispensable pillars of the industry. This digital integration not only enhances operational efficiency but also fosters deeper connections with audiences, establishing new pathways for growth and engagement.

The pandemic underscored the critical importance of these digital strategies, serving as a catalyst for their accelerated adoption. Crisis communication theory provides a pivotal perspective, emphasizing that effective crisis communication not only mitigates the adverse effects of unforeseen challenges but also unlocks opportunities to strengthen audience engagement. (Coombs T. W., 2007). By

addressing the evolving needs of fans and stakeholders, organizations can turn periods of crisis into moments of transformative innovation, preparing the way for sustainable growth in an increasingly digital world.

2.2. Communication Strategies and Responses in Professional Sports

As outlined in the first chapter, crisis communication serves as a critical discipline for managing emergencies. Key factors such as preparation, familiarity with a defined plan, and a corporate structure featuring clear communication roles can significantly shape the outcomes. This chapter highlights that the sports industry is no exception: organizations within this field must consistently prioritize maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders, regardless of the challenges they face. Achieving this requires responses that are both timely and transparent across all types of crises. Coombs emphasizes how planning, responsiveness, and proactive public engagement are three essential components that are perfectly applicable and well-suited to the sports sector. (Coombs T. W., 2007).

The pandemic crisis underscored, more than ever, the critical importance of being prepared for such scenarios. Organizations equipped with a well-defined crisis protocol for severe and emergency situations were certainly better positioned to respond effectively. However, despite these preparations, the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19 proved to be complex and demanding for organization at every level.

In the world of sports, few, if any, were truly prepared for a crisis of this magnitude, which necessitated a complete reimagining of the sports landscape in an exceptionally short timeframe. However, the select leagues and an even smaller number of clubs that had established protocols, structures, or plans in place for such urgent and critical situations were able to depend on pre-existing guidelines tailored to their unique needs and characteristics.

One of the most notable examples is the Premier League, a sports league with vast resources. Despite its financial strength, having a well-structured crisis plan proved to be indispensable. From the onset of the emergency, the league prioritized transparent communication, keeping fans and stakeholders informed through regular updates, educational videos, and interviews with health experts. The effectiveness of these efforts is reflected in the consistently high level of trust in the organization, which remained largely unchanged throughout the crisis. (Wenner, 2021).

As we will explore in the upcoming chapters, with a particular focus on basketball and its organizations, even the most highly professional entities acknowledged their inevitable

unpreparedness for a crisis of such scale. Their feedback highlights how even minimal internal structuring can significantly impact the ability to manage challenges effectively.

One of the greatest challenges organizations faced, regardless of the location or context, was addressing the pervasive sense of uncertainty and confusion among the population. For sports organizations, the priority became delivering information that was timely, transparent and, whenever possible, reassuring. This was achieved through official announcements, often in collaboration with multiple governing bodies, and emphasizing the visible role of organizational leaders. A standout example is the NBA, where Commissioner Adam Silver took a proactive approach consistently leading communications and personally representing the decisions made, thereby instilling confidence and trust, thus recalling the importance of the role of CEOs in crisis communication underlined by Sardanelli in his article published in 2020 inside the “Corporate Governance and Research & Development Studies” journal. (Sardanelli, Conte, Siano, & Vollero, 2020).

Over time, as communication strategies shifted toward greater interaction with stakeholders and fans, focusing on sustaining engagement through digital products that substituted live events and captured audience interest, sports organizations continued to prioritize regular information updates. They remained committed to countering the spread of misinformation, reinforcing their role as reliable sources of truth contrasting the diffusion of fake news.

As pointed out in the first paragraph, sponsors have always played, and continue to play, a vital role in the sports industry, supporting both clubs and leagues. In this context, implementing an effective crisis communication strategy to reassure sponsors proved essential. This involved developing new digital sponsored content and hosting virtual events designed to enhance brand visibility. (Woods & Butler, 2020). Additionally, awareness campaigns, proposed challenges, and social media content were often created with the dual purpose of engaging audiences and offering innovative advertising opportunities for business partners.

As previously mentioned, audience uncertainty has been one of the most pressing challenges for the sports industry. The spread of misinformation has frequently disrupted stakeholders' perceptions, as they were overwhelmed with an influx of news and constant changes, driving them to seek reassuring information at any cost. This situation underscores the importance of a transparent and reliable communication strategy, as emphasized by crisis communication theory (Coombs T. W., 2007), to establish and maintain a consistent narrative amidst the chaos.

The suspension and rescheduling of sporting events and their communications, coupled with the ongoing adjustments to health protocols and the concerning economic repercussions, have

contributed to enhancing the uncertainty among the population. In times of instability, official bodies have consistently served as a crucial point of reference for individuals at all levels, and the sports industry has been no exception.

Coombs emphasizes the significance of fact-checking tools and collaborative efforts with platforms as essential strategies for combating fake news and maintaining credible, consistent communication. This principle is equally relevant to the sports industry, particularly in preparing for and addressing future crises.

Leagues have taken a proactive stance in addressing the spread of fake news, which proved especially detrimental during the heightened uncertainty of the pandemic crisis. The NFL, in partnership with ESPN, introduced a dedicated fact-checking initiative (Beech & Chadwick, 2021), while the Premier League collaborated with various social media platforms to detect and report false information related to its league and future plans. (Wenner, 2021).

2.3. The Role of Governing Bodies, Leagues, and Teams in Crisis Communication

Sports organizations need to align with government and health officials during the pandemic to ensure their messages are credible. Consistent communication has been emphasized as crucial, requiring coordination between sports federations, leagues, and clubs to deliver reliable information. (Seeger M. W., 2006).

During the pandemic, sports federations faced the challenging task of maintaining decision-making independence while complying with government regulations. According to Frandsen and Johansen (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016), federations that communicated openly and proactively about decisions made with health authorities gained greater stakeholder trust. This principle will be examined further in chapter four's case study of Italian basketball, where key figures emphasized this approach as fundamental to their communication strategy.

Sports leagues faced unique coordination challenges with their clubs during the pandemic. Formula 1 illustrates this complexity, as the organization had to manage teams from various countries with distinctly different situations and needs. Similar challenges emerged for continental competitions like the Champions League in soccer and the Euroleague in basketball. These leagues needed to implement adaptable approaches that accommodated everyone while respecting the specific governmental constraints and challenges faced by each participating country.

In general, the partnership between leagues and clubs serves mutual benefits: expanding audience reach, aligning events and messaging, and creating consistent crisis response strategies—all aimed at preserving fan engagement.

Frandsen and Johansen noted that despite occasionally conflicting interests, coordination remains essential. They conceptualized this dynamic as "an arena of multi-voice crisis communication," emphasizing how multiple stakeholders each bring distinct roles, needs, and perspectives that require both respect and assertion. (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

During the crisis, clubs navigated complex communication challenges. Though guided by federation and league directives, they retained significant autonomy in crisis messaging to fans, sponsors, and athletes. Successful crisis communication strategies deployed three distinct message categories: informational communications providing critical crisis updates; adaptive messaging offering psychological support and frameworks for processing the disruption; and reputation-focused communications aimed at preserving organizational credibility, stakeholder engagement, and trust capital developed over time. (Sturges, 1994).

Moreno together with other scholars stated that organizations gained significant credibility by implementing tangible social responsibility initiatives during the crisis. Rather than limiting themselves to awareness campaigns, successful sports organizations demonstrated genuine emotional support through concrete actions. This approach included on-the-ground activities, collaborative efforts, and visible commitment to addressing community needs. A notable example was the widespread practice of sports clubs converting their facilities into COVID-19 testing and vaccination centers, which demonstrated both practical assistance and authentic understanding of the public health emergency. (Moreno Fernandez, Funentes Lara, & Navarro, 2020).

The communication between clubs and their athletes tended to be more direct, especially when federations and leagues provided clear updates regarding stops and potential resumptions. While an emotionally sensitive approach was important, it often was second in line with the straightforward dissemination of factual information about the situation. In many instances, clubs asked their athletes to aid in engaging with fans. Most social initiatives, activities, and digital events, as well as the broader communication content produced by the teams, prominently featured athletes, the true icons of the sports industry and the primary drivers of fan interest.

A final critical topic to address regarding the role of leagues, ministries, and decision-making bodies is the management of competition resumptions. In the next two paragraphs and in the final chapter, we will explore this issue in greater detail through various examples from the basketball world. It is important to highlight that the decisions made varied significantly, shaped primarily by differing health conditions, as well as the unequal resources available to sports leagues and clubs across the globe.

What remained crucial, however, was effective communication from decision-makers. Reynolds and Seeger examined several cases and highlighted the importance of preparing stakeholders to adapt to a "new normal" rather than expecting an immediate return to the previous status quo. Striking the right balance between optimism and caution was identified as a key factor in successful communication strategies. (Seeger & Reynolds, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, consistent communication plays a crucial role in reducing uncertainty and preparing the audience. Coombs further emphasizes the importance of going beyond merely conveying decisions; involving stakeholders in the decision-making process itself proves highly effective. (Coombs T. W., 2007), This approach not only fosters greater involvement but also reinforces confidence in the legitimacy and fairness of the procedure.

2.4. Fan engagement and media narratives in sports crisis communication

The pandemic inevitably transformed the media narrative surrounding sport. With fan interests around the globe at risk, the focus shifted away from athletic performance and toward broader, more profound themes. Sport emerged as a powerful symbol, medially significant, of resilience, hope, and the collective pursuit of normality.

As previously discussed, this shift involved a metamorphosis of the message conveyed, manifesting in various forms. The media were compelled to construct a new meaning, redefine their identity, and, in many instances, adapt their very essence. These changes were driven by an acceptance of the new reality and a conscious response to it. However, this transformation was neither immediate nor linear. The evolution of the sports narrative closely mirrors the stages outlined in Marra's model (Marra, 1998), beginning with an initial phase of denial, progressing into a stage of awareness, and culminating in a reinvention of identity. (Pedersen, Brody, & Bo, 2021).

The "reinvention" cited in the book primarily involved adopting a fundamentally different approach centered around empathy. The media were required to acknowledge the reality of the situation and adapt accordingly, shifting their focus beyond their own interests to deliver messaging that was both grounded in reality and capable of offering reassurance. This empathetic approach aimed to resonate with and support stakeholders during challenging times.

During a crisis of such magnitude, one critical consideration was how to maintain fan engagement in the absence of live events. With the competitive element proving challenging to replicate through digital content, efforts increasingly focused on emphasizing the importance of the community. For instance, organizations sought to maximize interaction with fans and prioritize their choices and preferences. This approach aligns with the theory proposed by scholars, which highlights the

significance of co-creating value through the collaborative efforts of stakeholders and organizations. (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

A clear example of this strategy can be seen in the contests organized by numerous leagues and clubs to determine fans' favorite athletes, with variations tailored to specific sports. In the third and fourth chapters, we will explore several cases within the realm of basketball. This approach, combined with the use of archival content, has generated remarkable interest and achieved great success. As Mastromartino reported in his paper about implications of closures in sports during COVID-19 pandemic, such content results in a high level of emotional engagement, effectively captivating a broad audience across virtually all age groups. (Mastromartino, Ross, Wear, & Naraine, 2020).

