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# Extending situational crisis communication theory: Attitude and reputation following the 2004-05 NHL lockout

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Extending Situational Crisis Communication Theory:  
Attitude and Reputation Following the 2004-05 NHL Lockout

by

Melanie Formentin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
School of Mass Communications  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mom and best friend, who so  
patiently and lovingly supported me throughout.

### Acknowledgements

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study positions the 2004-05 National Hockey League (NHL) lockout as an organizational crisis, studying it within a Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) frame. A mixed methodology approach used qualitative and quantitative content analyses and a survey of NHL fans to gauge the NHL's reputation five years after the lockout. For the content analyses, 282 newspaper articles from 7 newspapers in the U.S. and Canada were coded for SCCT variables and presentation of the lockout by news writers. NHL fans ( $n = 140$ ) were surveyed with the goal of assessing SCCT variables as predictors of attitude. Results confirmed previous SCCT findings and showed links between SCCT variables and fan attitudes toward the NHL and the sport of hockey.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Like other unionized organizations, the professional sports industry has experienced its share of strikes and lockouts in the previous two decades. Major League Baseball (MLB) lost an entire post-season to a labor strike in 1994, while the National Hockey League (NHL) stumbled through its first lockout in 1994-95, losing half of a hockey season to an ongoing labor dispute. However, it was the 2004-05 NHL lockout that resulted in the longest stoppage of play experienced by a major North American sports league.

A strike is considered “the primary bargaining power of organized labor,” (Schmidt & Berri, 2004, p. 344). During a strike, workers withdraw their labor or services from an organization. The objective is to impose costs upon the organization and gain an upper hand during contractual negotiations. A strike is different from a lockout because, during a lockout, laborers are prevented from working at the choosing of the organization.

Sports provide an interesting context through which to study labor relations. Unlike traditional unions, the players’ associations found in professional sports are not utilized to negotiate individual salaries (Rosen & Sanderson, 2001). Instead, collective

bargaining agreements are put in place to help standardize “working conditions, pension benefits and insurance, grievance procedures and... league-wide arrangements such as a minimum salary, any direct restrictions on total payrolls or individual salary caps, or owners’ incentives to compensate players,” (p. F63). This results in disagreements between owners’ groups and players’ associations in regards to revenue distribution. Historically, players’ associations oppose attempts to cap payrolls while owners often fight to restrict excessive player movement. The basic labor agreements typically last for three to seven years prior to being reopened for negotiation.

This becomes especially important in the big business of sports. Revenue can hinge on player salaries, franchise values, and stadium costs (Rosen & Sanderson, 2001). The collective agreements between ownership and player groups provide outlines that control revenue sharing and free agency, strikes and lockouts, player agents, endorsements, product licensing, and even media partnerships such as television broadcasting deals. All of these factors—and more—affect the bottom line of sports leagues, individual teams, and even individual players.

For the NHL, the 2004-05 lockout represented a labor disagreement that arguably spun out of control. When the NHL officially announced the beginning of the lockout, it left a somber impression of the state of the ongoing collective bargaining agreement negotiations. Although it has been suggested that strike costs are “limited to the strike period and that consumer demand returns in force immediately after the strike ends” (Schmidt & Berri, 2004, p. 345), one could argue that even the NHL realized it wasn’t facing a standard labor disagreement.

### *The 2004-05 NHL Lockout*

The NHL faced numerous popularity issues in the United States at the time of the lockout (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008). Attendance numbers were falling, a television contract with ESPN was in limbo, and teams were claiming large revenue losses due to rising player salaries. Further damaging the image of the NHL was the notion that contract bargaining negotiations were stalled because of salary cap issues (Podnieks, 2005). While the league was calling for a salary cap tied to a percentage of overall league revenue, the National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA) was fighting the idea of limiting the amount of money a team could spend on its players. As the two sides continued to battle each other well into the canceled season, public perception was that greed was at the root of the CBA-related problems (Toronto Star, 2004).

With the NHLPA vehemently opposing a salary cap, the NHL argued that imposing such a cap was necessary to create "cost certainty" and align player salaries more closely with team and league revenues (Podnieks, 2005). At one point, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman argued that imposing a salary cap would drop the average player salary from \$1.8 million to \$1.3 million. Additionally, average player salaries had risen from \$733,000 in 1994-95 to \$1.8 million in 2003-04 (Woods, 2004a). With numbers like these, it seemed understandable that the average sports fan might be unimpressed with the NHLPA's position on the issue. In an interview with Peter Mansbridge on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) Newshour show, *The National*, NHLPA executive director Bob Goodenow was challenged by one fan who

asked, “Do the players know the average salary of a National Hockey League fan?” (cited in Podnieks, 2005, p. 42).

Further exacerbating the tension between the two sides was the fact that Goodenow was publicly steadfast in his opinion opposition to a cap (Podnieks, 2005). Despite early reports that some players started calling for changes in Goodenow’s bargaining tactics, it took nearly five months for the NHLPA to consider a salary cap. At the same time in February 2005, the NHL conceded its position on “linkage,” or tying salaries to overall league revenues. The effort was too late. Even with increasing negotiations between the sides, Bettman proclaimed the entire season would be canceled if a deal wasn’t made, and no team would compete for the Stanley Cup for the first time since 1919 when an influenza epidemic wiped out the final series. By then, players and fans were furious that the season seemingly was lost for no reason as each side moved off its entrenched position in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. At that point, the main concern was simply to create a contract bargaining agreement that could save the NHL from further embarrassment and the potential cancellation of a portion or all of the following 2005-06 season.

With the lockout affecting everyone from fans to league employees and cab drivers to television broadcast networks, the league was in a vulnerable state. It became important for the two sides—the NHL and the NHLPA—to communicate their positions. The league was facing a crisis situation, and public perception that greed was the underlying issue presented a challenge to both the NHL and NHLPA. During the course

of the ten-month lockout, the NHL emerged as better prepared to deal with the public scrutiny it endured.

This case study argues that reputation management objectives should have been at the forefront of the NHL's communication strategy during the 2004-05 NHL lockout. Specifically, this study employs exploratory case study methodology founded in Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), including a newspaper content analysis and a survey of NHL fans, to identify how the league's reputation has changed in the five years since the 2004-05 NHL lockout. According to Coombs (2007), SCCT posits that crisis responsibility is directly correlated with reputation, thus crisis communication strategies should be based upon perceptions of crisis responsibility. The SCCT is used as the guiding framework for a content analysis of how the lockout was presented in major newspapers—thus, identifying some of the information fans received about the labor dispute. Through use of a fan survey, SCCT is used to identify a link between fan attitudes toward the NHL and the reputation management variables of crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation/relationships history. It is suggested that SCCT variables can be used to assess the league's reputation in the years following the crisis.

The following research questions and hypotheses are addressed in this study, and are separated per the research method that informs them:

## **Research Questions**

### **Content Analysis**

**RQ1:** Was the 2004-05 NHL lockout presented by major newspapers as an organizational crisis?

**RQ2:** How was the 2004-05 NHL lockout presented by major newspapers in terms of SCCT variables?

**RQ3:** What strategic communication strategies did the NHL use during the 2004-05 lockout, as presented by major newspapers?

### **Survey**

**RQ1:** Do fans have a positive perception of the NHL's reputation?

**RQ2:** Has the NHL's reputation improved in the five years since the lockout?

## **Hypotheses**

**H1:** NHL crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation influence the NHL's current reputation.

**H2:** Hockey fan perception of reputational threat variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation) related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout are related to fan attitude toward the NHL.

**H3:** Hockey fan perception of reputational threat variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation) related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout are not related to fan attitude toward hockey.

- H4:** Among hockey fans, perception of high player responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout is inversely related to perception of NHL/owner responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout.
- H5:** Among hockey fans, perception of high player responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout negatively influences perception of NHL reputation.
- H6:** Hockey fan attitude toward the NHL is less positive than fan attitude toward hockey.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### *Crisis Communications*

A variety of definitions have been applied to the concept of a crisis, and many scholars have developed working definitions for their own purposes. In early crisis management literature, definitions focused on a crisis as a disruption that could threaten a system, or organization, both on the physical and existential level (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Crises have been labeled as “forewarning situations” that can escalate in severity and may impede operations and affect revenues (Fink, 1986). Media or government scrutiny can add to the stress of the crisis. Less measurable—but just as important—is the concept that organizational image and reputation may also be affected during a crisis. Noted crisis communication expert Fearn-Banks (2007) echoes these sentiments when suggesting that the key concepts in defining a crisis are the assumptions that business is interrupted and an organization’s existence can be threatened.

In the previous two decades, crisis management has emerged as a way for organizations to strategically prepare for crises they may face. Crisis management has been defined as “the preparation and application of strategies and tactics that can prevent

or modify the impact of major events on the company or organization” (Stocker, 1997, p. 189). In this sense, crisis management can be a predictive function in which an organization tries to plan ahead for potential crisis situations. Based on a review of public relations-related crisis communication literature, Hagan (2007) posited that “organizations that scan the environment for potential problem areas and maintain positive relationships with the organization’s various publics handle and survive crises better than do others” (p. 437).

One of the criticisms that may be directed at crisis management literature is that suggested steps for communication during a crisis can vary from author to author. Stocker (1997) suggests that crisis management is organization-centered and starts with an analysis of the company and/or industry and moves towards asking whether a plan or preparation is needed. In contrast, audience-centered approaches suggest that stakeholders should be a top priority, a level of responsibility should be accepted, central information centers should be developed, news coverage should be monitored and key stakeholders should be communicated with (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2005).

Despite the importance of crisis management offered by both approaches, many companies are not prepared for a crisis situation even though many crises can be predicted (Mitroff, Pauchant, & Shrivastava, 1989). Many managers deny that a crisis may befall their organization, while others suggest that a major catastrophe would have to occur before efforts are made to be proactive crisis managers. This happens despite managers recognizing that they are significantly likely to encounter a crisis.

Even so, this has not stopped scholars from devising methods aimed at planning for and approaching crisis situations. One particularly relevant crisis management approach that leads naturally into post-crisis management objectives comes from Stocker (1997), who suggests that crisis management can be built from three sequential objectives. The first objective is that an organization try to prevent crisis. If the crisis occurs, the second objective is for an organization to turn its efforts towards countering the negative effects the crisis may have. Finally, the third objective suggests that, through behavior, an organization must “provide a platform for the company’s future” (p. 191).

In recent years, public relations scholars have started looking at crisis management from a public relations and reputation management perspective (Hagan, 2007). Within that time frame, communication scholars have also started to look at crisis management as a symbolic approach (Coombs, 1998). This perspective places an emphasis on “how communication can be used as a symbolic resource in attempts to protect the organization’s image” (Coombs, 1998, p. 177), which is consistent with Stocker’s (1997) second crisis management objective—managing or countering the negative effects of a crisis.

As it has been developed by researchers, the symbolic approach rests on two assumptions: 1) crises present a threat to organizational image, and 2) the characteristics of a crisis situation influence the communicative choices of an organization (Coombs, 1998). Crisis communication research has focused on strategies for concepts such as image protection and restoration (Benoit, 1997), contingency theories (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997), and situational response strategies (Coombs & Holladay,

2002). A common criticism of the symbolic approach is that the literature is rife with case studies that offer more post-crisis situation prescriptive recommendations than predictive theories (Coombs, 2007; Hagan, 2007). Although these rhetorical case studies have allowed communicators to focus on what to say or do based on given situations, it has also means that overall theory has remained relatively underdeveloped (Coombs, 2007).

Despite these criticisms, one theory that has received support in the field of post-crisis communication is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). In the mid-1990s, W. Timothy Coombs pioneered this symbolic approach, arguing that crises can be assessed on a situational basis along a continuum of response types that range from defensive to accommodative messages (Wilcox, et. al, 2005). SCCT addresses factors such as crisis responsibility, prior history and prior reputation/relationship history. The case study approach dominantly found in SCCT literature will be maintained for this study, utilizing the NHL lockout as the specific example. However, as will be discussed, efforts will be made to expand the type of research and data collection methods traditionally used to analyze similar cases.

#### *Situational Crisis Communication Theory*

In 1995, Coombs synthesized existing crisis communication literature in an effort to make a list of existing crisis response strategies. Coombs (1995) defines crisis-response strategies as “public statements made after a crisis” (p. 447) and worked to develop a set of guidelines to appropriately use the identified strategies. Positing that “crisis-response strategies are an important symbolic resource for crisis managers”

(Coombs, 1995, p. 447), Coombs also suggests that “the crisis situation should be a major influence in strategy selection” (p. 448).

Coombs grounded his approach in attribution theory, arguing that the key characteristics of the theory complement the needs and uses of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). Attribution theory suggests that people have a need to search for the reasons an event has occurred—especially unexpected and negative events—and judgments about the event are made based on locus, stability, and controllability (Coombs, 1995; 2007). Locus is concerned with locus of control or “whether the cause was internal or external to an actor” (p. 448). Stability focuses on whether the event has happened more than once over time. Controllability refers to whether the event was in or out of control of the actor. These three attributes may vary across crisis situations, leading to different response needs across cases. Stronger attributions of responsibility, frequency of event occurrences and increased harm to outside stakeholders invariably lead to more negative attitudes towards an organization. Development of SCCT focused on applying related concepts from attribution theory to a greater variety of crises (Coombs, 2007).

As studies continue to be performed, SCCT has been developed as a way to give crisis managers a guiding framework for navigating crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Crises pose reputational threats to organizations, and the notion is that protecting reputations can be a central focus of crisis communications. An organization’s reputation is defined as the way stakeholders perceive an organization, and research suggests that reputation can be considered a “valued resource” in and of itself. As such, SCCT acts as a mechanism for predicting how stakeholders will react to a crisis by using

“an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (Coombs, 2007a).

