

Public Relations Strategies and Image Repair in Football: A Case Study of Stakeholder Responses to the Racist Abuse of Bukayo Saka

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how major institutions in English football dealt with the racist abuse aimed at Bukayo Saka after the UEFA Euro 2020 final. It analyses how organisations like Arsenal FC, the English FA, and the UK government handled this reputational crisis from a public relations standpoint. The effectiveness of their responses is examined using Image Repair Theory, drawing on insights from seven semi-structured interviews with experts in PR, media, sponsorship, and sports. The findings show that institutional responses were often cautious and reactive, influenced by concerns over reputational risk rather than strong moral leadership. Many responses relied on the player's own messages to seem authentic. The analysis places these communication strategies within the commercial and global context of modern football, where racism is both a social issue and an economic problem. Institutional silence, delays, and symbolic gestures appear to be tactics aimed at protecting commercial interests and managing stakeholder expectations. The study concludes that effective crisis communication in such situations needs consistency, speed, and a commitment to ethics that values real leadership over maintaining a reputation.

Keywords

Image Repair Theory, Racism, Bukayo Saka, Institutional Response, Crisis Communication, Authenticity, Reputational Risk, Player Agency, Social Media, Strategic Communication, Moral Leadership, Commercial Logic

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the UEFA Euro 2020 final, Bukayo Saka became the unwilling

focal point of a public crisis that transcended football. His missed penalty, followed by a torrent of racist abuse online—one troll, a man in his early twenties from Saudi Arabia, sent Saka a barrage of monkey emojis on Instagram. His Instagram account was suspended for 24 hours as a result, but the company now says he should have been banned from social media for longer (BBC, 2021). The abuse ignited widespread condemnation and prompted a flurry of institutional responses from clubs, governing bodies and commercial stakeholders. While these responses were largely positioned as acts of solidarity, their tone, timing, and perceived authenticity raise pressing questions about how institutions navigate reputational risk in the face of racialised crises.

This dissertation investigates those responses through the lens of public relations (PR) strategy, with a particular emphasis on William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997). It examines how organisations like Arsenal FC, the English Football Association (FA), and the UK government positioned themselves in the wake of the abuse directed at Saka, and how their actions were received within the broader media and public discourse. The study focuses on official responses issued by these institutions following the Euro 2020 final, as well as expert perceptions of the effectiveness and authenticity of those responses. While Arsenal did eventually create a powerful wall of supportive messages for Saka at their training ground (Hutchinson, 2021), a gesture widely appreciated, it came several weeks after the abuse, further highlighting the delay between public outrage and formal institutional recognition.

The case of Bukayo Saka is especially significant because it sits at the intersection of sport, race, digital media, and institutional responsibility. In contemporary sport, particularly elite football, organisations are no longer judged solely by performance on the pitch but by how they manage moments of social and moral significance. Racist abuse, especially when amplified through social media, constitutes not only a personal attack on the athlete but also a reputational crisis for associated institutions. These moments demand more than generic statements or symbolic gestures; they require strategic communication that aligns with public expectations around justice, solidarity, and systemic change.

The Saka incident provides a clear illustration of how silence, media pressure, and public expectation interact. A couple of days after the Euro 2020 final, Saka posted a statement to Instagram condemning the racist abuse he had received. His message was heartfelt, articulate, and widely praised. Saka's response ended with three words: "Love always wins" (Jackson, 2021).

This sequence, in which the individual responds before the institution, was described by participants throughout this study as emblematic of a broader reputational pattern. From a public relations perspective, O'Boyle and Gallagher (2023) describe how sports organisations strategically align with athletes' public messages to gain reputational benefits while limiting direct exposure to scrutiny or responsibility. In moments of crisis, such as those involving racial issues, this dynamic may allow institutions to leverage player voices for solidarity signals, sub-

sequently positioning themselves as supportive actors without assuming leadership accountability.

This study interrogates the PR responses to the abuse Saka suffered, focusing on the organisations and entities most directly connected to his career and public image. It seeks to understand the strategic and ethical considerations behind their communications, the tensions between authenticity and brand protection, and the degree to which their statements and actions can be seen as effective forms of image repair. Drawing on insights from PR and media professionals, the study also considers what alternative approaches might have enhanced these responses, whether through stronger leadership, earlier engagement, or more proactive anti-racism messaging.

Central to this inquiry is the application of Image Repair Theory, which provides a structured framework for analysing how organisations attempt to manage reputational damage. Benoit's typology of strategies, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, offers valuable tools for categorising and interpreting institutional behaviour in the wake of crisis.

The findings are organised around three central themes: the strategic considerations in responding to racism; the role assigned to the player in the construction of public messaging; and the patterns of silence and inconsistency that often characterise official reactions. These themes are not merely descriptive but analytical. They reflect the broader challenges facing PR professionals in an era where audiences are increasingly sceptical of corporate messaging and demand more than symbolic alignment. In moments of racial crisis, or crisis in general, institutions are expected to demonstrate moral clarity and sustained commitment, not just reputational self-preservation. Yet, as this study shows, internal pressures—legal oversight, stakeholder tensions, hierarchical decision-making—often inhibit such clarity, resulting in responses that are cautious, delayed, or performative. This disconnect between institutional intention and public reception is central to understanding the limits of traditional image repair strategies in the context of racism.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to a growing body of research on race, sport, and public relations by providing an empirically grounded analysis of one of the most high-profile reputational crises in recent English football history. It extends existing scholarship on image repair by applying it to a racially charged event, thereby testing the robustness and limitations of traditional PR frameworks in addressing moral and social crises. In doing so, it offers practical insights for PR professionals, sports organisations, and media practitioners seeking to navigate similar challenges in the future.

In summation, this introduction outlines the rationale, scope, and structure of the study, framing the racist abuse of Bukayo Saka not merely as a moment of public outrage but as a critical case for examining how institutions in sport respond to reputational threats that are moral as well as strategic.

The dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter One presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature on image repair theory, racism in football, and institutional crisis communication.

Chapter Two details the methodological approach, including the rationale for case study design and the thematic analysis of interview data.

Chapter Three presents the findings, organised thematically to reflect key patterns in institutional response and stakeholder dynamics.

Finally, Chapter Four draws together the key insights and implications, offering conclusions and recommendations for best practice in managing racially charged crises in sport.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Image Repair Theories

William Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory (IRT) remains foundational in crisis communication research, especially in understanding how organisations respond when their reputation is under threat. Crucially, IRT defines a crisis as emerging not from actual guilt, but from the perception of responsibility for an offensive act. In some cases, organisations must respond even when they are not the perpetrators, but are perceived as morally or institutionally accountable, such as when a public body is expected to show leadership or take corrective action. This distinction is especially relevant to the case of Bukayo Saka, who was subjected to racist abuse online following England's Euro 2020 final loss. Here, the English FA who Bukayo Saka was representing during the incident, and related organisations were not responsible for the abuse, but were nonetheless expected to issue public responses that addressed both the immediate harm and broader societal concerns. In this sense, their reputations were indirectly at stake: for how they responded, rather than what they had done.

Benoit's theory offers five core image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—many of which have implications in this case. While outright denial or blame-shifting would be inappropriate in such a morally charged context, strategies such as corrective action (e.g., demanding legal reform or platform accountability) and mortification (e.g., expressing shared outrage and solidarity with the victim) become vital tools. These strategies also signal alignment with public values around inclusion, responsibility, and justice, themes especially prominent in racially charged crises. While the organisations may not be guilty of the initial offence, failure to respond adequately can create a secondary reputational crisis, which Benoit's theory still helps to analyse.