Moreover, leagues and clubs have explored a variety of approaches, including unveiling exclusive, previously unseen content or revisiting iconic historical moments of the club or organization. At the same time, they prioritized establishing a direct and personal connection with their fans, fostering the sense of synergy and closeness we have previously highlighted.

The digitalization process, previously discussed, has played a key role in capturing fan interest, which represents a trend that the pandemic likely accelerated. The convergence of traditional and digital sports has been widely observed, with sports video games making remarkable progress over the years, achieving highly realistic simulations of athletic performance. This advancement has greatly benefited the sports industry, enabling it to provide fans with high-quality alternatives.

As has been observed, "E-sports has offered a role model for the digitalization of the sports experience, with its streaming practices, virtual commentators, and real-time interactions." (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). It is now challenging to find a sport that has not integrated with gaming in some capacity. Many leagues capitalized on this opportunity during the lockdown by organizing virtual championships that became highly popular. Moreover, continuous technological advancements, coupled with increased access to digital media, have dismantled traditional communication hierarchies. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 period, when shared global challenges fostered a sense of unity. The sports world reflected this shift, enabling unprecedented interaction between athletes and fans.

The sports press, like other forms of media, was compelled to undergo a rapid adaptation in response to the unprecedented global changes. Traditional reporting, centered around the narratives of live sporting events and their associated dynamics, was no longer viable. Instead, the focus shifted toward examining the impact of the pandemic on the sports industry, analyzing the crisis to provide readers with insights into an unprecedented worldwide halt in sports activities.

Positioned between sports organizations and the public, the sports press played a mediating role. However, the messages it communicated did not always align with the interests of leagues, clubs, or federations, nor did they consistently support the decisions made by these bodies. As sociologists observed, sports organizations often promoted narratives, such as those concerning potential resumptions, that contrasted with ethical considerations related to public health. (Rowe, 2020). To support their perspectives, newspapers frequently incorporated opinions from health experts, enriching their coverage with informed analysis. Additionally, like other media outlets, the sports press adapted by diversifying its content. This included a greater emphasis on in-depth analyses of various issues, which had previously received less attention during the regular cadence of sports activities.

2.5. Crisis communication in basketball: specific challenges and approaches

The world of basketball, which will be explored in depth in the next paragraphs and in the third chapter, exemplifies the broader need for adaptation and the creation of effective emergency management plans within the sports industry. Basketball, in today's context, transcends its identity as a mere game. It has evolved into a multifaceted global phenomenon, intertwining social, cultural, and business dimensions that extend far beyond the court.

This sport impacts countless lives, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a platform for societal influence and economic opportunity. Its ever-expanding reach and significance highlight its role in shaping communities, fostering connections, and driving innovation across various domains. As basketball continues to grow and adapt, it stands as a prime example of the dynamic and transformative power of sports in the modern world.

Focusing on the health-related aspects of basketball, it is inevitable to connect its practice to the primary modes of contagion discussed in the first chapter. The restrictive measures enforced by health institutions and government authorities worldwide led to the suspension of basketball activities during the pandemic. Both amateur and professional levels of the sport were significantly impacted. However, professional leagues, such as the NBA, consistently sought solutions to resume play—some of which yielded successful outcomes.

In addition to the evident challenges posed by basketball's nature as an indoor, contact-intensive sport, the game has also encountered significant hurdles on the communication front—issues thoroughly examined earlier in this chapter. The pandemic brought unique complexities, requiring basketball organizations to navigate not only logistical and health-related concerns but also the critical task of maintaining transparency and fostering trust among stakeholders.

The suspension of competitions and the challenges surrounding potential restarts have also deeply impacted the world of basketball. International tournaments were canceled due to travel restrictions, while smaller local leagues faced the same fate, as they lacked the resources necessary to envision and implement restart initiatives. The NBA, however, took a different approach with its Orlando "bubble," which will be discussed in detail in the next paragraph. Similarly, some European professional leagues successfully concluded their seasons by adopting solutions inspired by the American model.

The outcomes in these cases were primarily influenced by two key factors: economic capacity and bureaucratic constraints. The financial resources available to clubs and leagues played a critical role in determining their ability to adapt and implement solutions, such as resuming competitions. Equally important were the bureaucratic challenges, including government-imposed restrictions, updated health regulations, and binding ministerial decisions.

These challenges prompted significant shifts in communication strategies, emphasizing the need to keep members, stakeholders, and fans well-informed globally. This urgency accelerated the digitalization process and elevated the roles of individuals like social media managers and communication managers within organizations. The broader communicative response and adaptation observed across the sports industry were equally evident in basketball, which faced unique difficulties as an indoor sport. Unlike others, basketball struggled to envision a restart that included live audiences in arenas, adding another layer of complexity to its challenges.

From an economic perspective, the suspension of championships inevitably led to substantial losses for basketball leagues and the clubs involved. As will be explored later, significant efforts were undertaken to maintain the engagement of sponsors, stakeholders, and fans, aiming to sustain interest in the absence of live events. However, it remains undeniable that, in the realm of basketball, the games themselves are the true driving force of the industry.

One of the most notable financial impacts was the complete loss of matchday revenues, not just from ticket sales but also from other streams inside NBA arenas. These include a wide variety of shops, fast-food outlets, and merchandising stores, all of which contribute considerably to the overall revenue generated during live events. (Nath, 2024).

In basketball, as in other sports, leagues and clubs were confronted with significant challenges regarding sponsorships. Sponsors, facing their own financial struggles, found the value of agreements signed at the start of the season severely diminished or even rendered obsolete. This led to reduced funding and, where possible, the cancellation of contracts. As a result, clubs, particularly smaller ones

or those unable to maintain a strong connection with their fanbase, faced substantial economic difficulties, some even went bankrupt, such as teams in Italy's minor categories overseen by LNP.

The NBA, however, managed to navigate these challenges more effectively. Despite the temporary suspension of activities, it maintained its status as a major hub of public interest, preserving its appeal and "usefulness" to sponsors. Conversely, in Europe, and especially in Italy's minor leagues, sponsors often withdrew support, resulting in sharp budget reductions and forcing organizations to make tough decisions about whether to continue operations.

TV contracts have inevitably been reconsidered, both in the immediate term and with a view to the future. However, significant differences exist between leagues in this regard. In the case of the NBA, the resumption of the season through the Orlando bubble, which will be discussed further, generated substantial revenue for television broadcasters. Both the broadcasters and the league capitalized on the unique circumstances of the global lockdown, during which much of society was confined to their homes. Conversely, in Italy, the LBA which organizes the professional championship, in agreement with the FIP, opted to conclude its competition early without declaring a champion, resulting in a very different outcome for media-related revenue.

Building on this comprehensive overview of the challenges encountered by the sports industry as a whole, and basketball leagues in particular, the final two chapters will delve deeply into the communicative responses of organizations, leagues, and clubs within the basketball world. This exploration will be enriched by interviews with key decision-makers, providing valuable insights into the strategies and adjustments implemented during this period.

The analysis will focus on highlighting the contrasts between leagues with varying levels of resources and differing restrictions, as well as between the professional, semi-professional, and amateur spheres. Additionally, it will aim to examine the communication strategies employed and evaluate the preparedness of the individuals and institutions involved in navigating a crisis of such an unprecedented magnitude. Through this approach, the chapters will seek to offer a nuanced understanding of how basketball adapted to and overcame its unique set of challenges during this turbulent time. The following section examines the crisis management approaches of basketball's two premier professional leagues: the NBA and the Euroleague. This analysis will investigate the different strategies each organization implemented during the pandemic, comparing how the cultural context, economic impact, divergent governance structures, and operational challenges have shaped their crisis management decisions. The chapter concludes with a comparative evaluation of these contrasting approaches, highlighting their effectiveness and implications.

2.6. The NBA's response: strategies and crisis management

The NBA stands as basketball's most influential global brand that extends far beyond its immediate fanbase, reaching a vast network of international partners and stakeholders. The basketball industry system worldwide consistently looks to Commissioner Adam Silver's league as a reference point, with organizations across continents comparing their operations against NBA frameworks and innovations.

The league's exceptional communication skills represent one of its defining competitive advantages. Its ability to transform the core product using comprehensive marketing strategies, delivering immersive experiences, and innovating its operations through collaborative initiatives for both fans and commercial partners has increased its global relevance that extends beyond the on-court performances of its athletes. This has established the NBA as a cultural phenomenon rather than merely a sports competition.

Yet, despite its robust organizational infrastructure and recognized communication capabilities, the global disruption generated by the COVID-19 pandemic challenged even this outstanding organization, requiring strategic shifts and unprecedented adaptive measures.

The NBA's COVID-19 crisis has a well known starting event, which would later be identified as the "Gobert Case". On March 9, 2020, Utah Jazz's French center Rudy Gobert became the league's first player to test positive for coronavirus. While he already expressed himself as being a skeptic regarding the possibility of virus transmission, days earlier, during a now-infamous press conference, Gobert had publicly downplayed the pandemic threat, deliberately touching all microphones in the conference room with his bare hands, proving to be careless about all kinds of risk. This disregarding act dramatically backfired when Gobert himself contracted the virus, forcing the cancellation of the Utah Jazz-Oklahoma City Thunder game on March 11. The announcement came only after both teams had completed their warm-up routines and spectators had already filled the Chesapeake Energy Arena in Oklahoma City. Fans learned of the game's postponement via a sudden public address announcement echoing through the packed venue.

The incident prompted Gobert to issue a public apology on Instagram, acknowledging his recklessness: "I would like to publicly apologize to the people that I may have endangered. At the time, I had no idea I was even infected. I was careless and make no excuse. I hope my story serves as a warning and causes everyone to take this seriously. I will do whatever I can to support using my experience as way to educate others and prevent the spread of this virus." This episode exemplifies

the initial crisis response pattern observed across various sectors, moving from denial and minimization to acknowledgment and corrective action only after direct confrontation with the pandemic's reality. (The Washington Post, 2020).

Moreover, the NBA was forced to a league-wide suspension of all the games for the following day when Gobert's teammate, Donovan Mitchell, and other players were tested positive. (The Washington Post, 2020). This decisive action coincided with the World Health Organization's official declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on the same day. (World Health Organization, 2020). The timing of this international announcement lent significant credibility to the NBA's unprecedented move, while the organization was still facing the challenge of explaining this extraordinary decision to its global fanbase.

The NBA's swift response demonstrated remarkable organizational readiness and flexibility, as leadership immediately recognized COVID-19 as a potential third major crisis for a league already navigating an extraordinarily challenging season. The organization had previously experienced significant turbulence through diplomatic tensions with China (Golliver, 2019) and the devastating loss of basketball icon Kobe Bryant (The Washington Post, 2020), whose tragic death had sent shockwaves through the global basketball community just weeks earlier.