In developing SCCT, a model is provided for developing a response system based on factors of the event or situation at hand. Through his research, Coombs (2007) suggests that proper assessment of the crisis situation and proper selection of a crisis response strategy can lead to better strategic communication approaches that will protect an organization’s reputation. Numerous studies have been used to test and define SCCT, with the main assumption being that a relationship exists between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Crisis responsibility is defined as “the degree to which stakeholders attribute responsibility for a crisis to an organization” (Coombs, 2004, p. 268). A correlational effect exists between the two concepts, with lower attributions of crisis responsibility resulting in less reputational damage in crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2002; 2006). Likewise, if attributions of crisis responsibility increase, the crisis poses increasing threats to organizational reputation (Coombs, 2004).

#### *Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory*

Applying SCCT to a crisis situation begins with two steps, the first of which involves the crisis manager examining the situation using three factors that can affect reputational threats (Coombs, 2007). The three factors—initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation/ relationship history—are compared along a continuum.

In the first step, perceived responsibility for the crisis—or locus of control—is determined (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 1995). In other words, did the organization create the crisis? Prior research indicates that the more an organization is attributed with crisis responsibility, the lower reputational scores are received and higher reputational threats exist (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; 2004). Crisis types are used to make this assessment, with the crisis type acting as a frame to indicate how stakeholders will interpret the crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Coombs and Holladay (2002) synthesized existing crisis typology literature into a list of 13 crisis types, attempting to differentiate the assortment of crises an organization may face. The goal of SCCT, then, is to create lists of both crisis types and response types that may be integrated to become practical for a crisis communicator. By refining existing typologies, variations were identified to expand the definitions of the crisis types an organization may face. In addition to acknowledging a variation between human and technical breakdowns, variations in the definitions of organizational misdeeds were also identified. After the crisis type is identified, adjustments are taken into consideration based on severity of the situation and organizational performance history. A negative or positive assessment of either of these two factors can change the perceived severity of the crisis situation, signaling a need for different response strategies. As such, the suggested adjustments in typologies give organizations a more precise method of identifying crisis type, and subsequently more appropriate response strategies. A suggested criticism of these typologies, however, is that they are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive. Regardless, moving along the continuum, three crisis clusters have been identified to

create specific and predictable levels of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2004; 2007; 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The victim cluster results in low attributions of crisis responsibility and low reputational threat. The accidental cluster shows minimal attributions of crisis responsibility in which the organization is held accountable but the event is considered unintentional or uncontrollable. The third cluster is the intentional cluster, in which the organization faces strong attributions of purposeful crisis responsibility. By determining which of the three clusters applies to a crisis situation, an organization can begin to gauge attribution perceptions of stakeholders and initial threats to reputation. In the case of the 2004-05 NHL lockout, one might argue that the crisis falls into the intentional cluster. The league purposefully locked out its players to achieve a more viable economic model and took it upon itself to cancel the entire 2004-05 season.

In the second step, crisis history and prior reputation/relationship history are assessed. Also known as consistency, crisis history examines whether an organization has experienced a similar crisis in the past (Coombs, 2007, Coombs & Holladay, 2002). A history of crisis suggests high consistency, or an ongoing problem, and intensifies reputational threat (Coombs, 2004). Even if an organization is currently a victim, the presence of past crises maintains the heightened threat. Some crisis types can be moved further up the responsibility continuum based on having a history of past crises, but if there is no history—or the history is not publicly known—there is little difference in stakeholder perceptions and therefore less threat to organizational reputation (Coombs, 1998; 2004). It has been said that increased crisis histories should result in strategies that result in greater acceptance of responsibility on the part of an organization. However, in

the case of the NHL lockout, one may argue that the league actually worked to deflect blame upon its players' association even though they entered the lockout with a known crisis history.

Rounding out the second step, prior reputation and relationship history are assessed. The two concepts have slightly different effects and are both strongly associated with perceptions of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Poor assessment of prior reputation/ relationship history and consistency of crisis history “intensif[ies] attributions of crisis responsibility thereby indirectly affecting the reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p. 137). When considered, the two concepts essentially “adjust the initial assessment of the threat” (Coombs, 2007, p. 137).

Associated with the prior reputation variable, a halo effect may occur whereby a positive prior reputation may shield or protect the organization from reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). The concept suggests that reputational damage is deflected and stakeholders may give the organization the benefit of the doubt in the crisis situation. However, identifying a halo effect has been difficult. The “Velcro effect” has been easier to identify, whereby negative performance history or reputation intensifies attributions of responsibility (Coombs, 2006). In this case, the NHL was facing the 2004-05 lockout with a poor reputation and a prior history of similar crises. There was potential for the Velcro effect to put additional pressure on their reputation. Factoring these variables into their crisis communication approach arguably should have affected their objectives and strategy.

Although a variety of additional factors such as legal or financial considerations may affect an organization's crisis response strategy, SCCT acts as a tool to help make decisions. By utilizing the crisis responsibility continuum, organizations can better prepare their crisis communication strategies. As developed by Coombs and Holladay (2002), the continuum suggests that the stronger reputational threat is, or the stronger the personal control is, the more accommodative organizations should be with their response strategy. In contrast, the weaker the personal control is in the situation, the more defensive an organization may be when responding to a crisis.

Answering Coombs' (2007) call to extend related literature, this case study analyzes the 2004-05 NHL lockout crisis situation, using SCCT as the guiding framework. Although the tradition of using a case study will be continued, the data collection techniques will be expanded upon to gain a more thorough understanding of the overall situation. A mixed qualitative and quantitative newspaper content analysis will be used to examine how the 2004-05 NHL lockout was presented in the news. Additionally, a fan survey explores the reputation of and attitudes toward the NHL. One team owner lamented that fans were the "forgotten victims" (Thompson, 2005) of the lockout when, as the primary revenue source of a league driven by gate revenues, the fans arguably should have been the NHL's primary concern. This study fills a gap in the literature by looking at the long term effects of a crisis situation while assessing measures of attitude as they are related to SCCT variables.

The research questions outlined earlier provide a baseline assessment of the 2004-05 NHL lockout as a crisis situation. In addition to positioning the 2004-05 NHL lockout

as a crisis and investigating league communication strategies, these research questions investigate general fan perceptions of the NHL's reputation. However, this study seeks to extend understanding of SCCT, specifically the variables that influence organizational reputation during a crisis situation and the resulting attitudes of stakeholder groups.

Therefore, the hypotheses outlined earlier explore SCCT factors as predictors of long-term effects on stakeholder attitudes following a crisis situation. Although SCCT literature suggests that all crises end (Coombs, 2007b), this study suggests that crises continue to affect organizations beyond the crisis situation. It is suggested that this effect can be addressed through measurement of attitude and reputation. This is particularly important because Coombs (2007b) positions the time after a crisis as a time to measure and evaluate crisis strategies. It seems reasonable to posit that an assessment of SCCT variables can help an organization gauge its reputation and stakeholder attitudes toward the organization, thus helping develop more effective post-crisis communication strategies based on reputation management objectives.

A central suggestion of this study is that SCCT variables influence the NHL's current reputation, even five years after the 2004-05 NHL lockout. It is also suggested that fan attitudes toward the NHL are less positive than their attitudes toward the sport of hockey. The sport of hockey, potentially identified as an overall industry, may arguably be safe from negative reputation effects in spite of crisis because of its nature as a general sport. However, the NHL may be viewed as an organization—an organization in crisis—and thus negative attitudes may be held toward the league. Player responsibility is also addressed as it may give insight into results related to the NHL's perceived responsibility

for the crisis. Higher player responsibility should result in lower NHL/owner responsibility, but may still negatively influence the NHL's reputation.

The method section outlines the triangulated approach used in this exploratory case study. As will be discussed, a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative content analysis and a fan survey was used to inform this study. Categories and coding and measures and design for the two data collection approaches are outlined.

## Chapter 3

### Method

Although case studies are sometimes considered less rigorous than other research methods, it has been noted that case studies can be one of the most challenging social science approaches to research (Yin, 2009). Arguments exist that case studies should be used as an exploratory research method, but it seems hard to disagree with Yin's (2009) assertion that "every research method can be used for... exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory [purposes]" (p. 7). The key to successful case study research is to approach it with rigor and maintain logical methodological designs. This study employs a case study approach in an effort to create a fuller exploratory snapshot of a particular crisis event, the 2004-05 NHL lockout.

Yin (2009) operationalizes the case study approach in two parts: (1) "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18) and (2) "The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to

converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 18). Boiled down, he suggests that, when deciding on the appropriate methodology for a study, a case study should answer a “how” or “why” question, the researcher should have little to no control over the events being studied, and the event should be of a contemporary—as opposed to historical—nature.

Basing the methodology of this study on the preceding definition is appropriate for a variety of reasons. The 2004-05 NHL lockout can be considered a contemporary event. Per Yin’s (2009) definition, direct observation of the event was possible and people involved in or affected by the event were directly surveyed. Further, the event cannot be controlled—it has already taken place and no variables can be manipulated. Combined, these two criteria point to the notion that case studies allow researchers to “understand a real-life phenomenon in depth” (Yin, 2009, p. 18) and within context. Finally, the nature of the research questions addressed in this study are of the “how” and “why” variety. Most importantly, and following the operationalized definition, these questions were developed based on prior theoretical propositions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). SCCT was used to guide the data collection and analysis.

A hallmark of good case study research, and the best way to maintain logic and rigor in data collection and analysis, is the use of *triangulation*. This research used a variety of data collection techniques in an effort to meet high standards of logical design. Triangulation is a multiple method approach that has been advocated by both qualitative

(Jankowski & Wester, 1991) and quantitative (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003; Yin, 2009) researchers. By definition, “triangulation refers to the use of both qualitative methods and quantitative methods to fully understand the nature of a research problem” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003, p. 48). The use of the two methods helps creates depth of data, and provides more valid results than the use of a single research method (Jankowski & Wester, 1991). A basic assumption of triangulation is that weaknesses in single methods “will be compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another” (cited in Jankowski & Wester, 1991, p. 62). Triangulation is seen as a strength, and a mandatory requirement, of case study research (Yin, 2009).

In case studies, “the most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of *converging lines of inquiry*, a process of triangulation and corroboration” (Yin, 2009, p. 115-116). For true triangulation, data should be collected from multiple sources in such a way that all results point to and support a single fact or conclusion. Additionally, “the potential problems of *construct validity* also can be addressed because the multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measure of the same phenomenon” (Yin, 2009, p. 116).

In an effort to meet the approach outlined by Yin (2009) while utilizing SCCT principles, this study employed methodological triangulation, approaching a single topic (the 2004-05 NHL lockout) through diverse data gathering methods and analyses. Mixed qualitative and quantitative newspaper analyses and a fan survey were used. Distribution of a communication manager survey and a player survey was unsuccessful, but is still discussed as a data collection method. Each method will be discussed individually in

terms of participants (when applicable), design and materials, measures, and procedural categories.

### *Content Analysis*

This study utilized a mixed quantitative and qualitative content analysis, analyzing newspaper content to address research questions about the 2004-05 NHL lockout as a crisis situation. Quantitative content analysis has been defined as a “summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method... and is not limited to the type of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 10). The goal of the approach is to use the scientific method to analyze content to the ends of producing objective results (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). Content analysis is often defined as systematic, objective, and quantitative (Stacks, 2002; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003; Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond & McCroskey, 2008). By being systematic, all of the collected content can be analyzed uniformly, and was assessed using SPSS and VBPro (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Objectivity suggests that research biases should be avoided, achieved by having additional content coders utilize a set of operational definitions and coding criteria, thus giving validity to the content analysis results (Stacks, 2002).

Qualitative analysis was simultaneously conducted and qualitative questions were built into the end of the codebook. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) define qualitative analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data

through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” Qualitative analysis served this study by providing examples and support for the quantitative analysis results, all of which spoke to the use of SCCT strategies during the lockout. The general flexibility of qualitative analyses has been criticized as a downfall of the method, so Hansen’s (1998) six-step model was employed. This model was similar to the quantitative approach, and thus follows accordingly with few adjustments.

To study the 2004-05 NHL lockout as a crisis situation, and thus position it within the framework of SCCT strategies, newspapers were chosen because it has been noted that people become active information seekers in times of crisis, and research suggests that people turn to media for information (Wilcox, et. al, 2005). Three date ranges for article collection were chosen based on major turning points during the lockout including the first (September 15-17, 2004) and last (June 13-15, 2005) days of the lockout, as well as the day that the season was officially canceled (February 16-18, 2005). It has been said that on February 16 “fan and media frenzy was at its greatest height since September 15, 2004” (Podnieks, 2005, p. 55), mainly because meetings were still being scheduled between the NHL and NHLPA as they continued trying—but failed—to salvage the season. These dates represent points in which the NHL would have been most diligent about maintaining a crisis communication strategy. Articles published two days after each turning point were analyzed in an effort to collect stories that included news and editorial pieces.

Four American and three Canadian daily newspapers were analyzed for content, with the papers chosen based upon circulation numbers. A benefit of using the most circulated papers for the content analysis is that they boast well-known and respected sports sections that consistently carried content about the 2004-05 NHL lockout. Attempts were made to use reports from ESPN and TSN, the respective sports news leaders in the United States and Canada, but neither organization maintains an archive of articles dating back as far as the lockout. Individuals from both news outlets were reached to attempt gaining access to articles directly through the organizations, but both people pointed to the archiving issue.