Ferguson, Wallace and Chandler (2018) offer a more practice-oriented extension of Benoit's theory, integrating insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and empirically surveying over 700 US PR professionals. Their study found that, across a range of crises, corrective action, compensation, and mortification were the most preferred and effective strategies. These results suggest that responses which acknowledge harm and demonstrate action tend to

resonate best with the public, even when the organisation is not directly responsible. In the case of Bukayo Saka, while neither Arsenal nor the English FA caused the racist abuse, they were still expected to take a stand, offer support, and implement visible responses. These are not acts of restitution in the legal sense, but rather acts of moral leadership and symbolic alignment with public outrage. The study underscores the idea that, in socially sensitive crises, silence or neutrality can themselves be damaging, while proactive, empathetic communication can protect and even enhance an organisation's reputation. In this way, Ferguson *et al.*'s findings remain highly applicable to racially charged incidents where reputational risk stems not from guilt, but from the demand for visible ethical alignment. The study also highlights the gap between theoretical strategies and what practitioners perceive as usable in real crises, revealing a preference for proactive, transparent communication that acknowledges wider social responsibilities. This aligns with the shift in expectations from mere image repair to reputational accountability, especially in the high-stakes world of sport where racial injustice triggers widespread public discourse.

Together, these studies highlight the relevance of Image Repair Theory in analysing how sports organisations, brands, and PR professionals construct crisis responses in the wake of racist incidents. Benoit provides the conceptual scaffolding, while Ferguson *et al.* offer empirical evidence of how these strategies translate into practice. In the context of the case of Bukayo Saka, understanding which strategies were employed, and which were absent, can reveal both the strengths and limitations of institutional PR responses to racism in sport.

2.2. Racism, Social Media and Football

The intersection of racism, football, and digital platforms is central to understanding the reputational crises faced by players and organisations in modern sport. The racist abuse directed at Bukayo Saka following the Euro 2020 final was not an isolated incident, but part of a wider continuum in which sport, race, and public discourse converge. As Cleland (2013) and Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) argue, digital media has transformed how racism manifests, circulates, and is contested, and this transformation has significant implications for public relations strategies in racially charged crises.

Cleland's (2013) analysis of online football fan message boards reveals how digital platforms have created new, largely unregulated spaces in which racism is not only expressed, but rationalised and defended. Drawing on over 500 posts from two major English football message boards, Cleland identifies a discourse of whiteness and national belonging that often takes the form of Islamophobia, cultural exclusion, and nostalgia for a "lost" England. These attitudes, while sometimes expressed in overtly racist language, are more often presented as "casual racism" or under the guise of humour and banter. This is significant in a public relations context, as it highlights the normalisation of racialised language within certain fan cultures, and the reputational pressure this places on clubs, players,

and football authorities to take a clear stance. Importantly, Cleland's findings suggest that the move from stadium to screen has not eradicated racism in football, but simply displaced it into less regulated and more anonymous arenas. While anti-racism campaigns have made public racism less acceptable inside grounds, message boards and social media have become arenas for both the perpetuation and contestation of racist beliefs. This insight is crucial when analysing the institutional responses to the abuse of Bukayo Saka. As mentioned previously, although the FA and Arsenal were not the perpetrators, they were nonetheless drawn into the crisis because of their institutional proximity and the public expectation that they show leadership. In this way, Cleland helps us understand how digital racism becomes a reputational threat for organisations, even when they are not responsible for the abuse itself—this is a key consideration when applying Image Repair Theory to racially charged events.

Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) reinforce and expand this argument by examining racism and hate speech across digital platforms more broadly. Their systematic review outlines how platform design—from algorithmic amplification to inadequate moderation—plays a critical role in the spread and entrenchment of racial hate speech online. The authors categorise the existing literature into three main areas: platform governance and moderation, computational detection of hate speech, and user practices (including counter-speech). They argue that much of the current research is overly focused on content removal and moderation and neglects the cultural and structural dimensions of digital racism, an oversight that has direct implications for how organisations approach PR responses to incidents like Saka's.

One of the key critiques posed by Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas is the tendency in both academic and platform discourses to define racism narrowly, focusing on explicit slurs rather than everyday racism or coded hate. This distinction matters greatly in the public relations sphere. When Saka was targeted after the Euro 2020 final, some of the abuse was overt and easy to condemn; but much of it was insidious, ambiguous, and dog-whistled, making it harder to counter with generic anti-racist statements. The platform's failure to filter or pre-empt such abuse further intensified the reputational pressure on associated institutions. For PR professionals, this raises a strategic dilemma: it is not enough to respond with symbolic solidarity; stakeholders now expect meaningful, structural-level responses that go beyond hashtags or single-issue messaging.

Both Cleland (2013) and Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) highlight the ambivalence and complexity of digital publics. Cleland shows that racist views expressed online are frequently challenged by fellow fans, illustrating a space of contestation as much as hate. Similarly, Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas note the growing use of counter-speech and activist-led campaigns to push back against platform racism. This suggests that organisations can no longer view digital abuse as simply a "problem of the platform"; instead, they must view digital engagement as a site of reputational risk and reputational repair. In the Saka case, the public

did not only expect a response to the abuse, but also a demonstration of values: inclusive culture, emotional intelligence, and alignment with anti-racism movements. Silence, delay, or generic messaging would risk being read as complicity or cowardice in the face of social injustice.

Another key implication from both readings is the shifting threshold of responsibility. Traditionally, public relations responses followed legal or factual responsibility, but in the age of social media, perceived moral responsibility has become just as potent. Cleland's study shows how online fan communities both generate and critique racist discourse, meaning that institutions are constantly being evaluated, even when they are not formally under investigation. Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas extend this by showing how platform inaction and algorithmic design feed into perceptions of systemic failure, meaning that institutions, including football clubs, governing bodies, and sponsors, are increasingly held accountable for the information ecosystems they participate in. This again reinforces the need for strategic, values-driven crisis communication that anticipates not just what has happened, but how it will be received across multiple, unpredictable online publics.

In conclusion, the work of Cleland (2013) and Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) together provide a robust foundation for understanding the digital dynamics of racism in football and their implications for public relations strategy. In the specific case of Bukayo Saka, their insights help explain why institutions were drawn into the reputational crisis despite not being at fault, and why traditional image repair strategies could fall short in the face of structural, decentralised, and highly visible racism. Their research underscores that in such cases, PR responses must be immediate, emotionally intelligent, and structurally aware, speaking not just to the moment, but to the broader cultural landscape in which football now operates.

2.3. Sports Public Relations Defence Strategies

In the wake of high-profile crises involving racism in sport, such as the abuse suffered by Bukayo Saka following the Euro 2020 final, sports organisations face not only public scrutiny but a growing moral demand for sincere, well-structured and honest communication. Public relations defence strategies play a central role in navigating this space. While traditional crisis communication models provide frameworks for response, the sport-specific approaches adopted by professionals are often far more nuanced, involving strategic redirection, media control, and the management of player visibility. Bruce and Tini (2008) offer a foundational case in this regard through their analysis of the Canterbury Bulldogs' salary cap scandal in Australia. Although this was not a direct parallel crisis, their study identifies a key sports-specific PR tactic: diversion.