On the evening of March 11, 2020, the NBA made the groundbreaking announcement of an indefinite season suspension, establishing itself as the first major North American sports organization to take such decisive action. (Zillgitt, 2020). This swift decision showcased not only exceptional timing but also exemplary communication strategy. The league's approach demonstrated genuine empathy through its actions while maintaining transparent and forthright communication with its commercial partners and stakeholders.

The following day, Commissioner Adam Silver published a comprehensive open letter directed to the NBA's diverse ecosystem of fans, stakeholders, and commercial partners. In this communication, he acknowledged the unprecedented uncertainty facing the organization, planning a minimum 30-day suspension while promising constant updates and assuring stakeholders of the league's commitment to addressing all concerns. (Silver, 2020). The communication exemplified masterful crisis leadership through its empathetic tone and the significant symbolic value of having the organization's highest authority personally lead the response efforts from the crisis's earliest moments.

The NBA's crisis response exemplifies the theoretical frameworks established by Coombs and other crisis communication scholars. By positioning itself appropriately as a victim of external circumstances rather than a contributor to the crisis, the organization avoided combining the external

threat with internal management failures. Instead, the league deployed a comprehensive crisis management strategy characterized by proactive leadership, strategic resource mobilization, and consistent transparency in its communications. This approach contributed to maintaining stakeholder confidence through a period of unprecedented crisis.

Finally, the NBA, like other sports organizations, confronted the complex decision of whether to resume its 2019/20 season amidst the pandemic. While in this chapter we previously highlighted the league's relative advantages due to its substantial financial resources and operational autonomy, the resumption deliberations, however, required navigating intricate organizational, public health, and economic variables through a challenging decision-making process.

Significant concerns emerged within the player community regarding safety protocols and the feasibility of a secure return-to-play environment. (Maloney, 2020). More notably, certain players voiced strong opposition to resumption based on concerns that it might divert public attention from the urgent social justice movement addressing systemic racism in the United States. The Black Lives Matter movement gained great attention during this period, with several NBA athletes serving as prominent supporters. Many African American players, who comprise a significant percentage of the league's talent base, expressed experiencing what they characterized as “a pandemic within a pandemic”, a dual crisis that further highlighted and intensified their experiences as members of marginalized communities. (Laurencin & Walker, 2020).

Furthermore, the resumption of basketball activities, despite significant organizational and health challenges, was primarily motivated by economic and reputational concerns. A crucial factor was the potential revenue loss from television contracts and sponsorships, particularly during high-visibility periods like the playoffs. From an economic perspective, even players supported resuming play to restore their salaries. Veteran player Austin Rivers framed these financial motivations as serving a broader social purpose in the context of racial justice efforts. (Maloney, 2020).

A critical element of the NBA's crisis response strategy was its deliberate pursuit of industry leadership through strategic timing and effectiveness in its reopening approach. Commissioner Adam Silver recognized the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce the NBA's global brand positioning as an innovative and socially conscious organization by establishing the league as a pioneer and benchmark for post-lockdown sports resumption protocols. This crisis management approach aimed to transform challenge into competitive advantage by setting industry standards rather than merely following them, increasing the organization's reputation, and strengthening stakeholder trust during the recovery phase.

These strategies culminated in the implementation of a controlled risk environment solution, primarily motivated by economic imperatives but also incorporating social responsibility considerations. This crisis containment approach manifested as the "NBA bubble", a comprehensive isolation protocol established at Walt Disney World in Orlando. The site selection represented a strategic crisis management decision based on infrastructure capabilities that could simultaneously accommodate all the teams while respecting all the safety protocols and measures established to ensure the health of athletes and professionals. While providing the protection of public health through stringent biosecurity measures, this solution created conditions for operational continuity that preserved the organization's core business functions during the crisis period.

The first man of the NBA staff arrived in Orlando on June 24, 2020 and the season ended on October 11 of the same year. The five-month implementation period was characterized by rigorous protocol adherence and adaptive management. Crisis protocols underwent continuous refinement and enhancement throughout the response period to optimize health protection measures: the crisis management team employed strategic resource allocation by initially limiting the people eligible for the "bubble" to just 36 individuals per franchise, later expanded to 41 during the playoff phase, standing as a significant reduction from standard operational staffing levels. (Mack et al., 2023).

This represents just one example of the NBA's comprehensive crisis containment protocols implemented to safeguard health within the controlled environment. Significantly, the league's crisis communication strategy deliberately published these internal safety measures, transforming operational protocols into reputation-building messaging opportunities. This dual-purpose approach enabled the organization to demonstrate authentic commitment to stakeholder wellbeing while simultaneously enhancing public perception. The NBA's crisis management exemplified how transparent communication about risk mitigation efforts can paradoxically strengthen organizational reputation even crisis period, converting vulnerability into credibility through demonstrated competence in crisis response.

A cornerstone of the NBA's crisis communication strategy involved a stakeholder engagement approach to address the breakdown of traditional live-event experiences: this included involving fans from home with exclusive content, new television broadcasts, and a massive and interactive use of social media. Moreover, the installation of courtside digital displays featuring remote fans connected via Microsoft Teams represented a tangible crisis adaptation mechanism, creating a simulated presence that preserved the common viewing experience essential to the organization's value proposition. (Rossi, 2020). From a communication standpoint, this strategy enhances, besides the operational continuity, the importance of addressing psychological and emotional stakeholder needs.

This accelerated digitalization represented both a crisis adaptation requirement and an opportunity for stakeholder engagement innovation. The communication shift extended beyond institutional channels to activate individual stakeholders, particularly players, as crisis communication partners who reimagined their engagement practices to maintain fan relationships during physical separation. Athletes like Philadelphia 76ers' Matisse Thybulle and Los Angeles Lakers' Javale McGee emerged as effective crisis communicators by developing video blog content that achieved significant audience engagement. Moreover, crisis managers recognized media engagement as a critical component for both promoting organizational recovery efforts and demonstrating transparency about safety protocols: the implementation of virtual access frameworks for journalists represented a deliberate crisis adaptation mechanism that preserved crucial media functions, including press conferences and interview opportunities. The structured media engagement approach stands as a primary example of how crisis periods can work as an opportunity for communication evolution that might otherwise require years of gradual development, creating new engagement modalities that may persist beyond the immediate crisis response phase. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of leveraging media partnerships to amplify crisis response messaging while maintaining stakeholder communication continuity through alternative communication systems during physical distancing requirements.

A pivotal element in the NBA's crisis communication effectiveness was the strategic positioning of the commissioner as the organization's crisis leadership focal point from the initial response phase. Beyond tactical communications, such as timing optimization and health-centered messaging, this leadership visibility strategy established a clear and proactive authority figure who embodied organizational accountability during uncertainty. The commissioner's exceptional crisis presence increased stakeholder trust by providing a consistent, identifiable personification of the organization's crisis response efforts. By centralizing crisis communications through its highest authority, the NBA demonstrated how personalized leadership engagement and visibility stand as crucial crisis management assets when dealing with complex stakeholder expectations.

Furthermore, the NBA demonstrated exceptional strategic integration by simultaneously addressing the immediate health crisis while amplifying complementary social supporting messages. Using this multidimensional communication approach, the organization overstepped conventional crisis management by embedding broader social responsibility initiatives, including voting rights advocacy and Black Lives Matter support. Crisis managers facilitated this approach by creating structured platforms for coaches and players that could use post-game interviews for social support messages. Moreover, they extended the strategy to visual communication elements through official uniform

modifications, replacing player surnames with social justice messages like "Equality," "Vote," and "I can't breathe", thus transforming athletes' jerseys into crisis communication assets.

2.7. Euroleague's crisis communication: a European perspective

The Euroleague's crisis communication strategy diverged significantly from the NBA's approach, primarily due to its complex stakeholder environment and its lack of autonomy. Operating across multiple European nations, each with varying pandemic situations and approaches, the Euroleague faced the communication challenge of adapting its messaging to fit with diverse governmental mandates, public health protocols, and national federation requirements. This fragmented landscape required the Euroleague to develop a more adaptive, multilateral communication framework that respected the varying contexts of its member clubs.

In the initial phase of the pandemic between February and March 2020, the Euroleague, under former CEO Jordi Bartomeu's leadership, implemented a crisis communication strategy that began with relocating games from high-infection countries to neutral venues. However, this temporary solution proved unsustainable as the global health situation degenerated. The organization was compelled to shift its communication approach from mitigation to full suspension, announcing the temporary halting of all competition activities beginning with the scheduled games on Thursday, March 12. (Euroleague Basketball, 2020).

Euroleague's crisis communication approach demonstrated a predominantly reactive rather than proactive stance. The leadership team, which was in charge of the continuity decisions, opted for a continuous assessment of the evolving situation, monitoring health evolution across different European countries. Instead of presenting a comprehensive crisis management communication framework, the organization's messaging primarily focused on situational updates, framing their actions as responses to crisis events rather than anticipating them.

A critical factor influencing Euroleague's crisis communication dynamics was the composition of its management board, which included 11 teams (now 13) holding "A" licenses. While participating in the board as a response to the demand of being more involved in Euroleague business, these stakeholders inevitably supported their individual interests, which were shaped by the disparate public health situations in their respective countries. Especially during the early stages of the crisis, when pandemic conditions varied significantly across Europe, member clubs often communicated divergent positions, frequently prioritizing their economic concerns. This multilateral stakeholder environment

complicated the development of a unified crisis communication approach, as organizational messaging needed to arbitrate between these competing internal positions.

In the two months following the initial March 12 press release, Euroleague's crisis communication strategy evolved through consistent dialogue between Jordi Bartomeu's leadership team and national federations. This approach aimed at understanding each participating club's challenges and constraints, to identify potential roads to season completion. The communication focus was less on proposing definitive solutions and more on determining if viable options existed at all. While the NBA's bubble concept was adapted and proposed for an implementation in Valencia, Spain, this and other alternatives were ultimately rejected in Euroleague's communications, acknowledging the distinctive challenges of European pandemic management, and, specifically, the impracticality of isolating teams from different nations operating under different regulatory frameworks and public health mandates.

On May 25, 2020, Euroleague officially announced the termination of the 2019-2020 season without crowning a champion. This final communication marked Euroleague as the last major European sport competition to formally abandon its season, concluding a prolonged period of uncertainty and communications that had explored various scenarios. (Euroleague basketball, 2020).

Euroleague's crisis communication strategy regarding season cancellation deliberately positioned the organization as a victim of circumstance, explicitly framing the decision as an unavoidable response to force majeure conditions. This messaging approach served to minimize potential reputational damage by portraying leadership as constrained decision-makers who had exhausted all viable alternatives. The communication narrative strategically highlighted external factors beyond organizational control, constructing an image of the Euroleague as an entity compelled by unprecedented circumstances rather than exercising autonomous choice.

With season cancellation, Euroleague faced an unprecedented challenge: maintaining stakeholder engagement without its core product. The organization addressed the difficult task of preserving fan interest, stakeholder relationships, and sponsor commitments in the absence of live games. This communication challenge was particularly acute for Euroleague which, despite representing European basketball's premier competition, lacks the deeply devoted and expansive fan loyalty enjoyed by other European sporting properties, most notably football's Champions League. Consequently, the diffuse decline in audience engagement during the pandemic significantly impacted Jordi Bartomeu's league, focusing on a switch in communication toward archival content and interactive digital formats in an attempt to maintain audience connections during this period.