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, the newspapers with the highest circulation numbers in 2006 included *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* (Infoplease.com, 2008). The top five Canadian newspapers, based upon circulation numbers compiled by the Canadian Newspaper Association (2008) in 2007, included *Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Le Journal de Montreal*, *La Presse*, and *The National Post*. Due to the fact that two of the papers, *Le Journal de Montreal* and *La Presse*, are French-language publications, content from only three of the five Canadian newspapers was analyzed. *Wall Street Journal* was also removed from the sample due to the small number of articles about the lockout. To find articles, the keyword “national hockey league” (in quotations) and the previously identified date ranges were searched via Lexis-Nexis Academic. *Los Angeles Times* articles were pulled from ProQuest, as they were not available on Lexis-Nexis database. The search returned 320 articles. Duplications and articles considered “newswire,” “news

roundup,” “notes” or “notebook,” and “transaction” reports were removed, reducing the sample size to 282 articles. Multiple units of analysis were used in this content analysis. Manifest units of analysis such as word counts and searches were conducted (Stacks, 2002). A list of keywords were coded and analyzed. Themes, or latent units of analysis, were also addressed. Articles were coded for positive and negative themes of newspaper coverage, patterns of coverage, and types of issues discussed.

Intercoder reliability was tested in two ways. First, a guide was developed using word- and phrase-listings coded by five individuals. Next, approximately 15 percent ( $n = 43$ ) of the articles were coded twice (see Appendix A).

All articles were collected into a single database and assessed using the text analyzer at <http://www.online-utility.org/>. Sixty keywords that appeared 10 or more times in the articles were coded as positive, negative, or neutral by five coders. Neutral words, and words with less than 60 percent (3 out of 5) agreement, were removed from the sample, resulting in a search term list of 47 words, including 18 positive words and 29 negative words. Additionally, phrases were randomly chosen from the articles and were coded to provide a guiding framework for coders. Phrases were coded for negative/positive connotations and favorability toward the NHL, and coders were asked to identify words that gave positive or negative meaning to the phrases. Because coders were not guided beyond being asked to identify words and label the phrases, the items that were agreed upon by the coders 3 or more items were included in the codebook as samples. Of the 22 phrases coders were asked to review, 19 phrases received agreement among three or more coders on both negative/positive connotations and favorability

toward the NHL. A total of 32 words were randomly identified by coders as either being positive or negative in connotation, and were included as examples in the codebook.

To further ensure the reliability of the codebook used in this study, 15% of the articles were coded twice. The second independent coder analyzed 43 randomly selected newspaper articles from the original 282 articles analyzed by the primary coder. Of the 43 articles, one article was discarded from the sample due to irrelevance to the crisis situation. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Holsti's formula, as outlined by Stacks (2002). Holsti's formula ranged from .714 on five items to 1.00 on three items, as shown in Table 1. These coefficients were considered acceptable for further data analysis and PASW Statistics 18 was used to analyze the data after discrepancies in coding were reconciled.

Once intercoder reliability was established, the sample of 47 words was used in the VBPro text analysis program developed by Dr. M. Mark Miller of the University of Tennessee. Wild cards were used in the text analysis to improve the program's sentence recognition and word identification. For example, the term "cancel\*" was used to account for variations of the word "cancel," including "canceled," "cancelation" and Canadian spelling differences including the use of the double-L in words such as "cancelled."

Table 1: Intercoder Reliability Analysis

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Story placement	35	0.83	SCCT: Labor history	41	0.98
Story type	36	0.86	Topics: Outside relationship	30	0.71
Lockout presentation	31	0.74	Topics: NHLPA relationship	30	0.71
Quoted: NHL Rep.	39	0.93	SCCT: Labor history	41	0.98
Quoted: NHLPA Rep.	42	1.00	SCCT: Fan concern	30	0.71
Quoted: Team/Org. Rep.	39	0.93	SCCT: Future growth	30	0.71
Quoted: Outside Partner Rep.	39	0.93	SCCT: Org. honesty	34	0.81
Quoted: Fan	40	0.95	SCCT: Org. soundness	37	0.88
Quoted: Other	39	0.93	SCCT: Management	32	0.76
Quoted: None	40	0.95	RELN: Fan	37	0.88
No. NHL reps. quoted	39	0.93	RELN: Player	38	0.91
No. NHLPA reps. quoted	38	0.91	RELN: Comm. Manager	42	1.00
Crisis presentation	38	0.91	RELN: Vendor	40	0.95
Topics: Crisis history	37	0.88	RELN: Media partner	37	0.88
Topics: Financial issues	35	0.83	RELN: Sponsor	42	1.00
Topics: Fan-related issues	30	0.71	RELN: Other	41	0.98

### *Categories and Coding*

For the codebook, designed to guide quantitative and qualitative article-by-article coding, analytical categories were developed using SCCT as a guiding framework. The categories were developed from SCCT variables. A previous qualitative content analysis uncovered themes that were expanded upon with additional qualitative and quantitative analysis (Formentin, 2009). Items were developed to code for how the lockout was portrayed by writers in an effort to position the lockout as a crisis. Additionally, articles were coded to identify how the NHL as an organization was represented and how the

NHL's reputation was presented and discussed. Reputation measures were modified from items developed by Coombs and Holladay (2002) and Sung and Yang (2008), as will be discussed in more detail in the survey research section. Finally, articles were also coded for portrayals of crisis type and crisis history. Results reflect an analysis of the crisis situation based on each individual turning point, as well as three turning points combined.

### *Survey Research*

To inform understanding of the content analysis and test SCCT principles, survey research was conducted. Defined as “a method of gathering relatively in-depth information about respondent attitudes and beliefs” (Stacks, 2002, p. 175), surveys are measurement instruments aimed at gathering information about “how a public perceives an issue or event or person” (p. 175). Surveys are controlled, and can boast higher levels of measurable reliability and validity if constructed correctly. Specifically, an Internet-based survey was administered using the online survey tool, [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

### *Materials*

A survey was distributed to the under-studied stakeholder group of NHL hockey fans. Although the NHL claims it has done previous research on fan perceptions at the time of the lockout, the information has been kept proprietary to date (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008). Users who frequent online message boards are typically more interested in specific subject matter, thus online distribution was used in an effort to gain a stronger response to the call for help with this study (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Limitations to the generalizability of results are inherent due to the online distribution of

the survey and the use of a convenience sample. A variety of successful and unsuccessful attempts were made to distribute the survey.

A 52-question instrument (see Appendix B) was distributed to fans via the Web-based survey tool SurveyMonkey. Thirty NHL team communication managers were contacted for permission to post the surveys on individual team message boards. Even after a follow-up request, only one communication manager suggested that posting the survey on the team message was allowed. However, this suggestion was made under the implication that the boards are controlled by the NHL. Of the managers reached for this study, 12 declined the request to distribute the survey to their fans and 18 communication managers never responded to requests for assistance.

Alternate methods of survey distribution were considered and it was determined that six sites may be appropriate for this study: NHL message boards ([www.nhl.com](http://www.nhl.com)), The NHL Arena fan message boards ([www.thenhlarena.com](http://www.thenhlarena.com)), the Hockey's Future fan message boards ([www.hockeysfuture.com](http://www.hockeysfuture.com)), the National Hockey League Fan Association (NHLFA) ([www.nhlfa.com](http://www.nhlfa.com)), the ESPN message boards ([boards.espn.go.com](http://boards.espn.go.com)), and TSN message boards. TSN is self-professed as "Canada's sports leader" (TSN.ca, 2010), and would have provided access to Canadian fans. Unfortunately, it does not have a message board and was excluded from the convenience sample. Representatives from the NHL, The NHL Arena, Hockey's Future, and NHLFA were all contacted to request permission to share the survey link on their sites. Hockey's Future representatives declined the request citing that they "don't permit [their] sites to be used for surveys." The NHLFA contact never responded to an initial request, and no additional attempts were made at

contacting the representative due to past experiences contacting the individual. An NHL representative was contacted, but no response was received. NHL Arena representatives agreed to grant permission to post the survey link on the main NHL discussion board. Additionally, the survey link was posted on ESPN's general message board. After posting the link on The NHL Arena boards, a fan expressed interest in the survey and distributed the link in his hockey blog while sending the message to other people in his blogging network. In all, the surveys remained open for two full weeks, from Feb. 10 – Feb. 24, 2010, generating 140 responses. Reminders requesting participation were made randomly during the two-week period, effectively “bumping” the threads in which the survey link appeared and maintaining appropriate online dialogue. By the second week, reminders were not generating a significant number of responses and the survey was closed.

#### *Measures and Design*

The measures for this survey were developed from previous SCCT research and concepts that emerged from the newspaper content analysis. Sections of the survey represented SCCT propositions for reputation management during crises. Specifically, items were created to measure six variables: current reputation, prior reputation, attitude toward the NHL, attitude toward hockey, crisis responsibility and crisis history.

One goal of the survey was to measure the NHL's current reputation among fans, five years after the crisis, using SCCT variables. By measuring the league's current reputation, attempts are made to determine if the league's reputation has improved in the years following the 2004-05 NHL lockout crisis.

No known reputation measurements exist from the time of the lockout, and the survey instrument cannot precisely determine the league's reputation at that time. Even so, to measure reputation, two sets of measures were developed. One set measures current reputation and the second set measures reputation five years ago (the time of the lockout). To assess current reputation, participants were asked to rate the statement "Overall, my impression of the NHL is..." using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unfavorable*) to 7 (*very favorable*). This one-item, global evaluation is identical to one used in previous reputation management studies by Coombs and Holladay (2006). The measure is intended to "provide a general idea of how participants viewed organizational reputation," (Coombs & Holladay, 2006, p. 129).

The instrument also included reputation measures developed from two previous studies. Sung and Yang (2008) defined reputation as "public perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple constituents over time" (p. 363). The definition, based on their interpretation of multiple definitions of organizational reputation, suggests that outside stakeholder perceptions about current and future performance defines organizational reputation. For their own research, Sung and Yang (2008) modified reputation quotient measures developed by Fombrun and Gardberg in 2000. The Reputation Quotient (RQ) has been developed to measure "a company's reputation by examining how a representative group of stakeholders perceives companies" on six dimensions of reputation (Fombrun & Gardberg, 2000). Used in nationwide surveys, RQ ranks companies by their reputations based on consumer feedback. Six dimensions of reputation have emerged including corporate appeal, products and services, financial

performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and social responsibility. In a study about university image, Sung and Yang (2008) modified only some of the RQ measures, thus arriving at five items that yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .88. Those items were adapted for this study.

As an aside, in their 2000 article "Who's Tops in Corporate Reputation?" Fombrun and Gardberg refer to a forthcoming article when discussing RQ. This article is cited as appearing in the *Journal of Brand Management*; however, no such article exists. Research into the matter revealed that the journal was launched in 2000, and only two issues from that year are available via the University of South Florida Library and the publisher's (Palgrave MacMillan) official site. As such, although it would have been preferable to refer to the original RQ questions developed by Fombrun and Gardberg, this survey will utilize modified versions of Sung and Yang's (2008) measures.

Coombs and Holladay's (2002) modified scale for measuring organizational reputation cites that trustworthiness is considered central to reputation and "is a common factor used in the commercial reputation measures" (p. 175). The commercial reputation measures they refer to include Fombrun's RQ. The Coombs and Holladay (2002) scale, adapted from their own 10-item Organizational Reputation Scale, used five items that produced Cronbach's alpha of .80 or higher in two prior studies. These items were modified for this study. Items such as "The NHL looks like a sports league with strong prospects for future growth" were used as vision and leadership measures, and "The NHL is socially responsible" addressed social responsibility. All items were measured using

Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Both Coombs and Holladay's (2002) and Sung and Yang's (2008) items were used.

To measure prior reputation, current reputation measures were altered to reflect a comparison to "five years ago" when the lockout happened. Respondents were instructed to recall their attitudes about the NHL prior to the lockout to the best of their ability, generating self-reported comparisons. These items allowed for analysis of one of the three factors accounted for in SCCT: prior reputation/relationship history.

Worth mentioning is that Sung and Yang's (2008) scale does not have an immediately obvious item for Corporate/Emotional Appeal beyond the item "The organization considers fans a top priority." Fombrun and Gardberg (2000) identify Corporate Appeal as "How much the company is liked, admired, and respected" (p. 13), which can be addressed via attitude measures. Attitudes were measured using a semantic differential scale in which respondents were asked to rate their feelings on a 7-point scale comparing "good" to "bad," "positive" to "negative," and "favorable" to "unfavorable." Respondents were asked to rate their attitudes twice; once for the NHL and once for the sport of hockey. A variety of newspaper articles from the time of the lockout addressed the notion that fans differentiate between the two entities, which is a revealing feature of this study.

To measure crisis responsibility, Coombs and Holladay (2002) utilized "Griffin, Babin, and Darden's (1992) three-item scale for Blame" (p. 175), yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .91. Other studies utilizing this scale have yielded Cronbach's alphas ranging from .80 to .86 (Coombs and Holladay, 2002). Items adapted for the present study

included, “The blame for the lockout lies with the NHL,” while items such as “The blame for the lockout lies with the players, not the NHL,” were added to reflect the nature of the specific crisis event. All items were measured using Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Additional crisis responsibility items were created for this study, intended to examine this particular crisis event in depth. Items intended to determine responsibility for the lockout included “I believe the NHL could have done more to prevent the lockout,” which may provide some insight into other survey responses. Greed emerged as a theme of disapproval toward NHL players in the content analysis, so the item “I believe the lockout was a result of greedy players” was included in the instrument. When it comes to crisis situations, apologies are tricky. Legal implications may make an apology an unreasonable response during a crisis, but if an apology is warranted—or believed to be warranted—perceptions of a crisis situation can change. As such, an item such as “I believe the NHL should have apologized for the lockout” may elaborate other survey results.