Diversion is a unique strategy deployed to reduce reputational fallout. Rather than focusing on denial or correction, the club effectively shifted public focus onto the emotional impact the scandal had on players and fans. These groups were

framed not as extensions of a tainted organisation but as innocent parties suffering unjust consequences. Through media interviews and appeals to supporter loyalty, the club was able to reframe the narrative, generating public empathy and preserving its fan base. This strategy helped insulate the club from long-term damage, despite the severity of the original breach.

This logic is particularly applicable to Saka's case, albeit with a reversal of roles. In this scenario, the athlete is not at fault for the crisis but its direct target, and yet the public and media looked immediately to Arsenal, the English FA, and other affiliated institutions to issue statements, take a stand with their player, and demonstrate leadership. In other words, the reputational risk transferred from the perpetrators, the anonymous racists operating on social media, to the institutions responsible for player welfare and public-facing values.

Within this context, the concept of diversion remains relevant. Arsenal's and the FA's responses actively constructed Saka as a figure of dignity, courage, and unity, thereby encouraging public focus to centre on values of resilience and collective condemnation of racism rather than institutional complicity or systemic failures. This form of moral narrative building serves not only as an act of solidarity but also as a reputational shield, ensuring that the organisation is seen to be taking a stance while tactically controlling the emotional tone of the discourse.

This strategic shaping of narratives is explored in depth by O'Boyle and Gallagher (2023), who present the concept of defensive mediatisation in sport. Their work, based on qualitative interviews with sports journalists across the UK and Ireland, illustrates how clubs and governing bodies now actively control the flow of information through tactics such as shielding (restricting journalist access), immunisation (media training), and steering (providing scripted narratives and managing press releases).

In this media environment, sports PR has become less about transparency and more about containment. The insight that organisations now prefer to operate their own media channels, via club-run platforms, in-house journalists, and digital content teams, means that PR professionals are increasingly able to bypass traditional media scrutiny. This may help protect athletes from further trauma in the wake of abuse, but it also allows clubs to micromanage tone, message, and public perception in a tightly controlled fashion.

In the context of racism, particularly online racism, this poses both opportunities and risks. On one hand, it gives organisations the ability to immediately publish supportive messaging, highlight anti-racism values, and provide a platform, or at least an option, for players to speak on their terms, as Saka did following the final. On the other hand, it can also serve to sterilise public discourse, narrowing the focus to surface-level statements and leaving broader questions around racism in football structurally unaddressed.

O'Boyle and Gallagher's (2023) findings suggest that while shielding and steering are highly effective from a reputation management perspective, they may not satisfy public demands for transparency and accountability, especially in moral cri-

ses where silence or evasion may be read as complicity. The more an organisation is seen to be managing or filtering its response, the more sceptical audiences may become about its sincerity—particularly when the crisis involves racism, a deeply emotive and socially charged issue.

Furthermore, the practice of immunisation, whereby athletes are prepared through media training to deliver emotionally palatable soundbites, becomes ethically complex when the topic is racism. Players like Saka are often expected to carry the emotional weight of public healing while still representing their clubs and brands. This dynamic raises serious questions for PR practitioners: to what extent should players be tasked with public diplomacy in the face of abuse? And is the framing of these moments as opportunities for national unity or organisational virtue inadvertently shifting the burden away from systemic accountability?

While [Bruce and Tini \(2008\)](#) reveal how organisations have successfully leveraged emotion and narrative to divert blame and retain fan engagement, and [O’Boyle and Gallagher \(2023\)](#) show how access to narrative production is increasingly centralised, both readings suggest that PR in sport is now less about reactive damage control and more about proactive control of meaning itself.

What emerges is a clear picture of PR as both a mechanism for managing reputational risk and a tool for shaping an organisation’s ethical stance in the public eye. The organisations surrounding Saka may not have caused the racist abuse, but their image was nonetheless on the line as a result of how they responded. The reputational challenge functioned as their own penalty kick: the question becomes whether they took it and scored, missed, or passed the responsibility to someone else entirely. As public expectations of organisations grow, particularly around issues of race, identity, and ethics, the adequacy of such strategies must be evaluated not only by their short-term effectiveness but by their long-term contribution to trust and legitimacy. In this sense, [Bruce and Tini’s \(2008\)](#) and [O’Boyle and Gallagher’s \(2023\)](#) work offers more than a taxonomy of PR strategies; it presents a critique of the sport-media-public triangle in which control is often prioritised over transparency.

In racialised crises, where reputational protection intersects with social justice, this approach is increasingly being tested. Audiences expect more than just swift responses or social media statements. They want action, commitment, and honesty. For PR professionals, the challenge is therefore twofold: to protect the brand while also responding with authenticity and ethical weight. The literature reviewed here makes it clear that this is no longer a simple task. Diversion and defensive mediatisation are powerful tools, but in the face of racism, their limits are exposed.

2.4. Anti-Racism Campaigns and Proactive Strategies

As the fallout from the racist abuse aimed at Bukayo Saka continues to raise questions about the adequacy of institutional responses in football, it is crucial to assess how proactive anti-racism campaigns function within the broader ecology of pub-

lic relations and crisis communication. Not all PR strategies are reactive. Indeed, anti-racism initiatives such as Show Racism the Red Card (SRTRC) and Nike's Stand Up Speak Up campaign represent key case studies in the proactive communication of ethical values. However, the effectiveness, limitations, and unintended consequences of these campaigns are subject to academic debate.

In analysing how institutional actors responded to the racist abuse directed at Bukayo Saka, it becomes essential to understand how anti-racism messages are shaped, received, and at times undermined by public relations strategies. [Dixon et al. \(2016\)](#) offer a strong analysis of SRTRC, highlighting the campaign's educational focus and its reliance on high-profile footballers to act as anti-racist role models. While well-intentioned, the campaign's structural limitations are exposed in their findings. Firstly, SRTRC's educational sessions, while participatory and interactive, often fail to confront the already embedded societal and familial belief systems that children are socialised into. The charity's "pyramid of hate" model aims to demonstrate how even seemingly trivial prejudices can escalate into broader discriminatory behaviours, yet the long-term effect of one-off workshops is doubtful in the absence of sustained adult involvement or systemic support ([Dixon et al., 2016](#)).

This matters in a PR context because it draws attention to the tension between short-term reputation management and long-term cultural change. When clubs or governing bodies engage in anti-racist messaging, as Arsenal and the English FA did in support of Saka, they risk repeating the performative limits of campaigns like SRTRC. Without addressing the deep-seated influences that allow racism to persist in football culture, even robust public statements can ring hollow or be quickly forgotten.

SRTRC also relies heavily on footballers as credible messengers. This is a double-edged sword. While footballers' lived experiences can make the anti-racist message relatable, their off-field conduct can also jeopardise the integrity of the cause. The authors point to Rio Ferdinand's use of the racialised term "choc ice," in a public tweet as a case in point, showing how even ambassadors of anti-racist campaigns can inadvertently reproduce divisive racial discourse ([Dixon et al., 2016](#)). For PR professionals, this highlights the precariousness of relying too heavily on individual spokespersons, particularly in a digital environment where missteps are amplified. The PR professionals ultimately do need to be in charge.