The new strategy included the 'EuroleagueUnited' campaign, using stakeholder connectivity techniques observed in the responses of other organizations. This initiative presented multilateral communication objectives: it positioned the organization as socially responsible by promoting public health messaging about virus mitigation during lockdowns, while simultaneously maintaining fan engagement through access to player and coach points of view. By facilitating direct interaction between fans and basketball personalities through structured Q&A sessions and personal pandemic experience sharing, Euroleague's communication approach transformed the crisis into an opportunity for deeper audience connection despite the competition's suspension. (Euroleague, 2020).

Furthermore, Euroleague offered historic game replays enhanced with commentary from the real participants. This initiative combined sports nostalgia, a widely successful engagement strategy employed across the whole sports industry, with exclusive insider perspectives from key figures, creating a strong involvement that fostered continued audience connection. By making this content freely available through its Euroleague TV platform, the organization's communication strategy prioritized accessibility during the crisis period, maintaining stakeholder engagement despite the absence of live competition.

2.8. Comparative analysis: NBA vs Euroleague

The examples illustrated above highlight the evident contrast in crisis communication approaches between basketball's two premier international competitions. The NBA's proactive communication strategy differs fundamentally from Euroleague's reactive positioning.

The NBA, under Commissioner Adam Silver's leadership, demonstrated communicative autonomy, formulating messages and framing decisions independently without needing to align with external authorities. Their communication strategy projected decisiveness and authority even when operating in severely impacted regions like Florida, successfully positioning the “Bubble” concept as a controlled environment operating with organizational self-determination despite surrounding events.

Conversely, Euroleague's crisis communication under CEO Bartomeu necessarily reflected the organization's complex operating environment. While financial disparities certainly influenced communication capabilities, the fundamental constraint was Euroleague's subordinate position within an intricate regulatory framework, as communications had to integrate and respond to directives from multiple national governments, public health authorities, and sport governance bodies. This multilateral accountability framework compelled Euroleague to communicate from a position of adaptation rather than direction.

This fundamental difference stands as an example of a crucial principle of crisis communication: governance structure and decision-making autonomy significantly shape messaging strategies. The NBA's structure allowed a communication driven by a singular voice and strategically effective, while Euroleague's diverse composition forced to a communication approach based on adaptation, intermediation and careful balancing between national constraints and stakeholder interests.

Both organizations have employed the crisis period to accelerate the digital transformation path outlined throughout this research, integrating sophisticated social media strategies and evolving communication approaches into their institutional channels. This digital evolution reflects a strategic adaptation by both leagues to reshape their organizational communication frameworks in response to contemporary media demands.

However, despite sharing digital evolution trajectories, these organizations show distinctive crisis communication footprints: the NBA prioritized empathetic messaging that highlighted human connection, while Euroleague, though implementing various fan engagement initiatives, maintained a more formal institutional voice primarily focused on situational evaluation and procedural crisis management.

A notable divergence in crisis communication strategies between the two leagues emerged in their handling of COVID-19 test results during competition resumption. The NBA implemented a transparent disclosure policy, publicly identifying players who tested positive. In contrast, Euroleague adopted a more restrictive information approach, releasing only aggregate case numbers without revealing individual identities, only acknowledging specific cases after the involved clubs had independently disclosed this information. This distinction in privacy management and information transparency represents a significant philosophical difference in how each organization balanced public interest against individual privacy considerations.

Moreover, a noteworthy distinction stands as evidence when examining the underlying fan relationship dynamics of each league. The NBA has cultivated a global entertainment brand extending beyond individual team affiliations, creating an autonomous league identity that attracts a fanbase independent of specific franchise loyalties. Conversely, Euroleague's engagement model is fundamentally club-centric, with fan connections primarily rooted in historic European club attachments rather than league-wide brand recognition. This disparity suggests that the Euroleague faces comparatively greater challenges in fostering sustained fan engagement, merely due to the stronger identification of supporters with individual clubs rather than with the league itself. In contrast, the NBA appears to mitigate this issue more effectively, as its branding and entertainment-

oriented model cultivate a broader appeal that extends beyond team-specific loyalty, thus maintaining a consistent level of audience engagement across the league.

Finally, comparing the letters to fans from Adam Silver (Silver, 2020) and Jordi Bartomeu (Bartomeu, 2020) from a communication standpoint, substantial differences are evident, confirming what was stated previously, about the divergent scenarios faced by the NBA and the Euroleague. While Adam Silver letter highlights the actions of his leadership (“...*we made this decision...*”, “...*we will continue to coordinate...*”, “...*we develop the appropriate course...*”) and the social commitment of the NBA in the pandemic containment (“...[On NBA site]...*you will also find guidelines on how to keep yourself and your family safe and healthy...*”), the tone of the letter by Jordi Bartomeu reflects a passive and cautious position towards the pandemic (“...*meticulously following the instructions of national and regional governments...*”, “...*due to forces beyond our control, we could not make it happen as soon as we all wish...*”, “...*the entire situation has brought anything good...*”, “...*Euroleague Basketball will continue monitoring the situation on a daily basis...*”, “...*we encourage you to follow all precautionary measures that are recommended by your public health authorities and the World Health Organization...*”). The comparison highlights how the NBA’s centralized structure allowed for cohesive decision-making and quick measures implementation, thus facilitating innovative solutions like the “Bubble”, the Euroleague navigation in a fragmented regulatory landscape struggling with delays related to cross-border and internal negotiations, limited its operational capacity, making swift, unified responses more challenging.

In conclusion, while the diverse audience profiles and fan engagement patterns between these leagues are evident, the communication distinctions identified throughout this analysis transcend these inherent organizational characteristics. Rather, they reflect fundamentally different strategic communication philosophies adopted by leadership teams with contrasting visions for brand positioning and stakeholder relationship management during crisis situations.

This analysis gains particular relevance in today's context, as the NBA has formally announced its interest in establishing a European competition in partnership with FIBA (International Basketball Federation), directly challenging Euroleague's continental dominance. While Commissioner Adam Silver's initiative remains in developmental stages, it has already promoted significant debates within basketball circles. Industry voices consistently highlight that European basketball could benefit most from the NBA's sophisticated marketing and communication expertise. Euroleague's competitive advantage continues to be based on its member clubs' historical significance and passionate fan cultures, alongside its improving competitive quality.

A potential future scenario might involve collaborative engagement between these organizations in the European market, potentially creating a new hybrid model that preserves the genuine passion characteristic of European basketball while incorporating the NBA's proven expertise in product definition and packaging, sponsorship activation, and audience development strategies.

3. Comparative Analysis of Crisis Communication in Italian Basketball

This last chapter carries on the study of empirical instances started in Chapter Two, so meeting the research goal of a qualitative and comparative study of crisis communication approaches narrowing the focus on the Italian basketball ecosystem. While the last chapter gained advantage from academic publications, official records, and well-known organizational responses, the Italian case study required a different methodological approach considering the lack of existing academic and scholarship research or suitable institutional documentation from the relevant organizations.

After a brief introduction to the research methodology and an overview of the structural and operational context within which these organizations operated, the chapter continues with the comparative analysis of responses provided by organizational decision-makers using primary interviews. This analysis takes into consideration the distinct roles and consequent actions that characterized the crisis communication strategies implemented by different governing bodies within the Italian context.

The final part of the chapter contains the examination of an interview conducted with a primary Italian basketball club involved in both national and European competitions. This final case study provides a particular and different viewpoint from an organization that experienced the pandemic crisis from a different perspective, requiring coordination with several regulating authorities across distinct competitive contexts. This perspective offers a particular view of the challenges faced by organizations operating at the implementation level of crisis communication frameworks, revealing how hierarchical directives were translated into the in-field operations and how clubs navigated potentially conflicting stakeholder expectations during COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. Methodology

In this third and final chapter, I analyze crisis management and communication practices implemented by key Italian basketball organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This examination draws on interviews with executives and decision-makers who were directly involved in crisis response within Italy's basketball ecosystem during our focal period of study.

The research methodology combines documentary and theoretical analysis with empirical investigation through qualitative interviews with diverse stakeholders. This methodological triangulation was strategically selected to deepen our understanding of a phenomenon that has received insufficient scholarly attention, particularly within the specific context of basketball governance and operations.

By gathering firsthand narratives from frontline crisis managers who managed pandemic responses across various organizational frameworks at the national level, this study provides a more authentic and multidimensional understanding of crisis communication dynamics. These semi-structured interviews with representatives from the Italian Basketball Federation (FIP), Basketball League (LBA), Italian Basketball Players Association (GIBA), National Basketball League (LNP), and Olimpia Milano basketball club offer valuable insights of the actual chronology of events, reveal the underlying decision-making processes, expose situational constraints, and highlight the strategic communication choices made during this extraordinary period of institutional stress and adaptation.

This approach not only serves as documentation about what happened but also explores the reasons behind key decisions, providing connections with crisis communication theory as applied within the specialized context of professional sports governance during a global health emergency.

This research strategically focused on the principal organizations within the Italian basketball ecosystem, each playing a distinct role in pandemic crisis management. For every organization, I intentionally sought to engage with individuals who had direct involvement in the communicative aspects of crisis response.

Interviews		
Organization	Name	Role
FIP	Francesco D'Amelio	Head of Media and Digital
LBA	Umberto Gandini	President
LNP	Massimo Faraoni	Secretary General
	Stefano Valenti	Communications Director
GIBA	Alessandro Marzoli	President
OLIMPIA MILANO	Claudio Limardi	Media Director

Table 1: Interviewees' Organizations and Roles

Through this careful selection process, I obtained interviews with several key figures: Francesco D'Aniello, Head of Media and Digital for the Italian Basketball Federation (FIP); Umberto Gandini, President of Lega Basket Serie A (LBA); and from the National Basketball League (LNP), both Secretary General Massimo Faraoni and Communications Director Stefano Valenti. Additionally, Alessandro Marzoli, President of the Italian Basketball Players Association (GIBA), provided valuable perspective from the athletes' representative body.

To incorporate insights from the club level, I also gathered information through a written interview with Claudio Limardi, Media Director of Olimpia Milano, a prominent organization competing in

both the Italian premier league (LBA) and Euroleague (where they hold board membership as an A-licensed team). This additional perspective enriches the study by illuminating crisis communication practices at the individual club level, complementing the institutional viewpoints from governing and representative bodies.

This carefully curated group of participants ensures comprehensive coverage across the organizational hierarchy of Italian basketball, encompassing federation leadership, league administration, player representation, and club management, thus providing a multi-dimensional understanding of crisis communication strategies throughout the basketball governance structure.

For this research, I approached all target organizations requesting interviews with either their communications directors or presidents. To accommodate the busy schedules of these executives, I offered flexible options including written response formats when face-to-face or telephone interviews resulted impractical.