The SCCT variable for history was measured using three items developed specifically for this study: “I am aware that there have been two lockouts in NHL history”; “I am aware of the player strike that occurred in the early 90’s”; and “I remember the 2004-05 lockout.” The best way to address people’s knowledge of prior history of crisis within the organization was to simply ask about previous events that actually occurred. The use of a contemporary event for a case study allows for questions about actual crisis history.

Questions aimed at adding depth to the study's findings were also included in the survey. Asking respondents to address "I am proud to be an NHL fan" directly addresses the inherent nature of being a fan of anything—if someone is not proud to be a fan of the sport, league, or a team they support, then this could arguably be a measure of reputation. The statement "The NHL and the NHLPA are the same organization" was also included in the fan survey to identify if fans differentiate between the league and the players' association, the two groups most deeply entrenched in the contract bargaining agreement dispute. If fans think of the NHL in terms of the players and athletes that represent the league, then the NHL may inadvertently make itself look bad if it makes the players look bad during this type of crisis. Ultimately, placing blame on players may affect the league's reputation, thus it is important to know if fans differentiate between the league and the players' association.

#### *Additional Surveys*

Two additional groups were approached to participate in surveys developed for this case study: NHL communication managers and NHL players. A quick glance at club staffs shows that most communication departments have between three to five communication managers. The highest ranking communication executive was identified for each of the 30 teams and contacted via e-mail to request participation in the study. The goal was to obtain generalizable results with an emphasis placed on understanding the league's reputation amongst organization-level communication managers.

Thirty NHL team communication managers were contacted for permission to distribute a 47-question survey instrument to team communication employees. A first wave of requests yielded one agreement to participate in the study and four rejections. Of the remaining 25 managers, no responses were received. A second wave of participation requests were sent out a week later, yielding four potential participants and four rejections. The remaining team communication managers never responded to any requests for participation. Of the potential participants identified following the second request, only one communication manager eventually completed the survey. For the team that agreed to distribute the survey to their communication managers, five individuals were contacted and three participated.

The original requests were sent prior to the 2010 Winter Olympic break, posing some logistical issues with data collection. Because of the Olympic break and pending playoffs, the communication manager survey was removed from this study as it was deemed more appropriate to leave the managers alone so as not to risk losing their participation in future studies. Considering time constraints and a low response rate, a different study may be better suited for this survey and communication managers may be easier to reach at a different time of the year.

A final group approached for participation in this study was that of the players. Athletes are arguably the selling point of sports leagues and the intention was to survey the players about their perceptions of the league and fans. Initial research into the lockout shows that player perceptions of the results of the crisis situation are sometimes hard to identify (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008). Arguably, this may have to do with the lack of

anonymity afforded by the public interviews the players are often asked to conduct.

Although attempts were made to reach out to this affected stakeholder group, it was not possible to secure access to the players.

An NHLPA representative was contacted to help identify a decision-maker who could assist with survey distribution. The representative suggested that this access needed to be approved by the NHL and offered to help “find the appropriate person” while suggesting “to be blunt, a survey of the players would have many challenges and would be very difficult to achieve [sic].” Although additional contact was made with this person, no additional information was offered in regard to distributing the survey. A final attempt was made to distribute the player survey via an e-mail to the NHL’s Vice President of Public Relations and Player Development. No response was received. Due to the timing of the survey distribution—during the Winter Olympic break, and toward the end of the season—a decision was made to remove the player survey from this study. The survey itself was shorter than the other surveys, featuring 25 questions including demographics, and was designed to gain some insight into player perceptions of the league. There was little intention to make the survey generalizable.

The following section presents results of the content analysis and survey.

## Chapter 4

### Results

As previously discussed, the following research questions and hypotheses are addressed in this study. The research questions and hypotheses are separated per the research method that informs them:

#### **Research Questions**

##### **Content Analysis**

**RQ1:** Was the 2004-05 NHL lockout presented by major newspapers as an organizational crisis?

**RQ2:** How was the 2004-05 NHL lockout presented by major newspapers in terms of SCCT variables?

**RQ3:** What strategic communication strategies did the NHL use during the 2004-05 lockout, as presented by major newspapers?

##### **Survey**

**RQ1:** Do fans have a positive perception of the NHL's reputation?

**RQ2:** Has the NHL's reputation improved in the five years since the lockout?

## **Hypotheses**

- H1:** NHL crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation influence the NHL's current reputation.
- H2:** Hockey fan perception of reputational threat variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation) related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout are related to fan attitude toward the NHL.
- H3:** Hockey fan perception of reputational threat variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation) related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout are not related to fan attitude toward hockey.
- H4:** Among hockey fans, perception of high player responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout is inversely related to perception of NHL/owner responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout.
- H5:** Among hockey fans, perception of high player responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout negatively influences perception of NHL reputation.
- H6:** Hockey fan attitude toward the NHL is less positive than fan attitude toward hockey.

## *Content Analysis*

For this study, 282 newspapers articles were coded from seven North American newspapers. Coded articles came from three turning points during the lockout. The majority of articles (47.2%,  $n = 133$ ) were from the day the lockout was canceled, as shown in Table 2.

Of the coded articles, 78.8% of the articles came from Canadian newspapers ( $n = 222$ ). Papers from the United States accounted for 20.6% of the coded articles ( $n = 58$ ).

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the number of articles coded from each paper.

Table 2: Newspaper Frequencies, by Date

Date	<i>n</i>	%
Sept. 15-17	81	28.7
Feb. 16-18	133	47.2
June 13-15	66	23.6

Table 3: Newspaper Frequencies, by Source

Source	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	16	5.7
<i>New York Times</i>	17	6.0
<i>USA Today</i>	14	5.0
<i>Washington Post</i>	11	3.9
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	97	34.4
<i>National Post</i>	76	27.0
<i>Toronto Star</i>	49	17.4

The majority of articles (46.8%) were 500-1000 words in length ( $n = 132$ ), as shown in Table 4, and appeared inside the sports section of the respective newspapers (39.7%,  $n = 112$ ), as shown in Table 5. News and feature pieces ( $n = 152$ ) made up 53.9% of the coded articles, as shown in Table 6.

Table 4: Newspaper Frequencies, by Word Length

Article Length	<i>n</i>	%
Less than 500 words	78	27.7
500-1000 words	132	46.8
More than 1000	50	17.7

Table 5: Newspaper Frequencies, by Story Placement

Placement	<i>n</i>	%
Front Page, paper	21	7.4
Front Page, sports section	51	18.1
Inside Sports Section	112	39.7
Other/Undetermined	76	27

Table 6: Newspaper Frequencies, by Article Type

Type of Article	<i>n</i>	%
News/Feature	152	53.9
Editorial/Opinion	53	18.8
Letter to the Editor	17	6.0
Other	38	13.5

### *Research Questions*

Research Question 1 asked if the 2004-05 NHL lockout was presented by major newspapers as an organizational crisis. Although the word crisis ( $n = 11$ ) rarely appeared in the coded articles—sometimes appearing because of the name of a cited crisis management consulting agency—coders indicated that newspapers cast the 2004-05 NHL lockout in a negative light in 58.2% of the articles ( $n = 164$ ). Of the remaining articles, 30.1% were considered balanced pieces ( $n = 85$ ) and only 3.2% ( $n = 9$ ) positioned the lockout in a positive light, as shown in Table 7. Additionally, words coded as positive ( $n$

= 17) and words coded as negative ( $n = 29$ ) were found 2,290 times and 2,162 times, respectively. “Fans” ( $n = 712$ ), considered a positive word, accounted for 16% of the overall sample of words and 31.1% of the positively coded words. “Lockout” ( $n = 478$ ) was the most frequently appearing negative word, accounting for 10.74% of the of the overall sample and 22.12% of the negatively coded words. Terms such as “cancel\*” ( $n = 310$ ) appeared more frequently during time frames that would encourage a logical increase. For example, 84.52% of occurrences the term “cancel\*” ( $n = 262$ ) occurred at the time the season was canceled. Overall, the content analysis seems to indicate that the 2004-05 NHL lockout was presented by major newspapers as an organizational crisis.

Table 7: Overall portrayal of the NHL lockout

NHL portrayal	<i>n</i>	%
Negative	164	58.2
Positive	9	3.2
Balanced	85	30.1

Research Question 2 asked how the 2004-05 NHL lockout was presented by major newspapers in terms of the SCCT variables for reputation, crisis history, and crisis responsibility. Measures designed to mimic the reputation measures found in the surveys (to be discussed) addressed topics including NHL concern for fans, NHL prospects for future growth, NHL honesty, financial soundness of the NHL, and the NHL as well-managed. Due to lack of subject matter addressing the topic, an item assessing the NHL as socially responsible was dropped from the analysis. Coders were asked to assess each reputation measure in two parts: 1) Identify if the topic come up in the article, and 2) If the topic was addressed, identify if it was addressed in a positive or negative manner.

Frequency of reputation-based topics being addressed was low and discussions were generally negative, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Newspaper Analysis, Reputation Variables

Variable	Yes	%	No	%	Missing	%
Concern for Fans	13	4.6	34	12.1	215	76.2
Prospects for Future Growth	42	14.9	54	19.1	166	58.9
Honest	2	.7	41	14.5	219	77.7
Financially Sound	2	.7	123	43.6	137	48.6
Well-Managed	3	1.1	53	18.8	206	73.0

Crisis history was addressed by assessing history in two ways: 1) coders were asked to identify if a history of crisis was addressed, and 2) coders were asked to identify if the NHL's labor history was discussed. History of crisis could involve any discussion of previous lockouts, strikes, or negative incidents related to the NHL. Negative incidents, even if unrelated to the 2004-05 NHL lockout, could potentially affect the NHL's reputation. As such, even negative incidents unrelated to the 2004-05 NHL lockout were considered in the content analysis. For example, qualitative analysis revealed that at the time of the lockout the ongoing and highly publicized court-battle between players Todd Bertuzzi and Steve Moore was taking place. Bertuzzi and other members of the Vancouver Canucks organization were being sued by Moore for involvement in an on-ice incident that ended Moore's career. Although unrelated to the lockout, this qualifies as a negative incident. History of crisis came up in 10.3% ( $n = 29$ ) of the articles. Labor history was a point of discussion in 8.9% ( $n = 25$ ) of the articles. History of crisis was discussed most frequently ( $n = 17$ ) during the first turning point of

the lockout (Sept. 15-17, 2004). As shown in Table 9, the NHL's labor history was discussed most frequently ( $n = 25$ ) when the lockout began. A chi-square was conducted to assess whether discussion of labor history changed significantly based on the date of publication, yielding significant results:  $\chi^2(6, N = 280) = 26.413, p < .000$ . Discussion of labor history was not significant across specific newspapers.

Table 9: Discussion of labor history

Date of Publication	Yes	No	Total
Sept. 15-17	16	64	81
Feb. 16-18	5	116	133
June 13-15	4	53	66
Totals	25	233	2

Finally, an assessment of crisis responsibility is best informed by a qualitative analysis of the coded newspaper articles. Most reaction in the newspaper articles presented a view that the lockout was caused by both the NHL and NHLPA, although some writers or quoted individuals specified an organization that they felt was to blame for the 2004-05 NHL lockout. For example, Rick Salutin (2004) of the *Globe and Mail* wrote "Count me with the 21 per cent of Canadians who blame owners, not the 52 per cent who say it's the players' fault." He discussed "fairness between rich guys" and described Commissioner Gary Bettman as the "owners' mouthpiece."

Writing for the *National Post*, Jack Todd (2004) wrote that Bettman's strategy "has been to deflect the blame by demonizing someone -- in Bettman's case, the NHL Players' Association." On the other hand, a *National Post* (2005) editorial argued not to blame the owners, saying instead that the NHLPA "overplayed its hand" and they cannot

reasonably expect the league to survive under the current economic system. Fans such as Kristen Mazza were quoted saying, “I mostly blame the players. I don't have much sympathy for someone who makes more in one year than I'll make in 30 years” (cited in Elliott, 2005).

A subsequent *Globe and Mail* (2004) editorial suggested that “both owners and players share blame for this mess. Fans can be forgiven for wishing a pox on both their greedy houses.” Kings fan Dan Daniel gave up his season tickets citing, “I'm embarrassed to be a hockey fan at this point. It's the first major professional sports league in America to cancel a season because of greed” (cited in Bolch, 2005). However, an employee laid off by the NHL's Dallas Stars was quoted as saying, “I can't really be bitter at the Stars; they have to look at the economic situation. I loved my job and I would have loved to keep it. It's tough to blame either side (NHL or NHLPA), but somebody let it get to this point” (cited in Zwolinski, 2004).

High-profile people with a connection to the NHL also chose between sides. Disgraced former NHLPA director Alan Eagleson blamed both sides (Woods, 2004b), while legend Phil Esposito was quoted as saying he was simply angry and upset at the lack of compromise and “So sick and tired of them calling each other names” (cited in Woods, 2005). However, another legend, Guy LaFleur, sounded off against the players saying they lacked respect for the game, had taken advantage of the economic system for years, and that they are unrealistic in their quest to avoid a salary cap (Stubbs, 2005).

Overall, the content analysis seems to suggest that the NHL is presented by newspaper writers as having a poor reputation. Newspaper writers did not cover the

NHL's history of crisis with great frequency, and were more likely to discuss previous labor disputes at the time the lockout was announced. Finally, newspaper writers presented responsibility for the lockout in two ways: 1) Players were blamed for the lockout, or 2) Both players and owners were blamed equally for the lockout as a cohesive pair representing the NHL as an individual whole.