Moreover, the campaign's minimal engagement with adult audiences, despite recognising their formative influence on children's beliefs, limits its transformative potential. The authors argue that intergenerational racism remains an unresolved barrier to SRTRC's efficacy. Applying this to Saka's case, it is not enough for institutions to shield players or issue statements in the immediate aftermath of abuse; genuine leadership would involve lobbying for deeper educational reform, amplifying inclusive practices across all levels of football, and backing this up with resource commitment.

In contrast to SRTRC's grassroots and educational approach, [Muller, van](#)

Zoonen and de Roode (2008) critically examine the corporate anti-racism strategy adopted by Nike through their Stand Up Speak Up campaign. Launched in 2005 and fronted by Thierry Henry, who is widely regarded as the greatest ever player to play for Bukayo Saka's club, the campaign sold over 5 million black-and-white wristbands and ran TV adverts across multiple European countries. At face value, it was a high-visibility, seemingly successful anti-racism intervention. However, their analysis suggests that it fell short of substantive cultural impact.

Nike's campaign is critiqued for relying on aesthetic and emotional appeals rather than encouraging meaningful behavioural change. Despite wide exposure and commercial popularity, empirical data gathered by the authors in Amsterdam reveals that only 4% of respondents felt the campaign had increased their awareness of racism in football or changed their interactions with others (Muller et al., 2008). PR responses to crises involving racism cannot rely solely on symbolic gestures, no matter how slick or popular. As with Nike's campaign, there is a danger that public messaging may be perceived as commodifying moral issues rather than genuinely confronting them.

The study also explores the visual and discursive codes embedded in Nike's advertising. Racism was presented as something "others" do—bad fans, fringe elements—rather than as a systemic issue implicating broader football culture. This framing allowed viewers to align with the "good guys" without engaging in any self-reflection or change. A similar risk existed in institutional responses to Saka's abuse: framing the incident as isolated or exceptional, rather than reflective of a deeper cultural rot in football fans, limits the opportunity for real reform.

Another issue Muller et al. (2008) highlight is the absence of grassroots integration. Campaigns designed at the top, for mass consumption, often fail to resonate at the community level where racialised abuse frequently occurs. This finding is mirrored in the limited change observed in the local Amsterdam football culture despite the wristband campaign's popularity. This highlights the need to interrogate whether Arsenal, the English FA, or other stakeholders did anything beyond broadcasting solidarity. For instance, did they support affected grassroots communities, or facilitate educational initiatives within their networks?

Interestingly, both papers hint at the potential for corporate or institutional actors to act as moral leaders, but only if they abandon the safer route of polished branding and take real risks. Nike, in particular, has the economic and cultural capital to set new norms, but as the authors conclude, their anti-racism output often serves more to secure brand integrity than to disrupt structural inequalities (Muller et al., 2008).

In sum, these readings demonstrate that while anti-racism campaigns are an essential part of sport's ethical landscape, their impact is contingent on depth, sincerity, and strategic alignment with long-term goals. For PR practitioners, the challenge is to move from reactive image repair to proactive cultural leadership, not just "standing up and speaking up," but staying in the fight once the headlines fade.

2.5. Case Study Context: The Racial Politics of Euro 2020 and the Image of Bukayo Saka

The Euro 2020 final presented one of the clearest case studies of modern sport as a contested cultural and political arena, particularly in relation to national identity, race, and public relations. The aftermath of England's defeat to Italy, culminating in the racial abuse directed at Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka, revealed not only the persistence of racism in football culture but also its entanglement with national discourse, institutional responsibility, and mediated image construction. As explored by [Back and Mills \(2021\)](#), the event foregrounded a question that has long haunted Black athletes in England: is their national belonging conditional on success? Their analysis reframes the Euro 2020 penalty shootout not simply as a sporting failure, but as a flashpoint in the broader politics of English identity. When Saka missed the final penalty, the racialised vitriol that followed on social media echoed historical forms of exclusion, revealing how quickly skin colour in sport can be decoupled from nationality when performance falters. For institutions surrounding these players, the crisis was not one of failure in sport but of exposure: exposure of latent racism in the fanbase, exposure of political double standards, and exposure of the inadequacies of symbolic commitments to anti-racism.

What distinguishes [Back and Mills' \(2021\)](#) contribution from other scholarly and journalistic accounts is their focus on contingency, the idea that Black players' inclusion within the national narrative is always provisional. John Barnes' remark, "When I didn't play well, my Jamaican-ness became very apparent to the public," exemplifies how identity in sport is rendered volatile, particularly through the lens of performance. Saka's image, like Rashford's and Sancho's, became a battleground for competing visions of England: one that celebrates multiculturalism when convenient, and one that reverts to nativist hostility in moments of disappointment.

The relevance of this case to crisis communication lies in how PR responses, or a lack thereof, navigate these highly charged symbolic terrains. The public statements issued by clubs, governing bodies, and sponsors were widely circulated, but often lacked structural follow-through. [Back and Mills \(2021\)](#) note that while there was an outpouring of public support following the defacement of Rashford's mural in Manchester, the institutional reactions were often reactive, emotionally framed, and short on concrete commitments. In this way, image repair becomes performative: organisations seek to align themselves with public sentiment and moral legitimacy, but without addressing the deeper cultural and political dynamics that perpetuate such crises.

Furthermore, the article highlights how political figures, notably Home Secretary Priti Patel, undermined the players' anti-racist stances during the tournament, only to later issue statements of support. This political selective alignment was publicly challenged by Tyrone Mings, who called out the hypocrisy of labelling players' decision to take the knee as "gesture politics," only to later condemn

racism when the backlash had already occurred. This moment is crucial for understanding the role of institutional credibility in crisis PR. The effectiveness of public messaging is not only contingent on content but also on perceived sincerity. When parliamentarians or football bodies appear to side with anti-racist gestures only when they are politically convenient, their interventions are framed as image management rather than moral leadership.

The case also demonstrates how football PR, often mediated through digital platforms, must contend with both traditional and grassroots responses. [Back and Mills \(2021\)](#) describe the community-driven efforts to restore Rashford's mural and preserve the supportive messages left by the public as emblematic of a shifting social consciousness. These acts were not orchestrated by clubs or governing bodies but by local communities who felt that racist defacement violated a shared, multicultural sense of belonging. This suggests that in moments of racially charged crisis, official PR narratives are often matched, and in some cases superseded, by grassroots expressions of solidarity. For professional communicators, this raises the question of whether institutional messaging should lead or follow such grassroots momentum, and how credibility is distributed between the two.

In terms of visual and symbolic representation, the article draws attention to the emergence of new iconography, such as the digital mural showing Rashford, Sancho, and Saka with crowns on their heads alongside the slogan "Never apologise for who you are." This powerful image, which gained traction across social media platforms, functioned as both a rebuttal to racist abuse and a repositioning of the players as cultural figures beyond football. It reflects a moment in which PR, activism, and fandom intersect, not to sell a product, but to affirm a set of values. However, such acts of symbolic repair are still vulnerable to co-option. Without institutional change in football's governance structures, such imagery risks becoming a substitute for action.

[Back and Mills \(2021\)](#) further contextualise the backlash against the three players within a broader historical and socio-political framework. They argue that racism in English football is not an aberration but a continuation of unresolved post-imperial anxieties and racialised nationalism. Despite the current England team's diversity, power in football, from management to boardrooms, historically was concentrated in white, male hands. While players are increasingly visible as public anti-racist figures, they operate within institutions that have yet to adequately confront their own complicity. This point has direct implications for PR professionals tasked with managing race-related crises: image repair cannot be separated from the structures and cultures of the organisations that deploy it.