The data collection process varied according to participant availability and preferences. Representatives from the Italian Basketball Federation (FIP), National Basketball League (LNP), and Olimpia Milano responded to a standardized set of written questions delivered via email.

Conversely, I conducted real-time interviews with the presidents of the remaining two organizations. LBA President Umberto Gandini participated in a telephone interview, while GIBA President Alessandro Marzoli engaged through video conferencing. These synchronous interview formats afforded the valuable opportunity to adapt the predetermined question framework based on conversational dynamics, allowing for more nuanced exploration of emerging themes.

All interviews were conducted within a three-month timeframe between February and April. The oral interviews each lasted approximately 30 minutes, providing sufficient depth while respecting the time constraints of these high-level executives.

This mixed-method approach to data collection, combining written responses with interactive interviews, ensured comprehensive coverage while accommodating the operational realities of accessing senior figures within professional sports organizations during their active seasons.

These interviews serve as a critical component in analyzing crisis management strategies and communication decisions implemented by various basketball organizations. While the previous examination of NBA and Euroleague cases provided external perspectives, these first-person accounts offer invaluable insider viewpoints that illuminate not only the decisions themselves but also the underlying deliberative processes that shaped them.

By incorporating direct testimony from key decision-makers, this research moves beyond observable outcomes to explore the contextual factors, constraints, and strategic considerations that influenced crisis response. This insider perspective enriches the analysis by revealing the complex interplay of stakeholder interests, institutional pressures, and practical limitations that characterized pandemic management within Italian basketball governance.

The methodological strength of this approach lies in its cultivation of diverse organizational voices, creating a multidimensional and comprehensive portrait of crisis communication across the Italian basketball ecosystem during the pandemic. This multifaceted representation enables a more nuanced understanding of how different entities within the same sports sector interpreted and responded to identical crisis conditions, highlighting both commonalities in approach and organizational distinctiveness in execution.

3.2. Introduction to the Italian Basketball Context

The Italian basketball landscape presents a hierarchical structure of distinct organizations, each with its degree of autonomy and fulfilling specialized roles within the crisis management and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This organizational architecture created both challenges and opportunities for coordinated crisis response.

At the apex of this governance structure stands the Italian Basketball Federation (FIP), established in 1921 and led by President Giovanni Petrucci since January 12, 2013. As the top government body, the Federation oversees the comprehensive Italian basketball movement, managing regulatory frameworks, coordinating competition calendars, institutional relationships with national and international bodies, and supervising basketball activity nationwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the FIP inevitably assumed a central leadership position in crisis communication and decision-making for all constituent organizations within the system. (Federazione Italiana Pallacanestro, 2021)

Operating under the Federation's umbrella are two league structured with differentiated responsibilities. The professional tier is represented by the Serie A Basketball League (LBA), presided over by Umberto Gandini. Established in 1966 as the "Union of Serie A basketball clubs" through Gianni Corsolini's initiative (LegaBasket, 2023), the LBA administers Italy's premier basketball championship through federation delegation. Parallel to this exists the National Basketball League (LNP), responsible for the semi-professional A2 series and amateur B series championships. led by President Francesco Maiorana and General Secretary Massimo Faraoni, the LNP emerged on April 23, 2013, inheriting the legacy of the disbanded Legadue and National Basketball League

Associations following the FIP's structural championship reorganization the previous year. (Lega Nazionale Pallacanestro, 2025).

Beyond the institutional government bodies, the Italian Basketball Players Association (GIBA) occupies a position of significant importance. Officially established in 1976, GIBA serves as the authoritative advocate for players' interests across contractual negotiations, labor conditions, and broader institutional dialogues. Under the leadership of President Alessandro Marzoli and Vice President Mario Boni, the association has successfully developed working relationships not only with domestic leagues and regulatory institutions but also with international player representative bodies. (GIBA, 2025)

To establish a proper framework for interpreting the forthcoming interview findings, it is important to notice that, unlike the autonomous North American basketball structure examined previously, the Italian basketball ecosystem operates through a complex interplay of overlapping jurisdictions. This fundamental structural difference creates a governance environment where multiple organizational entities with potentially divergent priorities and imperatives must coordinate their actions and messaging. This multi-layered organizational architecture presented perhaps the most significant challenge for Italian basketball during the pandemic. Effective coordination across these various institutional entities became essential, requiring sophisticated communication strategies operating along two critical dimensions. Firstly, internal inter-organizational communication demanded careful balance between governing bodies, leagues, player associations, and individual clubs. This information flow needed to maintain coherence despite potentially competing institutional interests. Moreover, external stakeholder communication required consistent, empathetic messaging to diverse audiences, including athletes, commercial partners, media outlets, and the fan community, all while acknowledging the gravity of the health crisis. This complex communication landscape stands in contrast with the more centralized and independent American model, highlighting how different governance structures fundamentally shape crisis communication approaches and effectiveness.

3.3. Interviews Comparison

The interviews conducted with key representatives from the previously identified organizations provide a valuable opportunity for cross-organizational comparison. By analyzing these responses collectively, we can comprehensively understand crisis communication strategies across multiple governance levels within Italian basketball, identifying distinctive approaches and shared patterns.

This comparative analysis will examine the perspectives shared by leadership figures from the cited Italian organizations. By juxtaposing their crisis communication experiences, decision-making

processes, and strategic considerations, we can construct a multidimensional understanding of how the Italian basketball ecosystem responded to the pandemic disruption.

The forthcoming sections will explore these interview findings through a comparative lens, highlighting where organizational approaches converged and diverged during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

3.3.1. Early Communication Management

The initial communicative and managerial responses to the pandemic crisis reveal distinct approaches across Italian basketball organizations, reflecting their position within the governance hierarchy and their institutional responsibilities.

Early Communication Management	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate activation of a communication circuit to clubs and registered members • Timely creation of protocols for a safe return to activities • Real-time information provided based on Government and CONI guidelines
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate suspension of all games (March 9, 2020) • Decision to cancel the championship after about a month and a half • Communication focused on the lack of resources to face uncertainty • Adaptation to government communication on the pandemic
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a commission with political, technical, and healthcare components • Daily 24/7 relationship between LNP structure and clubs • Role as intermediary between FIP (government referent) and clubs
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant dialogue with the federation focused on emergency management • Daily monitoring of different realities and conditions of athletes • Constant updates to athletes on developments in dialogue with federation and leagues

Table 2: Early Communication Management Key Points

The Italian Basketball Federation (FIP) immediately positioned itself within an institutional framework characteristic of sports governing bodies, embracing its authoritative role within the ecosystem. This hierarchical, top-down approach under President Petrucci's leadership facilitated the implementation of standardized protocols, dissemination of precise directives, and pursuit of procedural consistency nationwide. Francesco D'Aniello, FIP's Head of Media and Digital, emphasized that the Federation's primary communication objective was establishing direct contact with clubs and members to provide transparent communication that aligned with governmental and Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) guidelines. This leadership stance established the communication framework within which all subordinate organizations would operate.

The subordinate organizational landscape necessarily adapted to Federation directives. The LBA adopted what could be characterized as a pragmatic and empathetic communication strategy, prioritizing transparency, particularly regarding financial constraints facing both the League and its member clubs, an approach that aligns with crisis communication best practices. President Gandini highlighted an additional challenge faced by LBA at the beginning of the pandemic period: his election on March 9, 2020 created a leadership transition precisely as the crisis intensified, necessitating accelerated adaptation. Despite this organizational complexity, the ultimate decision regarding championship suspension remained with the Federation, as championship management delegation to LBA does not extend to such extraordinary measures.

Similarly, the LNP aligned with FIP's decisions regarding competition suspension and eventual cancellation. Communications Director Francesco Valenti articulated LNP's commitment to factual, measured official communications that avoided emotionally charged statements, focusing on objective realities rather than subjective interpretations. Like LBA, LNP's communication approach centered on transmitting official directives from higher authorities while maintaining continuous dialogue with member clubs.

The GIBA employed a distinctly different initial approach, consistent with its representative mandate. GIBA utilized a more direct, less institutionally formal communication model specifically targeting its primary stakeholders, the athletes. This approach enabled rapid collection of player concerns, which then informed direct engagement with clubs and leagues to advocate for member interests within the crisis context. This networked communication strategy allowed for efficient identification and response to specific athlete needs as the situation evolved.

The comparative analysis reveals that organizational positioning within the basketball governance structure significantly influenced communication approaches, particularly regarding institutional formality. However, all interviewed organizations emphasized the importance of conveying empathetic messaging while maintaining clarity about the unfolding situation, balancing emotional support with factual transparency during the early crisis phase

3.3.2. Communication Channels and Strategies

Looking at the comparative analysis on communication channels and strategies used during the pandemic, a key observation emerges: all basketball organizations experienced a significant quickening in digital adoption. While digitalization was already an ongoing process in the sports sector, the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, including lockdowns, competition suspensions, and restricted audience access, dramatically accelerated this transformation across all organizational communication strategies. Each institution approached this digital shift according to

their specific roles and organizational needs, but the common goal was the necessity to maintain engagement and visibility in an environment where traditional in-person interactions had become impossible. This forced digital migration represents one of the most profound and likely permanent changes in sports communication resulting from the crisis.

Communication Channels and strategy	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Email, website, social media channels Videos containing specific guidance for registered members Special page on the website dedicated to institutional communications
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily digital communication (especially during the behind-closed-doors season) Intensive use of social media Development of protocols for media On-court interviews with distancing, press conferences via streaming
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streaming through LNP Pass to maintain interest in basketball Constant communication with clubs Collaboration with FIP to transmit information
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assemblies with over 300 athletes on platforms like Zoom Social media channels (particular emphasis on Instagram Stories) WhatsApp for direct and immediate communications with athletes Direct consultation and intervention in critical situations

Table 3: Communication Channels and Strategy Key Points

We previously emphasized that the FIP aimed to preserve its institutional role, which is reflected in its communication approach. The Federation prioritizes official channels to lend authority to the information it distributes.

The official website serves as the primary communication channel, with the reliability of press releases being fundamental to the FIP. While the Federation has adapted to digitalization and social media usage during this period, it has maintained a more formal institutional approach to its communications. Social media platforms have been utilized to expand reach, but the Federation has continued to emphasize the publication of official press releases on its website.

Considering the crisis communication principles discussed earlier, this strategy seeks to maintain trust in an institution that recognizes its specific role in relation to its collaborating organizations and members.

The LBA was forced to completely reimagine its communication strategy. While sponsorships of live events and on-field activities traditionally drove all communication decisions for sports leagues, the

crisis necessitated a pivot to an entirely digital approach to maintain fan engagement. Even during the period of forced closure without competitions, maintaining communication flow proved essential. In this regard, extensive use of social media played a crucial role in LBA's communication strategy.

President Gandini emphasized that the digital transformation became even more significant during the resumption of competitions in the following season. There was a need to continue offering fans the best possible product while ensuring appropriate visibility for sponsors. This could only be achieved through modified communication protocols for media and massive integration of new digital concepts in the sports environment.