Finally, RQ3 asked what strategic communication strategies the NHL used during the 2004-05 NHL lockout. Both the announcement of the lockout and the cancellation of the season were formally announced during press conferences featuring Bettman. On each date, the NHL made its announcement before the NHLPA and did so from New York City near the league's offices. At the beginning of the lockout, Bettman set a tone by frequently using "cost certainty" and "linkage" as buzzwords to describe the needs of the NHL during the lockout. Cost certainty was called "a euphemism for a cap on salaries" (Cole, 2004) and linkage was a name applied to the concept of revenue-sharing. Additionally, Bettman positioned cost certainty as a way to achieve a better economic system and lower prices for fans (Duhatschek, 2004). He claimed that the future of the game was at stake and the owners were united in their stance. Bettman also began the lockout by pointing blame toward the NHLPA, suggesting they should have "see[n] this bleak day approaching" but didn't "lift a finger to prevent its arrival." In the background of Bettman's press conferences, the NHL prepared a Web site devoted to explaining its side of the dispute, a move described as a "fierce public relations campaign designed to sway fan support" (Woods, 2004).

When the season was formally canceled, the NHL distributed a full copy of a memo sent to NHLPA executive director Bob Goodenow outlining the league's final offer. The letter suggested "This offer is not an invitation to begin negotiations – it's too late for that," and was described as a "four-paragraph missive" with a sharp "take-it-or-leave-it" tone (Wharnsby, 2005). Bettman opened the press conference announcing the cancellation by saying it was a "Sad, regrettable day." He then went on to describe the NHLPA as an "unwilling partner" while suggesting "everyone... owes our fans an apology."

When the lockout was lifted in mid-June 2005, the NHL and NHLPA sent out a joint statement saying, "The National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association have reached an agreement in principle on the terms of a new Collective Bargaining Agreement. It is anticipated that the ratification process will be completed next week, at which time the parties will be prepared to discuss the details of the Agreement and plans for next season" (cited in Wherry, 2005).

Overall, the content analysis seems to indicate that the NHL used defensive communication strategies. Although it apologized to fans, its primary communication efforts were defensive. The NHL either blamed the players for forcing them into the lockout, or the NHL used its current economic stability to reason that the lockout was a necessity for the economic health of the league.

### *Fan Survey*

Respondents in this study included 140 hockey fans contacted via the Internet. Of the participants, 14.3% were female ( $n = 20$ ) and 58.6% were male ( $n = 82$ ). Thirty-eight participants did not indicate gender. The age of respondents ranged from 17 to 57 years old ( $M = 31.87$ ,  $SD = 10.572$ ). The majority of respondents were between the age of 20 and 29 ( $n = 40$ ), accounting for 28.6% of participants as shown in Table 10. In addition, 67.9% of respondents identified themselves as Caucasian ( $n = 95$ ) and 2.1% were Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 3$ ). No other ethnic choices were selected, with 30% ( $n = 42$ ) of respondents leaving the question blank. The majority of respondents (31.4%) identified themselves as having some college ( $n = 44$ ) education, while 24.3% are college graduates ( $n = 34$ ).

Respondents were asked to report where they lived via an open-ended question and came from 22 states and four Canadian provinces. Of the states and provinces represented, eight of the states and one of the provinces do not have a NHL franchise. Specifically, 9.29% of respondents ( $n = 13$ ) were Canadian, and 60.71% lived in the U.S. ( $n = 85$ ). Of the respondents who lived in the U.S., the majority ( $n = 15$ ) were from Pennsylvania, accounting for 10.71% of overall respondents and 17.65% of U.S. respondents. Other states with 10 or more respondents included Michigan ( $n = 11$ ) and New York ( $n = 11$ ). This demonstrates a generally diverse participant sample.

Table 10: Respondent Demographics, Age

Age Range	<i>N</i>	%
19 or younger	6	4.2
20-29	40	28.6
30-39	24	17.2
40-49	14	9.9
50 or older	9	6.3
Missing	47	33.6

Finally, respondents indicated that they have been hockey fans from 3 to 53 years ( $M = 23.12$ ,  $SD = 11.909$ ), with the majority of participants (26.43%) identifying themselves as hockey fans for 10 to 19 years ( $n = 37$ ), meaning most were fans prior to the lockout. Respondents identifying themselves as fans for less than 10 years ( $n = 8$ ) made up 5.6% of participants. Of the participants, 32.9 ( $n = 46$ ) left the question blank. Respondents generally considered themselves to be “diehard” fans ( $n = 105$ ,  $M = 6.59$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) and strongly agreed that they remembered the 2004-05 NHL lockout ( $n = 109$ ,  $M = 6.52$ ,  $SD = .97$ ). They were also aware that there have been two NHL lockouts ( $n = 105$ ,  $M = 5.59$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ), and were aware of the player strike that occurred in the early 90s ( $n = 108$ ,  $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ).

#### *Research Questions*

Research Question 1 asked if NHL fans have a positive perception of the NHL’s reputation. The one-item, global evaluation used by Coombs and Holladay (2006) in previous reputation research revealed that respondents had a generally favorable impression of the NHL ( $n = 75$ ,  $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). In addition, the nine additional items used to measure current reputation in this study were collapsed into a composite

measure ( $\alpha = .874$ ), which yielded an average mean score of 4.28. Overall, survey results indicate that fans have a somewhat favorable perception of the NHL's reputation.

Research Question 2 asked if the NHL's reputation has improved in the five years since the lockout. Paired  $t$ -tests were conducted on reputation measures addressing the league's current reputation and its reputation five years ago. Nine items previously developed by Coombs and Holladay (2006) and Sung and Yang (2008) were modified into two sets of items to assess current and past reputation perceptions. The matched items were paired and differences in item means were assessed.

Of the nine pairs, six were statistically significant. There was a significant difference between perceptions about the NHL's concern for the well-being of fans five years ago ( $M = 4.06, SD = 1.46$ ) and the NHL's current concern for fans ( $M = 4.44, SD = 1.43$ ),  $t(107) = 2.341, p = .021$ . When measuring the NHL as a league with prospects for future growth, there was a significant difference between perceptions five years ago ( $M = 4.42, SD = 1.75$ ) and current perceptions ( $M = 4.90, SD = 1.40$ ),  $t(106) = 2.487, p = .014$ . Five years ago the NHL was considered less socially responsible ( $M = 4.22, SD = 1.52$ ) than they are now ( $M = 4.58, SD = 1.47$ ),  $t(107) = 2.324, p = .022$ .

When measuring honesty, the item "The NHL is basically dishonest" was reverse-coded, yielding a significant difference between perceptions of NHL honesty five years ago ( $M = 3.83, SD = 1.538$ ) and now ( $M = 4.53, SD = 1.43$ ),  $t(107) = 4.116, p = .000$ . Another item reverse-coded was "The NHL is NOT concerned with the well-being of its fans," ( $M = 4.80, SD = 1.44$ ), and when paired with the item, "Five years ago, the NHL was concerned with the well-being of its fans" ( $M = 4.16, SD = 1.429$ ) a significant

difference was observed,  $t(104) = 4.267, p = .000$ . Finally, a significant difference was identified between respondent perceptions about the NHL's financial soundness five years ago ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.58$ ) and current financial soundness ( $M = 3.79, SD = 1.325$ ),  $t(106) = 4.055, p = .000$ . Items that were not significant addressed the league's consideration of fans, how likely fans are to believe what the NHL says, and if fans believe the NHL as a well-managed organization. This indicates that no significant changes exist for these reputation items from the time of the crisis five years ago. Overall, survey results indicate that the NHL's reputation among fans is somewhat improved compared to its reputation five years ago.

#### *Tests of Hypotheses*

For purposes of conciseness, the remaining analysis in this study will refer to the "prior reputation/relationship history" variable simply as "prior reputation." Prior to hypothesis testing, the multi-item measures used to assess crisis responsibility, crisis history, prior reputation, current reputation, attitude toward NHL, and attitude toward hockey were assessed for internal reliability. The alpha coefficient and number of items in each composite measure are shown in Table 11. The alpha score for all composite measures indicated strong internal consistency, so data analysis proceeded with hypothesis testing.

Although alpha values between .80 and 1.00 indicate high reliability (Berman, 2002), a lower limit of .70 is still considered a useful measure of constructs (Broom and Dozier, 1990; Stacks, 2002). The Cronbach's alphas for the single-item constructs ranged

from .79 to .96, with four items having coefficients of .87 or greater. This suggests that the items measuring SCCT variables demonstrate high internal reliability.

Table 11: Reliability Analysis for Variable of interest

Variable	<i>a</i>	<i>n</i>
Crisis responsibility	.81	4
Crisis history	.79	3
Prior reputation	.87	9
Current reputation	.87	9
Attitude toward NHL	.90	3
Attitude toward hockey	.96	3

Hypothesis 1 posited that NHL crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation influence the NHL's current reputation. To test this hypothesis, linear regression analysis was conducted in which the measures of crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation were the predictor variables and current reputation was the criterion variable. The results of linear regression analysis revealed that 14% of the unique variance in current reputation was due to the measures of crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation,  $R=.38$ ,  $R^2=.144$ ,  $F(3,95)=5.176$ ,  $p=.002$ . However, only crisis responsibility and prior reputation were unique predictors of current reputation, as shown in Table 12. Overall, these results provide partial support for the propositions of SCCT, suggesting that perceptions of crisis responsibility and prior reputation positively affect perceptions of current reputation.

Table 12: Regression Model for Fan Perception of SCCT Reputational Threat Variables  
Predicting Attitude Toward NHL

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>Sig.</i>
Crisis responsibility	-.194	.092	-.215	.039
Crisis history	-.030	.081	-.037	.715
Prior reputation	-.254	.092	.270	.007

Hypothesis 2 posited that hockey fan perception of reputational threat variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation) related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout influences fan attitude toward the NHL. To test this hypothesis, linear regression analysis was conducted in which the measures of crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation were the predictor variables and attitude toward the NHL was the criterion variable. The results of the analysis were not significant, suggesting that, overall, these results do not provide support for the notion that threat variables are related to attitude toward the NHL as an organization.

Hypothesis 3 posited that hockey fan perception of reputational threat variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation) related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout do not influence fan attitude toward hockey. Linear regression analysis was used to test this hypothesis. Results indicated, no significant overall effect,  $R=.29$ ,  $R^2=.087$ ,  $F(3, 83)=2.529$   $p=.063$ ; however, crisis history was a unique predictor of attitude toward hockey,  $\beta=-.080$ ,  $t(82)=2.198$ ,  $p=.031$ . These results suggest that only the crisis history threat variable is related to attitude toward the sport of hockey.

Hypothesis 4 posited that among hockey fans, perceptions of high player responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout are inversely related to perceptions of NHL/owner responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout. A scale analysis of all responsibility measures—including those placing blame on the players and those placing blame on the NHL—was not, as expected, internally reliable ( $\alpha = .219$ ). As such, items were separated into groups depending on whether blame was being placed on players or the league. Two modified measures used in previous studies included “The blame for the lockout lies with the NHL” ( $M = 4.58, SD = 1.60$ ) and “The blame for the lockout lies with the players, not the NHL” ( $M = 3.85, SD = 1.39$ ). A third item, “The NHL is not to blame for the lockout” ( $M = 3.02, SD = 1.35$ ), was also reverse-coded ( $M = 4.98, SD = 1.35$ ) to be included in both the NHL-responsibility and player-responsibility variables. All the responsibility items were collapsed with responsibility measures developed for this study, creating single variables for NHL Responsibility and Player Responsibility.

Items measuring blame toward the NHL showed high internal reliability ( $\alpha = .868$ ). Items included the reverse coded “The NHL is not to blame for the lockout,” “I believe the NHL could have done more to prevent the lockout,” “I believe the NHL should have apologized for the lockout,” “The blame for the lockout lies with the NHL,” “I believe the owners were at fault for the NHL lockout,” and “I believe the NHL should have taken responsibility for the lockout.” The scale  $M = 29.77$  and  $SD = 6.70$  over six items shows that respondents somewhat agree that the NHL ( $M = 4.96, SD = 1.12$ ) is to blame for the lockout. A single NHL Responsibility variable was created for additional statistical analysis.

For a single player blame variable, the item “The NHL is not to blame for the lockout” was included in an effort to see how its inclusion in both scales would affect results. Internal reliability increases ( $\alpha = .837$ ) without this item, but it will be retained for comparative purposes. Items include, “I believe the lockout was a result of greedy players,” “I believe the players should have taken responsibility for the lockout,” “The blame for the lockout lies with the players, not the NHL,” and “The NHL is not to blame for the lockout.” The scale  $M = 15.06$  and  $SD = 4.47$  over four items shows that respondents somewhat disagree that the players ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) are to blame for the lockout. Thus, a single Player Responsibility variable was created for additional statistical analysis.

A paired  $t$ -test of the collapsed NHL Responsibility and Player Responsibility variables showed a significant difference of perceived responsibility between the two groups. Respondents were more likely to blame the NHL ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) than the players ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) for the 2004-05 lockout,  $t(104) = 6.039$ ,  $p = .000$ . Overall, survey results seem to indicate that fan perceptions of high player responsibility are inversely related to perceptions of NHL/owner responsibility.

Hypothesis 5 posited that hockey fan perception of high player responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout negatively influences perceptions of NHL reputation. To test this hypothesis, linear regression analysis was conducted in which the measures of player responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation were the predictor variables and attitude toward the NHL was the criterion variable. The results of the analysis were not

significant and, overall, suggests that fan perceptions of high player responsibility do not negatively influence perceptions of the NHL's reputation.

Hypothesis 6 posited that fan attitudes toward the NHL are less positive than their attitudes toward the sport of hockey. As previously discussed, items measuring attitudes toward both the NHL ( $\alpha = .901$ ) and hockey ( $\alpha = .957$ ) had high internal consistency and were collapsed into unique measures. These measures were analyzed using a paired  $t$ -test, yielding a significant difference between means. Paired items ( $n = 111$ ) revealed that respondents were more likely to have positive attitudes toward hockey ( $M = 6.86$ ,  $SD = .43$ ) than they were toward the NHL ( $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = .88$ ),  $t(110) = 6.614$ ,  $p = .000$ . Overall, this suggests that fan attitude toward the NHL is less positive than fan attitude toward the sport of hockey.