The article closes with a powerful reflection on Gareth Southgate's empathetic response to the missed penalties. His embrace of the players and his open letter to the nation represented an alternative form of leadership. Southgate's communication stood in stark contrast to that of many political or media figures, modelling a form of masculinity and national identity capable of acknowledging failure without scapegoating. This is perhaps where the most important lesson lies: in racially

charged crises, PR is not just about words or positioning. It is about modelling values under pressure, and showing that public statements are rooted in genuine ethical commitments.

Taken together, the events following Euro 2020 offer more than a cautionary tale about racism in sport. They provide a contemporary case study in how institutions respond, or fail to respond, to crises that strike at the heart of national identity. For PR professionals, the lessons are clear: credibility depends on consistency; messaging must be matched by action; and the deeper structures of exclusion within football cannot be hidden behind slogans or reactive media strategies.

2.6. Research Gap and Contribution

The literature reviewed above provides a strong foundation for understanding how institutions respond to racism in sport through the lens of public relations and crisis communication. However, a significant gap remains in the empirical examination of how these theoretical frameworks apply to specific, high-profile incidents of racial abuse directed at individual athletes. While Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997) and sports PR defence strategies (Bruce & Tini, 2008; O’Boyle & Gallagher, 2023) have been extensively theorised, there is limited research that interrogates the actual strategic decision-making processes, institutional pressures, and stakeholder dynamics that shape responses to racially charged crises in real time.

Furthermore, existing scholarship has not adequately explored the tension between institutional reputation management and the ethical treatment of players who become the focal point of such crises. The role of the athlete—not merely as a victim but as a strategic asset in the communication response—remains under-examined. Similarly, while the commercial logic underpinning institutional behaviour has been acknowledged, its specific influence on the timing, tone, and substance of responses to racism warrants deeper investigation.

This dissertation addresses these gaps by providing an empirically grounded analysis of institutional responses to the racist abuse of Bukayo Saka. Through semi-structured interviews with PR professionals, journalists, academics, and sponsorship experts, it offers practice-based insights into how strategic communications are crafted, constrained, and perceived in the context of a racially charged crisis. By applying Image Repair Theory to interview data, the study extends existing scholarship in three key ways: first, it tests the applicability of Benoit’s framework to a crisis where the institution is not the perpetrator but is nonetheless held morally accountable; second, it reveals the ethical and strategic dilemmas faced by PR practitioners when responding to racism; and third, it highlights the commercial and stakeholder pressures that often inhibit more authentic, timely, and structural responses.

In doing so, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on race, sport, and public relations, offering both theoretical refinement and practical recommendations for institutions seeking to navigate similar challenges in the future.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Objectives

This research investigates how stakeholders in sport, particularly PR professionals, media, and sponsors, respond to incidents of racism targeting high-profile athletes. It focuses on the case of Bukayo Saka following the Euro 2020 final, using Image Repair Theory as a framework for analysis. The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are the key strategic and ethical considerations when crafting public responses to racism-related incidents involving elite athletes? What challenges and organisational pressures do PR professionals face when managing these crises? How do stakeholders balance the need for speed, authenticity, and reputational protection in crisis responses? What image repair strategies are used in incidents involving racism, and how effective are they perceived to be by industry professionals?

These questions directly reflect the themes explored in the interviews, including sincerity vs. performativity, stakeholder coordination, the role of social media, reputational risk assessment, and preparation for future incidents.

3.2. Research Design

A qualitative methodology is most appropriate given the exploratory, interpretive nature of the research questions, which seek to understand subjective experiences, strategic thinking, and institutional responses to a high-profile incident. The study takes the form of a focused case study, centring on the racist abuse suffered by Bukayo Saka following the UEFA Euro 2020 final. This case offers a unique opportunity to analyse how race, reputation, and public relations intersect in a moment of heightened media and public scrutiny. A case study approach enables an in-depth examination of this real-world context and facilitates the exploration of institutional and strategic decision-making in response to a racially motivated reputational crisis.

While the focus of this dissertation differs significantly from Fortunato's (2000) case study of the NBA's media strategy, his work provided useful inspiration in terms of methodological design. Both studies explore how sports organisations manage their public image through strategic communication, albeit in very different contexts—one proactive and commercially driven, the other reactive and reputationally sensitive. Fortunato's use of a case study to dissect the mechanisms behind sports PR helped support the decision to adopt a similar structure in this research, where the Bukayo Saka incident is examined as a concentrated site of institutional image management under public pressure.

To gather insights into the perspectives and practices of those involved in or familiar with strategic communication in sport, the study uses semi-structured interviews. This method allows participants to offer in-depth responses, grounded in their professional experiences, while also enabling the researcher to pursue emergent themes across the dataset. Semi-structured interviews also strike a bal-

ance between consistency in questioning and flexibility in follow-up, making them suitable for a study exploring nuanced topics such as authenticity, stakeholder tensions, and ethical responsibility. This design is aligned with the study's theoretical framework, which is grounded in Image Repair Theory.

As discussed in the literature review, Benoit's typology of image repair strategies (Benoit, 1997) offers a lens through which to examine how institutions manage reputational damage, particularly when issues of race and morality are at the centre of the crisis. The interviews were therefore designed to explore the real-world use, interpretation, and perceived effectiveness of these strategies in a context where public response is shaped not only by PR planning but also by wider cultural and social dynamics.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

The research uses a purposive sampling strategy to identify individuals with direct or expert-level experience in crisis communication within sport, particularly in relation to race, media backlash, and public image. A total of seven participants took part in the study. These included: Four PR professionals working in, or with a history of working in, sport or with sports organisations. One sponsorship expert with insight into commercial brand responses to reputational risk. One academic specialising in online hate and racism in football. One senior journalist covering football and high-profile player cases.

Participants were selected on the basis of their professional background, their familiarity with race-related issues in sport, and their ability to comment on strategic communication practices. The diversity of roles across PR, media, academia, and sponsorship provided a multi-perspective dataset that enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings. Initially participants were contacted via email, through contacts that I have gained in media and LinkedIn, having been identified through professional networks, online profiles, and existing media work. A snowball sampling element was also present, as some participants recommended other individuals with relevant expertise. This allowed for access to professionals with direct experience of advising on or reporting on crisis communications involving racism.

All participants chose to be named in the research due to the public-facing nature of their roles. This flexibility respected participants' preferences while maintaining ethical integrity.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams Meetings, Zoom and phone calls in May and June of 2025. Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and the depth of discussion. Each interview was recorded with the participant's verbal consent and transcribed manually post-interview.

The decision to conduct first-hand interviews provided rich, practice-based in-

sights that would not have been accessible through secondary data alone. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility while maintaining focus on the key themes of institutional response and reputational strategy. This approach mirrors best practice seen in related research, such as O'Boyle & Gallagher's (2023) study on crisis communications, which similarly used expert interviews to explore how practitioners interpret and apply PR theory in real-world scenarios.

Participants were sourced primarily through LinkedIn outreach and through an existing professional network built within the media industry. While this approach gave a diverse range of expert perspectives, it also came with challenges. Despite repeated efforts, including targeted messages and follow-ups, over one hundred individuals declined participation due primarily to the sensitive nature of the topic. Notably, no representatives from Arsenal FC or the English FA who were active at the time of the incident were willing to provide comment.