LNP followed a similar path to LBA, despite having fewer resources. During lockdown, they enhanced their social media presence while involving clubs in various initiatives and campaigns, all while maintaining official communications.

In this regard, one notable social media initiative was "Legends," where fans could vote for their favorite historical players and coaches from different clubs. According to communication manager Francesco Valenti, this campaign generated significant and somewhat unexpected engagement on both the league's and participating teams' social channels.

When competitions resumed in the following season, the LNP Pass streaming platform became crucial, offering access to all LNP club matches. This further emphasized the digital transformation that organizations at every level necessarily implemented.

Conversely, GIBA's approach emphasized direct relationships with stakeholders, which influenced their channel selection. They prioritized platforms enabling real-time, immediate communication with athletes, particularly privileging WhatsApp and Instagram Stories.

While they continued to issue official communications through standard social channels and their website, their commitment to serving athletes led to choices that prioritized communication speed.

Another noteworthy aspect of President Marzoli's players' association during the peak crisis period was their implementation of virtual assemblies through online platforms. These meetings featured two-way interaction with members and unfiltered communication as key characteristics.

This represents an interesting example of "participatory crisis communication" that has become widespread across various sectors, not just sports, during and after the COVID-19 period. Initially adopted to comply with health protocols, these approaches continue to meet other needs today. GIBA's implementation demonstrates the association's commitment to its members and dedication to addressing their actual needs throughout the crisis.

Finally, we can highlight that while digital transformation was common across all organizations, their specific approaches were guided by their unique requirements. Despite varying levels of preparation and resources, every organization attempted to maintain interest in a sport and activity that had been stripped of its usual appeal. The objective was to balance necessary official communications with diverse forms of engagement and entertainment that aligned with emerging trends and new interaction methods.

3.3.3. Cooperation at Institutional Level and Directives Management

Considering the extremely disruptive nature of the pandemic, public institutions became central actors across all levels of crisis response. Each organization functioned as an institutional message distributor and directive recipient. This dual role demanded exceptional organizational agility, developing the capacity to rapidly adapt and contextualize information while preserving message consistency and maintaining stakeholder trust.

Cooperation at Institutional Level and Directives Management	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant and collaborative contacts with Government and CONI • Dissemination of government information through federal channels • Effective coordination with the Leagues (LBA, LNP, LBF)
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex communication with the government to obtain economic aid • Dialogue with Ministry of Health for health protocols • Collaboration with other leagues (volleyball, football Lega Pro) that shared similar issues • Difficulties in negotiating arena capacity percentages
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role as intermediary between FIP (government referent) and clubs • Coordination difficulties with local health authorities that interpreted protocols differently • Disadvantaged position compared to professional championships
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination with international player associations (NBPA, ABP, SNB) • Participation in UBE (Union of Player Associations) • Representation of athletes in dialogue with federation and leagues

Table 4: Cooperation at Institutional Level and Directives Management Key Points

Regarding institutional relations, the FIP played a pivotal role under President Gianni Petrucci's leadership. They maintained continuous communication and collaboration with both the Government and CONI, adapting to their directives while determining the optimal approach for their championships. Moreover, the FIP needed to coordinate effectively with the various leagues (LBA,

LNP, and Women Basketball League), which, as previously noted, only managed their respective championships, with final championship decisions remaining under federation and federal council authority.

The FIP essentially functioned as an "information gatekeeper," guiding the entire Italian basketball movement, respecting external directives, and serving as the official channel for their dissemination. In this regard, the federation's Head of media and digital mentioned, in the interview, that they created a dedicated page for institutional communications.

The FIP's position toward the leagues established clear vertical communication, eliminating ambiguity about decision-making responsibility in an effort to maintain consistent roles.

LBA necessarily followed a different communication path regarding institutional relations. Despite the FIP's leading role, significant negotiation with other institutions was required. President Gandini's league's communicative function extended beyond informing and reassuring as dialogue was necessary with the Government regarding economic assistance and potential restarts (such as arena capacity), with the Health Ministry concerning health protocols for both lockdown and the upcoming championship season, and with other leagues (Serie A Volleyball League, Women's Serie A Volleyball League, and Pro League in football) facing similar challenges to present a united front to the relevant authorities.

This bidirectional communication wasn't always straightforward, particularly when organizing the restart. President Umberto Gandini emphasized that discussions with the Government and various Ministries about limitations and protocols often failed to satisfy both parties.

LNP faced perhaps the most complex situation: while subordinate to the Federation like LBA, its amateur designation and the resulting interpretative fragmentation at regional and provincial levels significantly complicated crisis management.

The tension between uniform central directives and varying local implementations, while representing a classic crisis communication challenge, became evident with LNP during the resumption of activities for the 2020-2021 sports season.

What clearly emerged was that LNP managed communication more effectively when following clear guidelines between FIP decisions and Government directives; conversely, the league's amateur status and the fragmented national-level crisis management post-lockdown substantially complicated LNP's efforts.

GIBA conducted multi-faceted institutional communications to protect athletes' interests. They engaged with the Federation regarding both the championship suspension and a restart that would prioritize player health.

With the leagues, beyond dialogue about safely resuming activities, discussions were centered on "maintaining promises of reciprocal performance." In our interview, President Marzoli highlighted players' collective desire to resume activities promptly, primarily due to concerns about potential income loss.

From an economic perspective, communication difficulties between leagues and the players' association were significant: President Marzoli described LBA and LNP's initial request for compensation reductions as "heavy." However, an important distinction emerged, while an agreement on a reduction extent was reached with LBA, no formal agreement was ever established with the amateur league.

In the second case, LNP's controversial position led to a clash, in which some clubs felt entitled to decide independently about the management of the remaining salaries of their members. This situation inevitably left an important aftermath in the following season, which was precisely what was wanted to be avoided both from the point of view of clubs and athletes. The resources of the clubs involved and the conditions of the sponsors have greatly influenced the management of the problem, however the lack of an agreement shows a major structural limitation that would still be found today in a similar situation.

GIBA's final institutional approach involved internal coordination with other European and non-European players' associations and the coaches' association. This demonstrates these associations' understanding of the importance of coordinated communications during crises, as a harmonized plurality of voices can achieve results unattainable at the individual level.

3.3.4. Economic Impacts and Sponsor Relationships

The economic dimension of crisis management has consistently been fundamental in organizational planning, influencing every decision-making process. COVID-19's economic impact on Italian basketball was immense, affecting current and future decisions not only for clubs and leagues but also for sponsors supporting team activities and collaborating with LBA and LNP in championship organization.

Economic Impacts and Sponsor Relationships	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic support to clubs with significant reductions in game fees • Reduction in membership renewal costs • Total intervention of 7.7 million euros in favor of clubs and registered members
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renegotiation of contracts with sponsors and TV rights holders • Reduction in contract value of about 40% after cancellation of the 19-20 season • One-year extension of existing television licenses instead of issuing new tenders • Subsequent communication focused on the safety of returning to arenas
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong economic impact on clubs without audiences in arenas • Many sponsors reduced or canceled contracts • Focus on streaming (LNP Pass) to maintain visibility and interest
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiation with LBA to limit salary reductions (maximum 20%) • Agreement not to touch contracts below €50,000 and to respect multi-year contracts • Conflict with LNP on the salary issue, without reaching a formal agreement • Monitoring of payment reductions across all championships

Table 5: Economic Impacts and Sponsor Relationships Key Points

From a communication perspective, organizations needed to implement different strategies. The FIP enacted several concrete measures to assist clubs, leagues, and basketball activities generally, without excessively "promoting" these communications. This "show, don't tell" approach proved particularly effective for a stressed system requiring tangible assistance rather than promises.

LBA faced a challenging position, as President Gandini noted in our interview, needing to justify and contextualize significant reductions in contracts with sponsors, media, and other collaborators. Initially, communication aimed to explain the situation empathetically, raising awareness about the "survival" circumstances they faced. This approach helped LBA's counterparts understand and accept the league's decisions, recognizing they would receive advantages and privileges later. This "relational consolidation" proved crucial for LBA, which chose, for example, to extend existing TV license contracts rather than launch new tenders for the canceled season.

The importance of sponsor relationships emerged not only in the aforementioned context but also when activities resumed, as LBA committed to communication strongly emphasizing safe returns to arenas, a crucial aspect for all its collaborators.

LNP, however, confronted the most challenging economic situation. The league, currently chaired by President Maiorana, comprises clubs with significantly fewer resources than Serie A teams. Sponsors collaborate with the league and teams primarily out of passion for the movement and for organizations that couldn't exist without their support. During the crisis, which affected everyone indiscriminately,

the progressive resource lowering for LNP companies led to drastic decisions, most visible in the 2020-21 recovery season.

One major challenge for these semi-professional/amateur organizations were related to match ticket revenues, funds the clubs relied on that were eliminated not only for the canceled season but also for the following one.

From a strictly communicative standpoint, they attempted to address problems by transmitting messages of unified intent and collaboration with clubs. Regarding the inability to attend live matches, they emphasized a new dedicated streaming service that would also provide visibility for sponsors.

Despite certain initiatives and FIP's attempts to support clubs through concessions and financial aid, recovery for clubs in the 2020-21 season remained highly complex. The absence of a collective agreement on previous season contractual inventories, discussed earlier, often created additional complications.

Nevertheless, passion for basketball, beyond economically advantageous choices, enabled new contractual agreements allowing many clubs to continue operations, often with reduced budgets but maintaining their important roles in local communities. This occurred partly through empathetic and realistic communication about the enormous difficulties these organizations were experiencing.

Regarding GIBA, we've already extensively discussed President Marzoli's association's key role in defending athletes' interests, including economic ones. These efforts resulted in a gentlemen's agreement with LBA concerning salary reductions, protecting contracts under €50,000, and respecting multi-year agreements. No such agreement was reached with LNP, leading to conflict between the two entities, including communications through sports newspaper articles.

GIBA also worked to provide factual data about the economic conditions of championships and, consequently, the athletes involved. This evidence-based communication allowed the players' association to argue its position more effectively by publishing its research, thereby giving credibility to its perspectives.

3.3.5. Players and their Associations Engagement

In our interviews, we aimed to explore the dynamics between organizations and players to understand their relationships. Some interactions became unidirectional while others developed into

collaborative partnerships, with all parties attempting to maintain necessary respect throughout this universally challenging situation.

Players and their Associations Engagement	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special attention to youth and youth clubs • Collaborative relationships with player associations despite initial difficulties
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong relationships with the Players Association during the crisis • Main dialogue with clubs, which then managed relationships with their players • Guidelines for interviews and communications filtered through individual entities
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information not available in the responses provided
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant monitoring of every athlete (not just members) • Immediate consultation in critical situations • Regular assemblies with hundreds of athletes • Negotiation of economic agreements with the leagues • Documented study on the economic impact of the pandemic on player contracts

Table 6: Players and their Associations Engagement Key Points

GIBA played a crucial role as the primary intermediary between players and organizations. President Marzoli's association established direct communication channels with athletes, aiming to connect with the tangible issues players faced during this period to provide immediate, targeted advice. This support was offered universally to all players, whether members or non-members. We have previously discussed how streaming meetings were organized at regular intervals to facilitate mutual updates. This "communicative democracy" model presents particularly interesting theoretical aspects and was remarkably challenging to implement during an unprecedented crisis like the pandemic.