The following section provides a discussion of the results of the content analysis and survey, as well as a discussion of the conclusions of this study. The conclusion wraps up with limitations of this study, suggestions for recommendations, and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Conclusion

Results of the content analysis and survey help inform this study via research questions and hypotheses. The 2004-05 NHL lockout was presented in the coded newspapers as an organizational crisis. Pertaining to SCCT variables, newspaper writers presented the NHL as having a poor reputation but did not frequently discuss the league's crisis history. Responsibility for the lockout was split in two ways: Either the players and owners were presented as a cohesive unit equally responsible for the 2004-05 NHL lockout, or blame was placed on the players. The content analysis also suggests that the NHL used defensive, blame-based communication strategies when communicating during the 2004-05 NHL lockout.

Results of the fan survey indicate that participants in this study have a somewhat favorable perception of the NHL's reputation; a reputation that has somewhat improved in the previous five years. Overall, results provide partial support for SCCT propositions. Perceptions of crisis responsibility and prior reputation positively affect perceptions of current reputation, and crisis history is related to attitude toward the sport of hockey. The three SCCT threat variables do not significantly relate to attitude toward the NHL.

Additionally, survey results indicate there is an inverse relationship between player responsibility and NHL/owner responsibility, although results did not indicate if high perceptions of player responsibility negatively influence perceptions of the NHL's reputation. However, survey results suggest that participant attitudes toward the sport of are more favorable than their attitudes toward the NHL.

### *Discussion*

By the time the lockout was lifted in June 2005, interest in the labor dispute had significantly waned. As one writer put it, “the news yesterday that the two sides had tentatively agreed to a new collective bargaining agreement didn't exactly arrive as a bolt of lightning. We all knew it was coming ... eventually” (Cox, 2005). From the dates analyzed, the lockout got the bulk of its coverage at the time the season was canceled—an unprecedented move in North American sports history; one that gave the NHL's 2004-05 lockout what Cox (2005) called the “dubious distinction of being the longest labour brawl in the history of pro sports.” Most stories (39.7%) were buried inside the sports section of newspapers.

Interest, however, never seemed to be an issue south of the Canadian border; there really wasn't any to begin with. Although four papers from the United States were analyzed for this study, they accounted for only 20.6% of the articles analyzed. Three Canadian papers made up 78.8% of the coded articles, boosting the not uncommon notion that the NHL garners only minimal interest in the United States. “Canada's game” (*Globe and Mail*, 2004) thrived even without hockey in the form of the NHL. Canadians returned to their outdoor rinks and minor league games, essentially taking hockey back to its

grassroots beginnings (Kuitenbrouwer, 2005). In the United States, however, fans simply tuned out. It was reported that replacement programming on ESPN—poker and bowling, for example—doubled the NHL’s average ratings (Penner, 2005). At a time of year when the NHL previously averaged a 0.2 rating on ESPN2, replacement programming averaged a 0.4 rating.

These and other ongoing issues helped position the 2004-05 NHL lockout as an organizational crisis. It was league Commissioner Gary Bettman who came out at the beginning of the lockout suggesting, “We owe it to hockey’s fans to achieve an economic system that will result in affordable ticket prices and stable franchises. The very future of our game is at stake and the NHL’s owners are united... We have no other choice,” (cited in Duhatschek, 2004). With television ratings already suffering going into the lockout, ESPN exercised its option to walk away from the final year of a \$60 million partnership with the NHL before the end of the lockout. Sports pundit J. A. Adande (2005) suggested the “NHL can’t be considered one of the ‘Big Four’ professional sports anymore.” At the time of the lockout, the National Football was spreading \$4 billion of television revenues among its 32 teams (Garber, 2005). The NHL’s overall revenue in 2003-04 was reported at \$2.1 billion per year. The lockout was easily positioned as a reputation-damaging event for the NHL, already considered a niche sport (Heath & El-Bashir, 2004; Foster & Dillman, 2005). As one writer put it, the record 301-day lockout “crippled an already fragile industry” (Duhatschek, 2005).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) variables (crisis responsibility, crisis history, and reputation) were presented in a somewhat negative way in the coded

newspaper articles. Items measuring reputation were not mentioned frequently, and when they were mentioned they were mostly discussed negatively. Financial soundness ( $n = 145$ ) was the most frequently appearing reputation variable, noted in 51.42% of the articles coded, and coded negatively ( $n = 123$ ) 84.83% of those instances. The reputation variable of prospects for future growth accounted for 25.3% ( $n = 42$ ) of the positively-coded variables. However, discussion with the intercoder revealed that prospects for future growth often coded positively because the NHL was in such a poor state that it is almost as though there was nowhere for the league to go but up. The NHL was not considered well-managed, with 53 of 56 instances (94.64%) of management discussions coding negatively.

Items measuring crisis history showed that newspaper writers did not necessarily focus on the league's labor history. Discussions about previous lockouts were significantly higher at the time the lockout was announced and were typically used as back-story or explanation for the ongoing events. Writers tended to discuss only the ongoing lockout, suggesting that crisis history was not a point of focus during the lockout. This is a positive thing for the NHL, as knowledge of crisis history can significantly heighten reputational threats of crises.

Finally, crisis responsibility was harder to pinpoint via an analysis of newspaper articles. Although the NHL locked out its players and incited the lockout, players were still considered responsible for the lockout. Results of the content analysis suggest that the crisis can be considered intentional if the owners and players are viewed as a single entity. At times, both the NHL and NHLPA received blame for the lockout, and the

blame appeared to be spread equally. Arguments were presented supporting both sides of the labor dispute, and a variety of stakeholder groups—fans, former players, laid-off employees, restaurant and bar owners—either blamed the sides equally or were equally countered by people with opposing opinions.

In keeping this discussion pointed toward the NHL, however, analyzing the league's communication strategy may round out discussion about crisis responsibility. From the beginning to the end of the lockout, the NHL used defensive communication strategies. In addition to outright blaming the players' association, Bettman used buzzwords and terms aimed at making the lockout seem like an unfortunate necessity. While never accepting blame for the state and reputation of the NHL, Bettman's announcements focused on obtaining "cost certainty" in order to make the league successful. The term caught on enough that even fans used it when discussing the lockout. In North Carolina, fan Chris Baker "blame[d] players for not realizing 'some kind of cost certainty is necessary for the NHL to survive'" (cited in Allen, 2004). The defensive strategy of the league was boosted by regular apologies to hockey fans coupled with suggestions that the NHLPA could have done more to prevent the crisis. A Web site was developed to offer the league's side of the story—it was not reported if the NHLPA did something similar. When the lockout was lifted, Stephen Brunt (2005) wrote that both the NHL and NHLPA would still make plenty of money from the new agreement, and suggested that "Resentment of that long-standing truth, especially in Canada - coupled with a brilliant public relations campaign waged by the league - has been at the heart of fans siding with the owners in this dispute."

Overall, these defensive communication strategies may have served to separate the NHL from its players' association. In doing so—and if truly done effectively—the NHL arguably made themselves victims instead of intentional actors of the crisis. Both of the scenarios were presented in newspapers articles, thus making it hard to determine if the NHL was ultimately presented as being responsible for the lockout. Per SCCT, greater responsibility creates greater reputational threat. In the case of the NHL, and by virtue of reports about the league's communication strategy, newspaper articles positioned the NHL as both responsible for the lockout and as victims of the lockout. Because research suggests that people turn to media for information (Wilcox, et al., 2005), further research during an ongoing sports labor agreement crisis may show if and how such presentations in the media affect stakeholder perceptions.

In discussing stakeholders, it is arguable that fans are the NHL's primary stakeholder group. Although respondents to the fan survey did not comprise a truly representative sample, and results are not generalizable, the survey still yielded significant and interesting results. Noteworthy issues with the sample of respondents included size of the sample ( $n = 140$ ) and gender discrepancies. Females have been a growing part of hockey's fan base, highlighted by numerous female-friendly events hosted by teams (i.e.: the Tampa Bay Lightning's Hockey 'n' Heels events), an influx of women's merchandise in recent years, and initiatives such as the Washington Capitals' Scarlet Caps "Hockey for Women" Web site (Washington Capitals, 2010). With nearly 60% of respondents identifying themselves as male, future research would need to find ways to tap into the female hockey fan population in order to gain a truly representative

sample of hockey fans. Additionally, respondents strongly agreed with the assessment that they were “diehard” fans ( $n = 105$ ,  $M = 6.59$ ,  $SD = .978$ ) and disagreed with the assessment that they were “casual” fans ( $n = 109$ ,  $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 2.006$ ). This suggests that survey responses and results may be skewed because of involvement with the sport, the league, and the crisis situation.

Despite those shortcomings, demographics such as age and location were fairly diverse, thus supporting the use of the online survey tool SurveyMonkey. Hockey fans from a wide range of locations offered their opinions, something an experiment could not have accomplished. For example, an experiment would have limited the diversity of the ages and locations of respondents (especially at a major university in Florida), and the current methodology allowed actual NHL stakeholders to offer their opinions about a crisis situation that actually took place. All these factors considered, the research questions and hypotheses yielded some interesting findings.

In general, RQ1 revealed that participants in this study have a somewhat favorable perception of the NHL’s reputation, an improvement from the time of the lockout. Addressing RQ2, the league’s reputation improved on six of nine measures of reputation including measures related to concern for fans and prospects for future growth. The NHL is also considered more socially responsible than it was five years ago, at the time of the lockout. Although statistically significant changes were achieved, it should be noted that the mean scores of the reputation measures never increased by more than .7 points on the provided 7-point Likert-type scales. The most dramatic increase was related to perceptions of NHL honesty. Participants in this survey somewhat agreed with the

notion that currently the NHL is honest ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ), although they identified the NHL as somewhat dishonest ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) at the time of the lockout. The slight increases are signs of improvement for the NHL, especially in light of the fact that newspapers portrayed the lockout as highly damaging for the NHL and its stature among fans.

Of potential concern for an organization such as the NHL, however, is that no significant changes were noted for items addressing if participants in this study believe what the NHL says, if the NHL is considerate of fans, and if the NHL is well-managed. A lack of significant change shows that opinions on these issues have not changed since the time of the lockout. Furthermore, reputation scores were extremely low on the items that showed no significant changes. Participants in this study disagreed with the notion that the NHL is well managed ( $n = 108$ ,  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ), do not believe or disbelieve what the NHL says ( $n = 107$ ,  $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), and don't have an opinion on whether fans are considered a top priority ( $n = 109$ ,  $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ).

Tested hypotheses yielded results that both supported and did not support SCCT propositions examined in this study. Results of a linear regression showed support for H1, revealing that SCCT variables can predict attitude toward the NHL, but crisis history was not a unique predictor of the attitude variable. This suggests that the NHL's history of labor disputes does not impact fan attitudes toward the organization.

Hypothesis 2 posited that participant perceptions of SCCT reputational threat variables related to the 2004-05 NHL lockout influence attitudes toward the NHL. A linear regression analysis was not significant, thus not lending support for this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that perception of SCCT reputational threat variables do not influence attitude toward hockey, which was supported by the lack of a significant overall effect of SCCT variables in a linear regression. However, in this analysis crisis history emerged as a unique predictor of attitude toward hockey. An overall analysis of the findings related to H1-H3 suggests that the NHL's current reputation is driven by factors not addressed by SCCT. It should be noted that crisis history did not affect attitude toward the NHL as an organization, but was the only variable that affected attitude toward the sport of hockey. As will be discussed, this may have implications for expanding SCCT literature.

As suggested by H4, perceptions of player responsibility were inversely related to perceptions of NHL responsibility for the lockout. The existence of an inverse relationship suggests that there may be value to the content analysis findings that the NHL was portrayed as both victims and intentional actors of the lockout. Without knowing why one side is blamed more than the other, it is hard to make a connection between responsibility and portrayals of the NHL's responsibility in newspapers. A suggestion is that diehard fans may have been more likely to view the NHL and NHLPA as a single entity, thus suggesting intentional crisis responsibility. On the other hand, casual fans may have been more likely to view the NHL and NHLPA as separate entities in the context of the lockout, thus positioning the NHL as a victim in the crisis. Future research would be needed to test such hypotheses and expand on the finding that an inverse relationship was identified for responsibility for the crisis.

The direction of that relationship, however, was the opposite of what was expected. Respondents of this survey were more likely to blame the owners for the lockout, making it hard to adequately test H5. It is possible that the makeup of the sample (diehard, male hockey fans) impacted the overall assessment of responsibility for the 2004-05 NHL lockout. As such, a linear regression analysis of player responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation did not affect attitude toward the NHL. Had the current survey yielded results that placed more blame on the players, this study would have been better able to assess the proposition set forth with H5.

Finally, H6 was supported as attitudes toward the NHL were less positive than attitudes toward the sport of hockey. Although participant attitudes toward the NHL were positive ( $M = 6.31, SD = .88$ ), their attitudes toward hockey were very positive ( $M = 6.86, SD = .43$ ). The mean difference, though small, indicates that participants in this study may differentiate between the NHL as an organization and the sport of hockey as an industry. This is also supported by the content analysis findings that suggest the sport of hockey was alive and well during the lockout in a hockey hotbed such as Canada. What this finding does not show is how casual fans view the sport. Future research may survey members of the general population—maybe even through use of an experiment—to show how closely related disinterest in the sport is related to disinterest in the league. This may be better informed by a study involving the National Football League, for example, as they are a league with a strong reputation even among people who are not interested in the sport of football.