All interview participants in this study identified as male. This was not by design, but rather a coincidence of availability and response within the recruitment process. Efforts were made to contact a diverse range of professionals, and future research would benefit from a more gender-balanced participant group to capture broader perspectives.

3.5. List of Interviewees

David Alexander, Public Relations Specialist and crisis management firefighter at Sports PR Firm Calacus, in London. David has previously run the Arsenal FC website and has written about the Saka incident.

Colm Kearns, post-doctoral researcher and assistant professor at DCU. Colm has written about an international data drive project tracking online hate in all levels of football (TOHIF).

Charlie Farmer, Senior Account Manager at Run Communications. Charlie has 7 years' experience in sports PR and communications, working with The English FA, England Football, Manchester City, City Football Group, Manchester United, and EFL.

Scott Dougal, Director of Communications at Digital (PR Company) and formerly the head of communications at British Cycling.

Brian Barry, PR and Communications Executive at Virgin Media Sports. Brian has also worked in sports journalism.

Sean Connell, editor at The Sponsor, and has previously worked as a sponsorship consultant and sponsorship account director.

Miguel Delaney, Chief football writer at The Irish Independent and has written about the Saka case study.

The interview questions were developed to reflect the themes and gaps identified in the literature review, particularly around image repair, authenticity, institutional responsibility, and the influence of public and media expectations. The guide consisted of 15 core questions, which addressed:

- Strategic considerations in crafting responses to racism

- Challenges and internal pressures, such as legal or reputational constraints
- Stakeholder involvement, including athletes, sponsors, clubs, and governing bodies
- The use of social media and traditional media in shaping narratives
- The perceived effectiveness of various image repair strategies

Some questions were adapted slightly in the moment based on the flow of the conversation, allowing participants to expand on areas of particular relevance to their experience. The decision to conduct interviews online reflected both logistical convenience and the participants' preferences, enabling access to professionals across different locations. The method also allowed the researcher to create a private and conversational atmosphere, which was important given the sensitivity of the topic.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined in the literature review. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, interpreting, and organising patterns across qualitative interview data. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to engage closely with the transcripts, identifying key themes that addressed the research questions.

Analysis began with multiple close readings of the transcripts to familiarise with the data. A combination of deductive and inductive reasoning was used: deductive themes were informed by Benoit's Image Repair Theory, such as denial, corrective action, bolstering, and mortification, while inductive themes emerged directly from the participants' responses. Rather than using coding software, the analysis was conducted manually, with key phrases and ideas grouped and refined into overarching themes through note-taking and iterative reading. This process helped ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' language and experiences.

The coding process followed a systematic approach. First, initial codes were generated by identifying relevant statements, phrases, and ideas within each transcript. For example, a participant's comment that "the comms team should be empowered to call it" was initially coded as "communication team autonomy." Second, these initial codes were grouped into broader categories based on patterns and relationships. Codes such as "timing of responses," "delay in messaging," and "speed vs. accuracy" were grouped under the category of "temporal dynamics in crisis response." Third, these categories were refined and organised into final themes through iterative review and discussion with the research supervisor. For instance, the category "temporal dynamics" combined with "institutional hesitation" to form part of the larger theme "Strategic Considerations in Responding to Racism." This process ensured that the final themes were grounded in the data while remaining analytically meaningful.

Thematic development was guided by the structure of the research questions, while remaining open to unexpected insights raised by participants. This ap-

proach provided a clear framework for discussing how PR strategies, authenticity, stakeholder dynamics, and institutional pressures are perceived in the context of race-related crises in sport.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Dublin City University Ethics Board. Verbal consent was obtained at the start of each interview, and participants were reminded they could decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time. The research deals with sensitive topics, including racism and public abuse, and care was taken to approach these issues respectfully. Questions were framed to focus on professional experiences and institutional responses rather than personal views or identities. All transcripts were stored securely.

In preparing to study a racially sensitive and emotionally charged case, the work of [Garland and Rowe \(1999\)](#) was instructive in understanding how institutional responses to racism can be critically examined within a research framework. Their study on police strategies in managing racism at football matches demonstrated how sociological inquiry can responsibly handle complex, politically fraught topics in sport. While their focus differs from the PR lens of this dissertation, their methodological rigour and care in handling sensitive data influenced this researcher's approach, particularly in terms of framing interview questions, respecting participant boundaries, and remaining alert to the emotional and cultural weight of the subject matter. Like this dissertation, Garland and Rowe's study also incorporated direct quotations from participants to illuminate key points. Their approach helped validate the decision to foreground expert voices throughout the findings and analysis chapter, using interview excerpts to deepen the analysis and humanise institutional perspectives.

The researcher acknowledged a responsibility to avoid sensationalising the case and to present findings in a way that reflects the complexity and emotional weight of the subject matter. Ethical considerations extended beyond formal consent and included attentiveness to power dynamics and cultural sensitivity. All participants provided explicit permission for their names and professional affiliations to be used in this research.

3.8. Limitations

As a young Irish researcher and long-time Arsenal supporter, I approached this topic with both personal investment and academic responsibility. My interest in the case of Bukayo Saka was shaped not only by its public significance but by a genuine passion for the club and for issues of fairness and representation in sport. This positionality inevitably influenced my sensitivity to the material, particularly in interpreting institutional actions and public reactions. While every effort was made to remain critical and balanced, I acknowledge that my emotional proximity to the topic may have shaped the questions I asked and the weight I assigned to certain narratives. Recognising this, I engaged in regular reflexive practice through-

out the research process to ensure the findings were grounded in evidence and not personal bias.

While the study ultimately drew on seven interviews, the process of securing participants proved challenging, and a larger sample size would have further strengthened the breadth of insight. Nonetheless, the range and depth of expertise among those interviewed provided a robust foundation for thematic analysis and offered valuable perspectives across PR, media, and sport.

As with all qualitative research, this study is shaped by certain boundaries. The focus on a single case—the racist abuse of Bukayo Saka—offers depth rather than breadth. While this limits the generalisability of the findings, it enables a concentrated analysis of a high-profile, racially charged crisis that holds broader significance within sport and society.

While the study includes perspectives from PR professionals, journalists, academics, and sponsorship experts, it does not feature participants who worked directly on the Bukayo Saka case or were part of his PR or club communications team at the time of the incident, or even Bukayo Saka himself. Gaining access to such individuals is often difficult, particularly when the subject matter involves reputational risk and ongoing sensitivities. However, the external perspectives included still provide valuable insight into how such incidents are understood, critiqued, and addressed across the wider industry.

While the Bukayo Saka incident was chosen for its prominence and symbolic weight, it is worth noting that a more recent and arguably more institutionally current example—namely, the abuse suffered by his Arsenal and England teammate Myles Lewis-Skelly, who suffered similar abuse not for missing a penalty but simply on how he conducted himself on a football pitch—was referenced by two interviewees. In hindsight, this case may have offered a more timely lens through which to analyse institutional PR responses, particularly given its proximity to the interview period and ongoing relevance in the sport's anti-racism discourse.

Finally, as with any thematic analysis, interpretation is an inherent part of the research process. While every effort was made to stay grounded in participants' language and to reflect their meanings accurately, researcher subjectivity cannot be fully removed. Reflexivity and close engagement with the data were used to support a thoughtful and transparent analytical process.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insight into how strategic communications professionals approach one of the most pressing issues in modern sport: how to respond meaningfully and effectively to racism in the public eye.

4. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the key findings from seven semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals across PR, journalism, sponsorship, and football communications. The insights are organised into three core themes that emerged during thematic analysis, each reflecting how institutions respond to racist abuse in football, particularly in high-profile cases like that of Bukayo Saka. The discussion

integrates perspectives from participants with the academic literature outlined in the literature review section and interprets how institutional strategies align, or don't, with theoretical models such as Benoit's Image Repair Theory. It also draws on the work of [Bruce and Tini \(2008\)](#), whose analysis of crisis responses in sport highlights a range of tactics, including denial, scapegoating, and diversion, that are often shaped by the unique media pressures and emotional fan relationships embedded in elite sport.

The aim is to critically evaluate how public relations professionals navigate the ethical, strategic, and reputational challenges of responding to racism in elite sport.

4.1. Theme 1: Strategic Considerations in Responding to Racism

A central concern emerging from participant interviews was the strategic complexity involved in crafting public responses to racist incidents. Across organisations, there is a need to respond quickly, but also deliberately, balancing reputational management, moral obligation, and the expectations of diverse audiences. This theme explores what professionals consider to be the key elements of an effective PR response to racism in football, including tone, timing, and internal decision-making processes.

4.1.1. Tone and Moral Positioning

Respondents consistently emphasised the importance of sincerity and values-based communication when addressing racism. Rather than centring the brand or institution, responses should reflect solidarity with the victim and demonstrate a broader moral stance.

"You want the message to feel human. Not corporate or cold. There's always a fear of over-polishing the message to the point it sounds performative. And in that case, what's the point? You've missed the opportunity to make an impact."

—Charlie Farmer, Senior Account Manager, Run Communications

This perspective aligns with [Bruce and Tini \(2008\)](#), who argue that sports organisations facing crises must go beyond routine or procedural responses and instead demonstrate accountability to both the affected individual and the wider community. They warn that superficial messaging may be perceived as tokenistic, undermining trust and damaging reputations.

Miguel Delaney, Chief Football Writer at The Irish Independent, similarly observed:

"Only the person being subjected to abuse can really know what's right for them in any response, because it is such a personalised thing."

This distinction between obligation and authenticity was echoed by multiple participants. They described how audiences increasingly assess institutional responses not only by what is said, but by how and why it is said. Statements that appear templated or reactionary are often perceived as insincere, particularly if they lack emotional resonance or moral clarity. In the context of racism, where lived experience and systemic injustice are deeply personal and sensitive, an overly

polished or generic message may be viewed as a reputational shield that is more concerned about corporate interests rather than a genuine act of solidarity.

This concern also reflects Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory, which emphasises that effective responses must appear authentic to be persuasive. Inauthentic apologies or vague anti-racism statements often fail to reduce reputational harm. Benoit categorises such strategies as evasion of responsibility or simple denial, both of which can be seen as dismissive when moral accountability is expected.

In high-profile cases of racism, the public increasingly demands not just acknowledgement but concrete action. Any attempt to deflect, minimise, or "PR-manage" the issue may intensify backlash rather than contain it. As Bruce and Tini (2008) conclude, audiences now expect organisations to act as ethical leaders in moments of injustice, not merely protect their image.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. The emphasis on sincere, human-centred communication aligns most closely with Benoit's (1997) mortification strategy, which involves accepting responsibility and expressing regret. However, the findings suggest that organisations often stop short of full mortification, instead employing bolstering strategies—emphasising existing positive attributes without directly acknowledging institutional failures. The tension between these approaches reflects the strategic dilemma identified by Ferguson et al. (2018): while PR professionals prefer sincere responses, institutional constraints often push them toward less risky strategies.

4.1.2. Timing and Response Speed

A widely discussed strategic concern was how soon to respond following a racism incident. Multiple interviewees stressed that being "first out" with a response is not always ideal if it risks sounding vague or unprepared.

"I think there's value in not rushing it. Yes, you need to acknowledge it early, but the tone and shape of the message matter more than being the first to post something."

—Dr. Colm Kearns, post-doctoral researcher, Dublin City University

This emphasis on timing reflects broader critiques within academic literature on how institutions and platforms manage racism. Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) argue that digital platforms, particularly social media companies, often delay substantive action, responding only when public outrage reaches a tipping point. Their systematic review found that such reactive tendencies are frequently driven by reputational concerns rather than ethical imperatives, resulting in responses that appear opportunistic or insincere. Although the study focused on tech platforms, the findings resonate with the pressures sports organisations face: to act swiftly, yet meaningfully. Delayed responses can be interpreted as silence or complicity, while rushed statements risk lacking depth or clarity. The middle ground seems extremely difficult to pinpoint. The challenge is how to ensure that the timing signals genuine moral urgency rather than calculated crisis management (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. The timing dilemma reflects

tensions between multiple image repair strategies. A swift response that acknowledges harm and expresses solidarity aligns with mortification, while strategic delay often reflects evasion of responsibility, as institutions wait to assess reputational risk before committing to a position. This cautious approach, described by participants as common practice, suggests that organisations frequently prioritise risk management over moral leadership—a finding consistent with Benoit’s observation that crisis responses are shaped by perceived threats to organisational image.

4.1.3. Strategic Audience Awareness

Participants also highlighted the layered audiences that must be considered in crafting the response: fans, media, sponsors, and minority communities. Several interviewees described this as a “balancing act” where internal politics and audience sentiment often push against each other.

“Sometimes what you want to say publicly clashes with legal or internal guidance. That’s the tension: you want to say something morally right, but you’re checking how that lands with different groups.”

—Brian Barry, PR and Communications, Virgin Media

This internal tug-of-war was echoed by Scott Dougal, Director of Communications at Digital (PR Company) and formerly the head of communications at British Cycling, who described the complexity of working with multiple stakeholders under legal and brand constraints. He noted that comms teams often operate with a draft statement that undergoes numerous revisions to meet internal approval, legal requirements, and the sensitivities of external partners. In high-profile cases, he explained, “you’re often caught between doing what feels right and what gets cleared.” This illustrates how communications professionals must navigate a shifting space between ethical clarity and institutional cautions, a pressure that complicates timely and effective responses to racism.

Charlie Farmer built on this by stressing the importance of trusting the communications team to lead during moments of crisis. He noted that overly centralised or hierarchical decision-making can delay or dilute a response, especially when senior leadership is overly cautious.

“The comms team should be empowered to call it,” he argued, highlighting that those closest to the issue are often best placed to judge how a message will land publicly. In the case of racism, where timing, tone, and cultural fluency are essential, Farmer suggested that organisations need to streamline approvals and allow PR professionals more ownership over how to engage with the public.

The tension described by participants between ethical communication and institutional constraint reflects the findings of [Ferguson et al. \(2018\)](#), who identify a disconnect between PR professionals’ preferred image repair strategies and those they are permitted to implement. Their study shows that although practitioners often favour sincere approaches such as mortification or corrective action, they are frequently pressured to adopt denial-based strategies due to the influence of senior leadership or legal departments. This dynamic creates a strategic dilemma

where the most effective responses for public trust are deprioritised in favour of those that minimise legal exposure.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. This audience awareness reflects the strategic calculation inherent in Benoit’s framework. The choice of image repair strategy—whether mortification, corrective action, or evasion of responsibility—is often determined by audience expectations and organisational risk tolerance. The findings suggest that while PR professionals recognise the value of mortification, institutional constraints frequently push them toward bolstering (emphasising existing positive attributes) or reducing offensiveness (minimising the perceived severity of the issue), strategies that protect the organisation but may appear insincere to critical audiences.