The FIP's initial approach differed significantly from this collaborative model. As mentioned earlier, the Federation initially emphasized its leadership position and institutional responsibilities. Subsequently, after the period of greatest uncertainty passed, the Federation acknowledged the importance of establishing collaborative relationships with players' associations, shifting to a process of "communicative maturation" and progressive openness to dialogue essential for strengthening the trust foundation upon which federal institutions rely. When discussing the FIP's relationship with athletes, we must highlight their focus on youth and youth clubs. These were identified as priority communication targets, as maintaining young people's interest and supporting organizations investing in youth development was deemed essential. Preserving these elements was considered fundamental for ensuring the movement's quick and smooth recovery.

The leagues operated differently: their primary communication recipients were the clubs, which served as intermediaries for athletes. While LBA organized some media collaborations with players, both leagues' relationships during the peak crisis period centered on the clubs. Even when interest specifically targeted the athlete community, an intermediary, typically GIBA, represented both their members and non-members. Consequently, neither LBA nor LNP maintained truly direct relationships with their participants. President Gandini himself specified in our interview that despite strong relationships and consistent communication with the players' association, their focus remained on the clubs and their role as representatives of the 16 member clubs' interests. The clubs were then responsible for filtering messages and maintaining direct connections with players and individual entities.

3.3.6. Specific Critical Issues and Championships Differences

Our analysis revealed how crisis management capabilities and associated communication strategies needed to adapt across varied operational contexts. The distinct challenges faced by different organizations tested the adaptability of associations, leagues, and federations even within the same national framework.

Specific Critical Issues and Championships Differences	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to communicate promptly at all levels of Italian basketball • Management of initial uncertainties
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inability to use "bubbles" like NBA and Euroleague due to lack of resources • Management of the 2020-21 championship completely behind closed doors • Difficulties in negotiations with the government on capacity percentages • Privacy issues in communicating players' health status
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties with local health authorities that interpreted protocols differently • Amateur status that complicated relationships with institutions • Greater economic impact due to loss of sponsors
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difference between employees (Serie A) and amateurs (A2, B, women's leagues) • Attempts at unilateral contract termination by some clubs • Inability to reach a formal agreement with LNP • Management of athletes' psychophysical stress beyond economic concerns

Table 7: Specific Critical Issues and Championships Differences Key Points

We've previously discussed the FIP's role and its significance in Italian basketball. The primary necessity was establishing clear, productive communication at all levels, representing a formidable challenge in such a complex and diverse system. This needed to be coupled with rapid transmission of messages and directives to eliminate the uncertainty that characterized Italy's most critical crisis

period. It was precisely this awareness of serving as a beacon amid tremendous difficulties that formed the foundation of President Petrucci's federation. The institutional nature of transmitted messages and continuous communication with governmental bodies demonstrated their consistent effort to establish credibility, recognizing that showing authority took precedence over displaying empathy.

During the COVID-19 crisis, LBA had to manage what could be termed "boundary communication". Public positioning became necessary to justify decisions, particularly to explain to audiences, media, and stakeholders why solutions implemented internationally (such as the NBA's Orlando bubble) couldn't be replicated in Italy. In this instance, President Gandini's league demonstrated transparency and self-awareness by avoiding unrealistic promises, which preserved organizational credibility through open acknowledgment of limitations. As suggested in our interview with the LBA leader, when activities resumed with the 2020-21 season, demonstrating league stability became essential by offering a product that was both valid and internationally competitive. For this precise reason, negotiations with the government and FIP, along with managing a championship conducted entirely without spectators, proved fundamental for LBA.

A final distinctive aspect in managing Italy's premier basketball league was their approach to players' health privacy, an issue also evident at amateur and semi-professional levels with LNP. The challenge involved balancing information transparency while protecting individual privacy. The league chose to grant decision-making autonomy to clubs and athletes, specifically to safeguard player privacy.

LNP's main challenge, conversely, derived from its "subordinate" position, necessitating greater efforts to gain visibility and consideration. Then-president Pietro Basciano's league faced a difficult situation both with higher sports institutions (which focused more on professional championships and youth activities) and with local health authorities (ASLs), with whom establishing consistent, productive communication channels that would create a clearly defined, nationally uniform situation for teams proved impossible.

Another specific challenge experienced by LNP during the crisis was profound uncertainty regarding the ability to continue operations and activities of many clubs registered in Serie A2 and, especially, Serie B championships. This resulted from the heightened economic impact of sponsor losses faced by numerous organizations. In this respect, LNP's primary role involved reporting these issues to federal bodies to emphasize the necessity for economic assistance and cost reductions for clubs.

GIBA's situation was divided between defending the interests of employed workers (Serie A) and amateurs (Serie A2 and B), creating fragmentation and requiring management of different

communication channels. In this context, communication "personalization" proved essential to appropriately value all athletes without distinction. President Marzoli's association faced its greatest challenges particularly in relationships with LNP and its managed clubs. While club economic problems and resource disparities are key to understand the situation, the inability to reach a substantial agreement with LNP, as explained previously, presented a significant challenge for the players' association. They also needed to protect players against unjustified contract termination attempts by certain clubs.

Moreover, GIBA additionally emphasized the psychological dimension in understanding athlete difficulties during the crisis period. Addressing psychophysical stress, beyond purely economic concerns, demonstrates an important evolution in sports crisis communication, which traditionally focuses more on tangible aspects.

3.3.7. Lessons Learned and Permanent Communication Changes

In our interviews, we consistently concluded by asking what lessons organizations extracted from this period of extraordinary crisis and whether these generated enduring changes and valuable insights for future communication strategies. From an external perspective, it might seem obvious that such an unprecedented situation would generate lasting lessons within an organization's experience and knowledge base. However, reality revealed that in every sector and at every level, a crisis of the pandemic's magnitude was so unimaginable and caught organizations so unprepared that envisioning a recurrence remains difficult. Nevertheless, the extreme danger, complete lockdown, and enforced isolation provide useful boundary conditions for crisis management planning, including communication approaches.

Lessons Learned and Permanent Communication Changes	
Organization	Approach and key points
FIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of constant dialogue with institutions • Creation of social media formats (Live) to alleviate tension • Development of a 2020 Yearbook with stories related to the pandemic • Important know-how on creating specific protocols
LBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of social media as the primary channel to reach fans • Focus on language oriented toward new generations • Emphasis on "shared experience" in communicating the return to normality • Lowering the average age of the audience as a communication objective
LNP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of "teamwork" • Being a daily reference point in collaboration with FIP • Maintaining enthusiasm even in difficult moments

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of streaming as a fundamental tool
GIBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater use of remote communication tools • Valuing direct and immediate channels (Instagram, WhatsApp) • Importance of "timeliness, good faith, and willingness for mutual collaboration" • Direct involvement of athletes in the decision-making process

Table 8: Lessons Learned and Permanent Communication Changes Key Points

Regarding the FIP, media and digital head Francesco D'Aniello emphasized the crucial lesson of maintaining constant dialogue with all institutions. While inevitably tied to the federation's role within Italian basketball, this highlights the recognized importance of sustained collaboration regardless of circumstances, overcoming episodic interaction models, particularly given the unpredictability of similar emergencies. Though permanent changes in FIP's communication strategies aren't evident, the lockdown paradoxically served as inspiration for adapting their approach to an evolving audience and context. The creation of innovative social entertainment forms (such as live events or the 2020 Yearbook development) demonstrates this trend, born during profound difficulty but leaving a legacy visible today in more relaxed social formats that diverge from traditionally formal institutional communication.

A final concept emerging from the interview was the central importance of specific protocols developed during the pandemic, which continue to form the foundation of crisis-inherited expertise. While potentially insufficient for completely managing another crisis of similar magnitude and unpredictability, they would constitute the organizational framework from which to begin.

LBA President Umberto Gandini, in our interview, emphasized the singularity of this crisis and the difficulty in imagining a truly comparable situation recurring. Nevertheless, it's evident that experience has been gained, that a legacy persists in collective memory, and that certain approaches will differ in the future. Despite this, according to the president, seems unrealistic suggesting that the league and its member clubs are now significantly more structured and potentially prepared for an event with similar consequences.

However, a meaningful strategic transformation in LBA communication remains apparent. Primarily, LBA has reoriented its product toward a younger target audience through extensive social media utilization, which has essentially become the primary channel for reaching fans. Even the language employed has evolved in this direction, adapting to connect with newer generations. Finally, LBA emphasized the concept of "shared experience" in their communication proposal regarding the return to normalcy. Highlighting reconnection between people transcended mere information dissemination and aimed to stimulate feelings of identity and emotional connection, experiences difficult to maintain

during lockdown, but which have always characterized sports through the special relationship between fans and athletes.

For LNP, communication head Stefano Valenti indicated no permanent structural changes in the league's communication choices, although a clear digital transformation of their product occurred. Meanwhile, Secretary General Massimo Faraoni highlighted a particular lesson from the crisis period: the essential ability to collaborate and maintain unity. Though abstract when considered within crisis management contexts, this underscores the importance of collaboration, even within organizations, providing a positive message of mutual trust and strengthened internal cohesion. The two interviews conducted to better understand the LNP world revealed a renewed awareness of their role as a consistent reference point for organizations within their championships and how fundamental collaboration with FIP is in supporting this leadership function.

Finally, we consider GIBA's position and President Alessandro Marzoli's perspective regarding lessons and potential permanent communication changes resulting from the challenging pandemic period. The players' association leader emphasized how, from his viewpoint, that crisis's exceptional nature undoubtedly created a wealth of new knowledge and different approaches to managing any crisis type. A primary insight was the necessity of establishing communication channels with institutional stakeholders not always closely connected to players' associations.

Another intriguing concept emerging from the interview identifies three indispensable principles: "timeliness, good faith, and desire for mutual collaboration." These fundamentals were mentioned repeatedly throughout our research, with interviewees referencing them at various points as key elements for successful crisis management. Alessandro Marzoli emphasized how the crisis period reinforced the conviction that directly involving athletes in decision-making processes must be fundamental for the association's growth and its collaboration with organizations and institutions at all levels. Only by prioritizing players' genuine needs can the association better represent them, which necessitates personal involvement.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught GIBA that the optimal approach for communicating with their constituents involves enhancing direct and immediate channels such as WhatsApp and social networks, thus aligning with the digitalization process affecting all sectors and utilizing communication methods consistent with athletes' habits.

3.4. Notable Crisis Communication Aspects

The comparative analysis of these interviews revealed several key recurring concepts and unique characteristics worth summarizing.

The first evident aspect from our interviewees' responses and subsequent communication analysis was each organization's need to recognize its authentic requirements. These requirements, based on organizational characteristics, led to different approaches reflecting specific "missions," moving beyond any "one-size-fits-all" notion of predetermined correct choices.