## *Conclusion*

At the time of the lockout, concern about the damage sustained by the game of hockey was high. Everyone from managers to players to fans wondered if the National Hockey League (NHL) would be able to rebound from losing a full year of play. Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) reputational threat variables this highly exploratory case study shows that the 2004-05 NHL lockout was a crisis event that may still be affecting stakeholder attitudes toward the NHL. This study, of course, presents only a preliminary pretest that suggests this line of inquiry and extension of SCCT should be the focus of future, more rigorous, research methods. A discussion of such limitations, and suggestions for future studies follows.

This study reveals that the NHL faces challenges related to interest in the sport. In Canada, and among diehard fans, fans are highly involved, active information seekers, who are opinionated about the sport. Greater coverage of the event in Canada suggests these fans are more informed and simply more interested in knowing the details and side effects of something such as a labor dispute. Coverage in the United States was much different, and information presented was more generalized, suggesting a general lack of interest in the dispute. When the NHL or similar organization creates a communication strategy during such a crisis, it seems reasonable to suggest that they have to be keenly aware of such discrepancies among stakeholder groups.

In the case of the NHL, the league still suffers from the stigma of being a niche sport. Although the league's reputation has improved in the years since the lockout, it still does not boast a good reputation. How much of that has to do with the lockout, however,

is up for debate. Lingering reputation issues from before the lockout may be a bigger culprit in the overall state of the NHL's reputation than the 2004-05 NHL lockout. It is possible that the lockout negatively affected the league's reputation, but the foundation of a poor reputation had already been set. Of course, this mimics Coombs and Holladay's Velcro Effect (2006). Overall, the league has shown signs of improvement even though they still rate poorly on reputation variables such as financial stability and management. Even so, the slight improvements mean it is possible that the lockout may have helped. As the president of one sports industry consulting firm suggested, "You know the old saying, 'You never get a second chance to make a first impression?' The NHL has one of those very rare opportunities for a second chance to make a first impression. At a terrible cost, but they have that opportunity," (cited in Penner, 2005). Additionally, there has been an influx of young and stellar talent—Sidney Crosby and Alexander Ovechkin—that likely contributes to the improving reputation of the sport.

The use of a multi-method approach also helped inform a variety of questions posed by this study. Use of the content analysis allowed for more in-depth analysis of survey findings. Additionally, the content analysis shed light on some issues related to the crisis, such as which group or organization was assigned responsibility for the crisis situation. Particularly, it illuminates the notion that adjusting SCCT variables can truly alter the way an organization communicates during a crisis. Looking at reputation measures and their effects on attitude also showed what some fans and writers expressed during the lockout: The game of hockey is viewed more favorably than the NHL, an organization in the business or industry of hockey. A combination of the content analysis

and the fan survey was what truly informed not only the hypothesis, but the findings. Further, the method of survey distribution—via online communities—allowed this study to be informed by a wide range of respondents. Although obvious limitations exist, as will be discussed, the most positive result of testing this distribution method is that it reached real fans with opinions about a real crisis event.

Ultimately, the 2004-05 NHL lockout—and other sports labor disputes—can be approached from a variety of different angles in an effort to expand and build SCCT literature. It should be of particular interest to dig deeper into the issue of player blame versus league blame because of the nature of sports organizations. Although owners may provide the financial footing for organizations, the true product of a professional sports league is its players. If fans are unhappy with the players or have negative attitudes toward them, they may not be willing to support the athletes. By virtue of not supporting the athletes, they ultimately withdraw their support from individual teams or even the league as a whole. This obviously has the potential to put dents into the owners' bottom lines.

Future studies may also work to establish profiles of Canadian and American hockey fans. Like other internationally operating organizations, the NHL operates in multiple countries, something unique for a North American sports organization. Attitudes and beliefs about hockey held by Canadians are much different than their U.S. counterparts. Differences may be identified and revealed not only through more in-depth analysis of newspaper articles about the NHL and hockey, but through additional surveys.

In-depth analysis of existing data such as previously administered surveys or polls may also inform such a study.

Finally, and most important for development of SCCT, results of this study suggest a variety of areas of future interest for development or understanding of the theory. Due to the exploratory, case study-based nature of this study, it is acknowledged that the research is fraught with problems. More rigorous future research is necessary to assert whether the following can truly extend SCCT development. However, future research may provide insight into some of the findings of this exploratory study.

Additional variables of 1) Attitude and 2) Industry Reputation may better inform future development of SCCT principles and propositions. Reputation is a variable that affects attitude. Because of the approach SCCT takes to reputation management, it is possible that use of the theory's reputational threat variables may better inform communication and crisis managers about stakeholder attitudes. This can help communication and crisis managers to not only develop strategies to approach crises, but also to develop strategies to approach stakeholders following a crisis.

Industry Reputation also emerges as a potential reputational threat variable for Coombs' theory. For example, and as shown in this study, the NHL organization suffered reputational damage from a crisis event. However, the organization's industry—the sport of hockey—did not suffer reputational damage. Reports were that the lockout may have actually helped improve fan relationships with the sport by getting them playing hockey or watching hockey at different, more grassroots levels. Of course, this example applies only to those fans that have an established interest in the game. A better example to

inform how a variable such as Industry Reputation might fit into SCCT may be of the ongoing Toyota recall crisis. It seems reasonable to ask, if the automotive industry was not facing widespread reputational issues, would Toyota need to establish different communication objectives and strategies?

It is also worth noting that crisis history was the only variable that did not affect attitude toward the NHL as an organization, but was the only variable that affected attitude toward the sport of hockey. This suggests more research may be needed to assess how crisis history affects organizational reputation. If a variable such as Industry Reputation is introduced to SCCT, it may link closely to crisis history, thus affecting the usefulness and development of the theory.

Finally, results of this study simultaneously show the strengths and limitations of a theory such as SCCT. The main assumption of SCCT is that a relationship exists between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As suggested by SCCT, blame and deflection techniques are appropriate for organizations that are victims in a crisis. This illustrates a strength of the theory because, per previous findings, the NHL used defensive communication strategies to match the suggested strategies for a victim in a crisis. However, it is actually unclear whether the NHL was presented by newspaper writers as being responsible as victims or intentional actors during the 2004-05 NHL lockout. This illustrates a limitation in the current understanding of SCCT. Instead of following the steps of SCCT to choose a response strategy during a crisis, it is possible that the NHL reversed the steps of the theory by choosing a response strategy to affect perceptions of crisis responsibility. This is a natural

reaction for an organization in crisis, however, as organizations in crisis often choose communication strategies to manipulate public opinion or perceptions of level of responsibility. It appears as though stakeholder groups that were more likely to believe or side with the NHL's messages were also more likely to see the NHL as a victim of the crisis. This presents a theoretical challenge that should be investigated in future SCCT studies because it implies that organizations can manage their reputation by picking a specific response strategy as opposed to simply following the steps offered by SCCT.

This case study, although large in scope, does not extend SCCT literature directly. Instead, it acts as exploratory, pre-test case study research aimed at showing what additional research may be considered to strengthen the theory. In all, this case study supports SCCT propositions and suggests additional measures may be added to future studies of the theory in an effort to better prepare organizations in the face of a reputation-damaging crisis.

### *Limitations*

Despite best attempts to create a triangulated, multi-method study, this exploratory case study research is fraught with obvious limitations. The yielded results provide only a partial snapshot of one particular organization—the NHL—and one particular crisis event—the 2004-05 NHL lockout. Foremost, results of this study are not generalizable. This study cannot directly extend SCCT, although it can provide suggestions for future research. Findings of this study should be examined in future, more rigorous studies.

A flaw of the literature review for this study is a lack of assessment about the nature of fandom and fan attitudes. Fan attitudes unique to sports can greatly inform studies linking SCCT to sport-related crises. Future research should carefully analyze this stakeholder group and its high relevancy to sport organizations.

A major limitation of this study, related to data collection, is the time frame in which the crisis was analyzed. More than five years have passed since the 2004-05 NHL lockout was announced, creating a handful of data collection issues. Due to archiving flaws, it is hard to know if the newspaper articles yielded for the study are a truly representative sample of newspaper coverage of the 2004-05 NHL lockout. Additionally, fans were asked to self-report their beliefs from five years ago. It is hard to know if respondents truly were able to recall accurately their opinions about the NHL and the crisis from five years ago, thus presenting a limitation of the survey results.

Such flaws in the research methods severely limit this study. For the content analysis, this study framed the codebook and coding guidelines around SCCT principles and propositions. This significantly limited the data yielded for analysis as it limited the type of information being coded. The inherent nature of the institution of sports journalism also creates issues. Framing or biases might be present in the articles coded for analysis.

It is also impossible to generalize survey data collected for this study. Online distribution of surveys has a variety of limitations. Data collection cannot be controlled for duplicated responses, and only a limited number of stakeholders may be reached. Flaws of such online convenience sampling were illustrated in this study. Noteworthy

issues with the sample of respondents included the size of the sample ( $n = 140$ ) and gender discrepancies, with males making up more than half of the respondents (58.6%). Additionally, the survey suffered from attrition, as less than 100 respondents fully completed the survey.

Combined, the two data collection methods were not strongly triangulated. Two failed surveys—to communication managers and players—limited the potential to create a more holistic assessment of the NHL's major stakeholder groups. And, even if the surveys had been distributed, there are still a variety of stakeholders such as broadcast and merchandising partners who may be surveyed for their perceptions about the 2004-05 NHL lockout and the effects of that crisis situation. Additionally, although the content analysis informed the survey results, the lack of generalizability makes it difficult to confidently assert the strength of the findings without future, more rigorous research. Suggestions for such research follow.

### *Future Research*

Future research based on this exploratory case study should address the possibility of linking attitude to SCCT variables. Organizational reputation may be closely linked to attitude toward the organization during a crisis, which can be assessed via an experiment or with a survey of stakeholders during an organizational crisis. The National Football League (NFL), for example, may be facing a lockout as its current collective bargaining agreement expires in 2011. A survey of NFL fans may lend insight into how the unique stakeholder group of sports fans reacts to a labor dispute in a highly reputable league.

Additional studies may examine the possibility of adding an industry reputation variable to SCCT. An experiment assessing industry reputation as it relates to organizational reputation may help inform SCCT strategies. For example, can the reputation of an industry protect or help an organization in crisis? Or much like Coombs' Velcro effect, can a poor industry reputation make an organizational more susceptible to poor perceptions of reputation? As assessment of current SCCT variables—responsibility, crisis history, prior reputation/relationship history—as they relate to organizational reputation, industry reputation, or both, may also inform development of SCCT. For example, per findings of this exploratory study, an investigation into the connection between crisis history and attitude toward an industry may be addressed. Additionally, an experiment may position a reputable organization within the framework of a disreputable industry, and a disreputable organization within the framework of a reputable industry, to gauge differences and similarities between the two scenarios.

Finally, an additional case study may use interviews and surveys of communication managers to assess how SCCT propositions are put into practice professionally. Exploratory results of this study suggest the NHL successfully chose their crisis response strategy to manipulate perceptions of their level of responsibility. Their response strategy, matched up with previously developed crisis types and appeared to generate perceptions of responsibility that align with the communication strategies suggested by SCCT. This shows support for the theory, but suggests a limitation of how the theory is applied. A survey of communication managers who have experienced an organizational crisis may yield insight into how crisis response strategies are typically

chosen, and how those procedures match SCCT steps. Coombs (2007) has previously suggested that communication managers are an understudied group, and such a study could fill that gap.

Ultimately, development of a theory such as SCCT is for practical use in professional settings. The following recommendations suggest ways in which the current study may inform sports-related organizations during a crisis.

### *Recommendations*

Although fans and fandom were not accurately defined for this study, it is inherent that sports fans are a primary stakeholder group of sports organizations. Results of this study suggest that during a labor dispute such as the 2004-05 NHL lockout, the organization should maintain a communication strategy that addresses fans and makes them a primary concern. Although the NHL briefly apologized to fans, the newspaper content analysis revealed that hockey fans felt underappreciated and ignored during the crisis. This left a poor impression on the stakeholder group, creating a sense that the NHL and the NHLPA only cared about their personal stakes in the dispute. For the NHL in particular, gate revenue—and thus, fans—is a primary revenue source. In future labor disputes, a sports league should take care to address its fans regularly while acknowledging the strife such a self-created dispute creates.

During a labor dispute with a players' association, leagues should also choose a communication strategy that does not completely blame the athletes. In the business of sports, players are both the employee and the product. Placing too much blame on the

players may alienate fans who do not wish to support—emotionally or financially—a group that is painted as greedy and selfish. Lack of support for the players may translate into lack of support for the sport, thus damaging the reputation and bottom line of a league even if it's positioned as a victim in the crisis.

In all, this exploratory case study shows a variety of ways in which SCCT propositions may be developed. Suggestions for future research are aimed at extending SCCT, especially as it can be used with sports leagues. Although the results of this study are not generalizable, they offer a brief snapshot of a crisis event—the 2004-05 NHL lockout—and how it was handled and received by the NHL, various sports writers and fans.

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## Appendices

Appendix A: Content Analysis Codebook

**QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

1.) Indicate if the paper is from an American or Canadian newspaper:

American	1
Canadian	2

1a.) Please provide the author's name, if available: \_\_\_\_\_

1b.) Please provide the title of the article: \_\_\_\_\_

2.) Indicate the date of publication:

Sept. 15 – 17 (Lockout announced)	1
Feb. 16 – 18 (Season canceled)	2
June 13 – 15 (Agreement announced)	3

3.) Indicate length of story in words:

Less than 500 words	1
500-1000 words	2
More than 1000 words	3

4.) Indicate placement of story:

Front Page	1
Front Page Sports Sec.	2
Inside Sports Sec	3
Other/Undetermined	4

5.) Indicate source of story:

LA Times	1
New York Times	2
USA Today	3
Washington Post	4
The Globe and Mail	5
The National Post	6
Toronto Star	7

Appendix A (Continued)

6.) Indicate what type of news piece the story was:

News/Feature	1
Editorial/Opinion	2
Letter to the Editor	3
Other	4

7.) To the best of your ability, indicate whether the newspaper story casts the NHL lockout in an overall positive, negative, or balanced light. Please use the provided list of words as a guide in making your assessment.