Moreover, the digital transition, widely discussed beyond national borders and outside sports contexts, was not merely an inevitable technical adaptation, but rather an accelerated process nevertheless following organizational specificities. I emphasize again that organizational decisions were not based on uniform processes but instead reflected distinct priorities and strategic visions.

Connected to this basketball-wide digitalization was the overcoming of rigid communication based on simple transmission models, giving way to new public engagement approaches that were participatory, dialogic, and engaging. This evolution is evident in the various new directions taken by the analyzed organizations' social media presence. The crisis somewhat amplified this concept, prompting clubs to unite and seek solidarity and common purpose, which are visible in club social campaigns. This new bidirectional communication approach has remained integral to current communication strategies, particularly within social media ecosystems.

Another noteworthy aspect was the necessary ability organizations demonstrated in positioning themselves differently across various fronts. All interviewees emphasized the importance of maintaining institutional communication while simultaneously developing more "playful," fan-engaging content. This fragmentation required diverse communication strategies and considerable flexibility in their offerings. I observed this adaptability and capacity to "divide" across multiple fronts in all organizations, partly due to the necessity of simultaneously relating to numerous bodies, institutions, organizations, stakeholders, sponsors, and more. I frequently noted the urgency of balancing uniform central directives with heterogeneous local interpretations.

It's also appropriate to mention another element previously highlighted in earlier chapters for other contexts: the transition from an initial reactive approach to a more proactive one. While clearly precipitated by the crisis's unpredictability that caught everyone unprepared, it's evident that even the analyzed organizations first found ways to respond to the crisis before working to propose solutions and offer adapted products.

Another key factor for effective crisis communication proved to be the ability to simultaneously integrate informational and emotional dimensions into messaging and overall communication strategies. Balancing these aspects proved fundamental, perhaps even recognizing different periods requiring slightly different balances. The ultimate message was that system resilience depends equally on transmitted information clarity and the ability to unite its members emotionally.

A lesson certainly derived from such a challenging period for the analyzed organizations was how investing in continuous communication and relationship channels, even during normal times, helps maintain connections that may later be tested. While the pandemic crisis certainly represented a unique situation, it somehow tested everyone's communication effectiveness at all levels, with the strength of pre-existing relationships and the ability to maintain them throughout various crisis phases proving to be key aspects. Perhaps obvious but worth emphasizing is that power and status asymmetries existed even within Italian sports and basketball specifically. These naturally influenced organizations' and institutions' communication capabilities while also generating natural roles that were accepted and respected. This inherent stratification was somewhat amplified by the crisis, which clarified role distinctions and led to diverse communication strategy development.

Another communication evolution marking the crisis period and informing today's management of similar situations is the necessary adoption of an ecosystem vision of the Italian basketball universe. Interviewees emphasized the importance of constant, productive collaboration not only within national basketball but also with external institutions and bodies. This recalls the value of overcoming an outdated, compartmentalized communication vision, which was a key element we have explained for achieving effective crisis communication strategies.

Finally, it is interesting to highlight the ability to extract lessons from such a difficult period. Transforming enormous challenges into lessons allowed the analyzed organizations to somehow leverage the crisis. While interviewees cited the uniqueness of their situation, creating experiences that influence future choices, present organization, and overall meaning given to crisis communication is inevitable.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis reveals an evolving context requiring improvement and adaptation to a complex crisis. The emergency response highlighted the necessity of valuing communication aspects and recognizing their strategic role in crisis management. Organizations have necessarily transformed communication challenges into innovation and learning opportunities while attempting to build more solid, strategic structures for the post-pandemic environment.

3.5. Focus on an Italian Basketball Club Standpoint

To conclude my analysis of the Italian basketball landscape and pandemic crisis management, I attempted to gain a comprehensive view of all stakeholder categories by exploring a club's perspective. Through an interview with Olimpia Milano's communication manager, Claudio Limardi, I gained deeper insight into the dynamics of a club competing in both Italy's premier league and Europe's most prestigious competition, the Euroleague, which was examined in our second chapter.

Beginning with this fascinating duality experienced by the Milanese organization during the pandemic, Limardi emphasized his belief that crisis management approaches and recovery strategies were similar across both contexts.

Among the differences between these two environments, Limardi noted Italy's almost immediate championship cancellation, while Euroleague initiated a recovery plan with a Valencia bubble, similar to the NBA's Orlando model. However, prohibitive costs and logistical challenges led clubs to reject this solution. The Italian club influenced this decision through its position on the Euroleague's Board of 13 clubs (then 11), which actively participates in final Euroleague decisions. At the national level, while regulatory frameworks were primarily established by institutions and governing bodies, Limardi explained that clubs were involved in developing protocols for resuming activities.

This participatory approach among organizational members proves particularly interesting from a crisis communication perspective, as it corresponds to the theoretical “stakeholder engagement approach” to crisis management, strongly recommended when maintaining role distinctions is possible. When all stakeholders respect their functions and collaborate while recognizing their areas of mastery, we implement the “distributed expertise” concept allowing a more effective crisis management.

The interview revealed how the profound uncertainty characterizing the crisis's initial phase significantly impacted organizations' abilities to manage difficulties and determine appropriate operational and communication responses. Initial responsibilities fell to club medical staff, who educated team members about possible precautions and provided guidance on all aspects of daily life. This situation improved through collaborative communication with sports institutions and health authorities, who implemented protocols and provided crucial guidelines that helped clubs understand how to interact with their members and plan for an uncertain future.

From this perspective, clubs were also responsible for directly informing athletes and staff about updates, directives, and future plans. The empathetic dimension played a critical role in this context.

At Olimpia Milano, players and coaches work within an organization that must treat them as company employees, all amid crisis and extreme uncertainty.

Beyond the tremendous uncertainty of the initial period, the interview highlighted that clubs' greatest challenges involved inter-club communication and adapting to calendar changes during the recovery season. Strict protocol adherence and numerous COVID-19 cases during the 2020-21 season, both nationally and across Europe, forced clubs to make frequent adjustments. Additionally, each improvement period brought hope leading to relaxed regulations or partial reopening, with all these changes requiring agreement, communication, and management: a novel situation not always easily "handled" by club staff. In this regard, Limardi recounted receiving confirmation to play a match just two hours before its scheduled start. While an extreme example, this illustrates how clubs needed to remain prepared for anything, capable of instantly modifying plans and forecasts. For the Milanese club specifically, difficulty also stemmed from European competition participation, which required fitting additional matches into an already full and constantly evolving calendar.

The interview repeatedly referenced the digitalization process previously discussed throughout these chapters. Teams couldn't exempt themselves from this transition; adaptation to communication innovations also influenced club strategies, positioning them at the forefront through challenge proposals, engaging fan content, and generally new message delivery methods.

Social media was specifically described as fundamental, becoming the only means for following one's favorite team, thus representing an essential communication channel for maintaining connection and keeping the fanbase engaged.

Another topic addressed with Armani's club communication manager was relationships with sponsors and media. Regarding sponsors, he emphasized how the economic crisis inevitably affected everyone, and from clubs' perspectives, generating interest and maintaining agreements required offering a different product. This became possible through the aforementioned development, establishing new digital content that provides visibility. This transformed relationship continues today, evolving alongside technological advancements.

Concerning media relations, Limardi characterized this as "the beginning of a new era," naturally revisiting the digitalization process affecting every aspect of human life, particularly sports. In Olimpia Milano's specific case, he explained that protocols differed between Italian championship and Euroleague. Nevertheless, they attempted to intensify relationships by utilizing all available new tools, while standard media engagement forms were maintained with adaptations enabled by

technological development. The Olimpia Milano case demonstrates that during extended crises, the means of communication can become as strategically important as the message itself.

We concluded the interview by examining this crisis period's lessons and legacies, exploring insights gained and potential alternative approaches. Primarily, Limardi emphasized communication's shift toward digital channels, the acceleration characterizing this process due to pandemic implications, and how most implemented changes have persisted in organizational communication strategies.

In conclusion, his assessment of club performance and crisis communication during this period was decidedly positive, highlighting how the organization successfully implemented key crisis communication principles: stakeholder engagement across multiple governance levels, adaptive uncertainty management despite rapidly changing circumstances, strategic communication channel transformation, and the development of organizational agility. The case of Olimpia Milano confirms how effective crisis communication is not merely reactive but can become a strategic capability, enabling organizations to maintain stakeholder relationships and operational continuity even during extended periods of disruption. In this context, the global solidarity and mutual understanding that emerged throughout this process reflects a collective approach that enhances shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving, thus helping organizations make decisions more effectively.

Conclusions

While synthesizing the multifaceted analysis presented throughout this research poses a considerable challenge, a clear narrative emerges as central: crisis communication constituted a critical strategic variable in how basketball organizations navigated the pandemic event. Although communication's centrality in contemporary society was already known, this research revealed the central character of proactive crisis communication planning and structured frameworks, which are elements often overlooked until crisis strikes.

The comparative analysis between international and national basketball governance, alongside the final focus on the professional-amateur spectrum, clarified not only which communication strategies proved most effective but also how inherent organizational structures either facilitated or constrained crisis communication capabilities. This multi-level examination demonstrated how organizational characteristics often predetermined communication strategies during unprecedented global disruption.

The Italian basketball ecosystem specifically exemplifies institutional collaboration patterns that align with theoretical frameworks established in crisis communication literature. Particularly revealing was the amateur sector's struggle with crisis communication, stemming from its fragmented governance structure and distributed responsibility, which represents a challenge theorized in crisis management literature but rarely examined in sports contexts.

The theoretical models presented at the outset provided both analytical frameworks and interpretative lenses for understanding organizational decision-making processes. Concepts such as attribution of responsibility and reputation restoration strategies manifested consistently throughout the case studies, validating their applicability to sports organization contexts. Similarly, the accelerated digital transformation and strategic pivot toward social media platforms emerged as consistent themes across organizations with vastly different resource capacities and structural configurations, demonstrating how crisis can serve as an equalizing force in communication innovation.

The qualitative interviews significantly enhanced this analysis by providing insider perspectives on the decision-making processes underlying communication strategies. While acknowledging their subjective nature, these narratives captured the uncertainty management challenges, emotional dimensions of crisis leadership, and forward-looking considerations that quantitative analysis alone could not reveal.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this research is its demonstration that crisis communication cannot be relegated to a subordinate function in organizational strategy, particularly

in sports contexts. The analysis of basketball organizations across multiple levels revealed how communication competencies directly influenced an organization's ability to maintain legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and community cohesion during prolonged disruption. Effective crisis communication emerged not merely as a reactive necessity, but as a proactive capability that fundamentally determined organizational sustainability.

In an increasingly mediatized sports environment subject to increasing stakeholder consideration, organizations cannot manage to approach crisis communication arbitrarily. This research underscores the imperative for precise, coherent, empathetic, and adaptable communication frameworks capable of navigating not only isolated incidents but the increasingly common systemic crises that characterize our contemporary landscape. The basketball organizations that demonstrated these capabilities proved most resilient, suggesting important implications for crisis preparedness across the broader sports sector.

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