**Positive** indicates that the lockout is good for the NHL and game of hockey.

**Negative** indicates the lockout is bad for the NHL and game of hockey.

**Balanced** indicates that the story does not necessarily address pros and cons.

**Not Sure** indicates the coder is unsure of the tone of the article.

Positive	1
Negative	2
Balanced	3
Not Sure	4

8.) Indicate which sources the author quoted in the story. Check all that apply:

**NHL Representative** = anyone who represents the NHL such as the Commissioner or communication managers.

**NHLPA Representative** = anyone who represents the NHL such as the Executive Director or players.

**Team/Organization Representative** = anyone who represents one of the 30 NHL teams, including general managers, communication managers, etc.

**Outside Partner Representative** = anyone who represents a partner organization, such as vendors, broadcast partners, other leagues, etc.

**Fan** = anyone identified as a fan.

**Other** = anyone quoted that does not fit in the above categories and has no specific affiliation with the league, including experts, lawyers, etc.

**None** = no quotes were used.

NHL Rep.	1
NHLPA Rep.	2
Team/Org. Rep.	3
Outside Partner Rep.	4
Fan	5
Other	6
None	7

Appendix A (Continued)

9.) Please identify how many individual NHL representatives were quoted in this story.

None	0
One	1
Two	2
Three	3
Four	4
Five or more	5

10.) Please identify how many individual NHLPA representatives were quoted in this story.

None	0
One	1
Two	2
Three	3
Four	4
Five or more	5

**SCCT:**

11.) Was the situation directly referred to as a crisis by the writer?

Yes	1
No	2

12.) Please identify which, if any, of the following topics were discussed (check all that apply):

**History of crisis:** involves any discussion of previous lockouts, strikes, or negative incidents related to the NHL.

**Financial issues:** involves any discussion of issues related to league finances, revenue, etc.

**Fan-related issues:** involves any discussion of fans, the lockout's effect of fans, fan opinions/reactions.

**Relationship with NHLPA:** involves any discussion of the league's relationship with NHLPA, including past and present dealings, issues, mutual successes, etc.

**Relationships with outside organizations:** involves discussion of the league's relationship, past or present, with any partner organizations. This may include broadcast partners, food and beverage service industry partners, vendors, etc.

**None of the above:** Please note if none of the above issues were discussed.

(Continued on next page)

Appendix A (Continued)

History of crisis	1
Financial issues	2
Fan-related issues	3
Relationship with NHLPA	5
Relationships with outside organization	6
None of the above	99

13.) Was the NHL's labor history addressed? This can include mention of previous strikes, lockouts, or labor disagreements.

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

14.) Was the NHL portrayed as being concerned for fans?

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

15.) Was the NHL portrayed as a league with prospects for future growth?

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

16.) Was the NHL portrayed as socially responsible?

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

17.) Was the NHL portrayed as being an honest organization?

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

Appendix A (Continued)

18.) Was the NHL portrayed as a financially sound organization?

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

19.) Was the NHL portrayed as being a well-managed organization?

Yes	1
No	2
N/A	99

20.) If the NHL was discuss as having a strained relationship at any point during the article, please identify if any of the following stakeholder groups were specifically mentioned:

Fans	1
Players	2
Comm. Managers	3
Vendors	4
Media Partners	5
Sponsors	6
Other	7
N/A	99

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

1.) Using the provided list of words and examples of positive/negative phrases as a guide, indicate if the NHL as an organization was portrayed positively or negatively. If the NHL was portrayed in a neutral manner, or you are not sure, choose “neither.”

Positive	1
Negative	2
Neither	3

1a.) Please briefly describe the main reason the NHL was portrayed either positively or negatively:

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2.) If the NHL’s communication strategy was addressed, what was the major point of discussion? “Communication strategy” may involve descriptions of how the NHL reached out to the NHLPA, the media, fans, or other entities, during the lockout. This can involve mention of press conferences, written communication, interviews, etc.

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### SCCT:

3.) If the NHL’s labor history was addressed, what history was discussed?

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4.) If the NHL’s reputation was addressed, what was discussed? The following are topics that elaborate on “reputation”:

Was the NHL discussed as being:

- concerned for fans
- a league with prospects for future growth
- socially responsible
- trustworthy or honest
- financially sound
- well-managed?

---

Appendix A (Continued)

**CODING GUIDE**

**Positive/Negative Word Lists**

The following are words that have been identified as either positive or negative in meaning.

<b>Positive</b>		<b>Negative</b>	
able	Accepted	battle	bitter
agreeing	Committed	blame	broken
fan	Fixed	canceled	cancellation
helped	Lucrative	damage	death
negotiating	Negotiations	difficult	dispute
passion	Power	failed	frustrating
profit	Progress	greedy	impasse
successful	Survive	impose	lies
trust	Win	lockout	lose
		lost	problem
		refused	rejected
		strike	suffer
		tragedy	trouble
		unable	uncertain
		war	

## Appendix A (Continued)

### Positive/Negative Phrases

The following phrases have been identified as **favorable or unfavorable toward the NHL**. When coding, please keep in mind that most questions are asking about **how the NHL is being portrayed** during the 2004-05 lockout. Sometimes, a phrase may be positive or negative in connotation, but it may not pertain to the NHL as an organization.

- Examples of 1. positive and favorable, 2. negative and unfavorable, and 3. both positive/negative and neither favorable/unfavorable statements have been provided.

Additionally, words with agreed upon positive and negative connotations have been identified to help put phrases in context:

- **Bolded** words have been identified as having negative connotations
- Underlined words have been identified as having positive connotations.

### Positive/Favorable to NHL Cluster:

1. Bettman assured fans that the league would rise from the ashes of a lost season...
2. ... more fan-friendly entertainment and an earnest attempt at creating more offence...
3. Their talk of cooperation [between the NHL and NHLPA] was a stark contrast to their old philosophical differences...
4. "The hockey world will soon be able to celebrate the return of NHL hockey."
5. ... focus on partnership and cooperation, with both sides apparently committed to mutually improving, marketing and sustaining a league that will now have to rebuild what was a damaged game before it disappeared.
6. ... live from New York, in a professionally orchestrated, televised press conference setting. [Mr. Bettman's] opening statement was assertive...

### Negative/Unfavorable to NHL Cluster:

1. The **lockout** will certainly mean an **adjustment** for hockey fans and business.
2. It's likely that such a move would **sour** relations with the league's corporate sponsors and self-described broadcast partners...
3. The NHLPA has **rejected** the league's proposals, **fearing** it could result in a ceiling on salaries.

Appendix A (Continued)

4. After **failed** labor negotiations that led to the NHL season's being **canceled** Wednesday, officials from both local teams said they expect holding on to business to be a **struggle**.

5. "Both sides clearly **failed**."

6. The owners have **screwed** this league up so **badly** under Bettman's watch that only a **lockout** of a season or more could right all that they have made wrong since their last lockout in 1994.

7. Joe Fan is the big **loser** in the NHL's economic **battle**.

Neither Favorable nor Unfavorable to NHL Cluster:

1. **Positive:** The league also will unveil rules changes that could include allowing two-line passes and introduction of an overtime shootout to eliminate regular-season ties.

2. **Negative:** Both the league and its players union said they are prepared to **endure a dispute** for months or even years rather than move off their **entrenched** positions.

3. **Negative:** The union said 228 players voted in person and the rest by e-mail. Their **defeat** on many issues appeared to leave Goodenow's position **untenable**...

4. **Negative:** ... the lockout is particularly **distressing**...

Neither Positive nor Negative Statement Cluster:

1. **Favorable:** ... somehow, hearing the owners say "We're tired of losing money" was more **palatable**...

2. **Unfavorable:** For a decade Goodenow **pulverized** Bettman in every meaningful aspect of hockey's economic picture.

## Appendix B: Fan Survey

### **Welcome**

The following survey is designed to measure your attitudes about the NHL. The results of this survey will be used in a study analyzing the NHL's reputation following the 2004-05 lockout.

The survey will take less than 15 minutes to complete. Your input is invaluable to my research, and your participation is highly appreciated.

Any collected survey data will remain confidential and anonymous. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [formenti@mail.usf.edu](mailto:formenti@mail.usf.edu).

Thanks so much for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Melanie Formentin

You are invited to participate in a research study about the National Hockey League's (NHL) reputation following the 2004-05 NHL lockout. If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your attitude toward the NHL and hockey. Benefits of this research include a better understanding of the NHL's reputation. Participants of this study will not face any known risks or discomforts. Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any survey question for any reason. If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Dr. Kelly Page Werder at the University of South Florida School of Mass Communications at [kgpage@cas.usf.edu](mailto:kgpage@cas.usf.edu) or University of South Florida, School of Mass Communications, 4202 E. Fowler Ave. CPR 107, Tampa, FL 33620. The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.

By continuing to the following pages, I agree to participate in the study.

### **Survey Questions: Part 1 A**

Using the 7-point scales, please select the number that best corresponds with your attitude toward the NHL.

1. My attitude toward the NHL is:

Good - - - - - Bad

Positive - - - - - Negative

Favorable - - - - - Unfavorable

Appendix B (Continued)

**Survey Questions: Part 1 B**

Using the 7-point scales, please select the number that best corresponds with your attitude toward the sport of hockey.

2. My attitude toward hockey is:

Good - - - - - Bad

Positive - - - - - Negative

Favorable - - - - - Unfavorable

**Survey Questions: Part 2**

The following questions refer to your attitude about the NHL prior to the 2004-05 NHL lockout. To the best of your ability, please try to recall your attitudes about the NHL prior to the lockout

Using the following 7-point scale, please indicate your overall agreement with the following statements:

(Using Likert-type scale of (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neither Agree/Disagree, (5) Somewhat Agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly Agree.)

1. Five years ago, the NHL was concerned with the well-being of its fans.
2. Five years ago, the NHL looked like a sports league with strong prospects for future growth.
3. Five years ago, the NHL was socially responsible.
4. Five years ago, the NHL was honest.
5. Five years ago, I was likely to believe what the NHL said.
6. Five years ago, the NHL was concerned with the well-being of its fans.
7. Five years ago, the NHL was considerate of fans.
8. Five years ago, the NHL was financially sound.
9. Five years ago, the NHL was managed well.

**Survey Questions: Part 3**

The following questions refer to your attitude about the NHL TODAY. To the best of your ability, please respond to how you feel about the NHL now.

Using the following 7-point scale, please indicate your overall agreement with the following statements:

(Using Likert-type scale of (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neither Agree/Disagree, (5) Somewhat Agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly Agree.)

1. The NHL considers fans a top priority.
2. The NHL looks like a sports league with strong prospects for future growth.
3. The NHL is well-managed.
4. The NHL is socially responsible.
5. The NHL is financially sound.

Appendix B (Continued)

6. The NHL is concerned with the well-being of its fans.
7. The NHL is basically dishonest.
8. Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what the NHL says.
9. The NHL is NOT concerned with the well-being of its fans.

**Survey Questions: Part 4**

You're almost done with the survey! Thanks for your patience.

The following are general questions about the NHL and the 2004-05 lockout. To the best of your ability, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. This section continues on the next page of the survey.

Using the following 7-point scale, please indicate your overall agreement with the following statements:

(Using Likert-type scale of (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Somewhat Disagree, (4) Neither Agree/Disagree, (5) Somewhat Agree, (6) Agree, (7) Strongly Agree.)

1. I remember the 2004-05 lockout.
2. I consider myself a casual hockey fan.
3. I am more excited about the NHL than I was five years ago.
4. I believe the NHL could have done more to prevent the lockout.
5. I believe the lockout was a result of greedy players.
6. I am aware of the player strike that occurred in the early 90s.
7. I believe the NHL should have apologized for the lockout.
8. I am more supportive of the NHL than I was five years ago.
9. The blame for the lockout lies with the NHL.
10. I believe the owners were at fault for the NHL lockout.
11. I believe the players should have taken responsibility for the lockout.
12. I believe the NHL should have taken responsibility for the lockout.
13. The blame for the lockout lies with the players, not the NHL.
14. The NHL is not to blame for the lockout.
15. I consider myself a diehard hockey fan.
16. I am aware that there have been two lockouts in NHL history.
17. The NHL and the NHLPA are the same organization.

Using the 7-point scale, please indicate your overall impression of the NHL:

18. Overall, my impression of the NHL is:  
(1) Very Unfavorable, (2) Unfavorable, (3) Somewhat Unfavorable, (4) Neither Favorable/Unfavorable, (5) Somewhat Favorable, (6) Favorable, (7) Very Favorable

Appendix B (Continued)

**Demographics**

1. Age: 18 or younger  
19-24 25-34  
35-44 45-54  
55-64 64+
2. Gender: Male Female
3. Race/Ethnicity: African American Asian/Pacific Islander Caucasian  
Hispanic/Latin Native American Other
- 
4. Education: High School Some college  
College graduate Some post-graduate work or higher
5. Income: \$24,999 or less \$25,000 – \$39,999  
\$40,000 – \$54,999 \$55,000 – \$69,999  
\$70,000 – \$84,999 \$85,000 – \$99,999  
\$100,000 or more
6. State/Province of Residence: \_\_\_\_\_
7. I have been a hockey fan for \_\_\_\_ years.
8. Where did you find this survey? \_\_\_\_\_