4.1.4. Consistency with Brand Values

Several participants noted that public reactions to anti-racism messaging are often shaped by an organisation’s prior track record. When clubs or governing bodies are seen as largely silent or passive on racism until a high-profile incident occurs, their sudden shift in tone can be interpreted as opportunistic or inconsistent. As David Alexander put it:

“With Saka, people remembered what those institutions had said, or hadn’t said, before. It all comes back to whether they’ve earned the right to speak on this.”

His point highlights how audience memory and institutional history play a powerful role in how statements are received. Responses that appear reactive or disconnected from a sustained commitment to anti-racism are easily dismissed as reputation management.

This idea of “earning the right” to speak was a recurring point in Alexander’s reflections. He argued that public trust is built incrementally, not reactively. “You can’t just parachute in with a big moral message when something awful happens,” he said. “The messaging has to come from somewhere, from what you’ve done before, not just what you say now.” His comments underscore how audiences interpret anti-racism responses not just as standalone statements, but as part of a broader pattern of institutional behaviour. A history of silence, neglect, or deflection in similar moments erodes credibility, making even well-written responses sound hollow. Alexander’s point reinforces the reputational risk of inconsistency: if public-facing communications are not backed by long-term values and behaviour, they’re likely to be dismissed as superficial or performative.

This aligns closely with Cleland’s (2014) critique of institutional inertia—the tendency of organisations or institutions to resist change—in football. His analysis of over 500 posts from two prominent football forums (Grimsby Town and Huddersfield Town) between November 2011 and February 2012 identifies how social media platforms facilitate racist sentiments. Cleland argues that football’s governing bodies have consistently failed to confront structural racism, opting instead for superficial or “symbolic actions” that give the appearance of responsiveness without addressing root causes. Within the context of Alexander’s arguments, public scepticism toward crisis responses isn’t simply a question of tone; it’s funda-

mentally about legacy. Organisations that have historically not used their platforms to meaningfully oppose racism risk appearing opportunistic, jumping on a moment rather than genuinely supporting a cause.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. Inconsistency in anti-racism messaging represents a failure of bolstering—the strategy of emphasising positive organisational attributes to offset negative perceptions. When an organisation has not consistently demonstrated anti-racism commitment, its attempts at bolstering during a crisis appear hollow, undermining the effectiveness of the image repair effort. This reinforces Benoit’s (1997) argument that image repair strategies are most effective when they are consistent with an organisation’s established reputation and values.

The insights across this theme reveal the nuanced and high-stakes environment in which institutional responses to racism are shaped. Professionals working in PR, media, and communications highlighted that effective messaging is not only about what is said, but also when, how, and by whom. Tone, timing, audience expectations, and internal constraints all play critical roles in determining credibility. These dynamics also underscore a core challenge explored throughout this study: how stakeholders attempt to maintain credibility in an environment that increasingly demands moral clarity and values-driven action. Viewed through the lens of Image Repair Theory, many early-stage strategic considerations resemble attempts to minimise responsibility (e.g., shifting blame, bolstering), rather than offering full mortification or corrective action.

4.2. Theme 2: The Role of the Player

Another recurring theme across the interviews was the complex and often contradictory role assigned to players in institutional responses to racism. While clubs and governing bodies tend to position players as both symbols of resilience and spokespeople, participants questioned whether this is always ethical or strategically sound. The analysis reveals tensions between player agency, emotional labour, and institutional reliance on individual voices to carry public messaging, particularly in cases like Bukayo Saka’s, where the personal and political collide.

4.2.1. Players as the Face of the Response

Several interviewees noted that institutions often default to putting the affected player “at the front” of the response, either through public statements, a photo shoot, or emotionally driven social media posts. This was described as both a powerful and problematic approach, especially when external stakeholders are involved.

“In a way it’s almost more tricky when the player says I would like somebody not just me to do something... you have to decide whether you’re going to be brave and authentically stand with (them) or... shy away from that.”

—Sean Connell, editor at The Sponsor

This burden is especially pronounced when the player is young, highly visible, and already under intense public scrutiny. Saka, at just 19, was immediately ex-

pected to respond, which many participants saw as unfair. Miguel Delaney noted that institutions often “hide behind the player’s dignity” instead of confronting the issue head-on.

“The way Saka handled it was incredible. But you have to ask: why did he have to? Where was the FA? Where were Arsenal? They did respond, but it felt like they were playing catch-up to what Saka had already done on his own.”

—Miguel Delaney, Chief Football Writer, *The Irish Independent*

This approach risks turning the victim into the solution, inadvertently shifting the responsibility for healing, public engagement, and moral clarity onto the player themselves. It creates a scenario where players become brand representatives for causes they are emotionally entangled in, often without meaningful organisational support. Some interviewees suggested this was not only ethically questionable but strategically unsustainable, as it places an emotional and reputational burden on the individual that simply isn’t fair. What emerges across the interviews is a pattern: institutions responding to racism by centring the affected player rather than stepping forward themselves—a strategy that may protect brand image in the short term but ultimately weakens institutional credibility.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. Using the player as the face of the response represents a form of bolstering, where institutions align themselves with a respected individual to enhance their own credibility. However, this strategy risks appearing as a form of evading responsibility if the institution fails to take independent action. The effectiveness of bolstering in this context depends on the perceived sincerity of the institution’s support; if audiences view the player as merely a prop for institutional image repair, the strategy may backfire.

4.2.2. Emotional Labour and Institutional Gaps

Participants expressed concern about the emotional burden players carry in the aftermath of racist abuse. While some organisations publicly “stand with” their players, the reality behind the scenes can be more performative than supportive.

“There’s a difference between backing a player with a tweet and backing them behind closed doors. A lot of the time, the second part doesn’t happen.”

—Dr. Colm Kearns, DCU

This disconnect reflects a broader criticism in the academic readings. [Bruce and Tini \(2008\)](#) argue that sports organisations often rely on symbolic public relations strategies during crises, using tactics like diversion or carefully crafted statements to manage reputational risk. While these approaches may satisfy short-term public expectations, they can deflect attention from deeper, structural issues within the institution. In the context of Saka’s racism, this tendency can result in surface-level messaging that protects image rather than committing to long-term change. The expectation that players must “show strength” in the face of abuse also reinforces harmful narratives around resilience, placing the emotional burden on individuals rather than compelling organisations to lead.

Institutions now effectively outsource moral leadership to players, often those directly impacted, rather than committing themselves fully to sustained anti-rac-

ism efforts. Cleland (2014) reinforces this critique by highlighting how football's dominant institutions frequently respond to racism through superficial or symbolic gestures, rather than structural reform. He argues that organisations prioritise image over genuine impact, a pattern indicative of institutional resistance to meaningful change. This analysis is particularly relevant in cases like Saka's, where Saka at the start appeared more vocal, composed, and morally grounded than the institutions tasked with protecting him. Such imbalances indicate a failure of leadership, momentarily shielding organisations from immediate criticism but ultimately undermining their long-term credibility.

Brian Barry added that:

"When clubs do say something, they tend to use the player's voice, or even just their face will do for them, to get the message out. But that's risky. You're building a comms strategy off the back of someone who's hurting."

This insight suggests that communications teams may strategically frame the response around the player to create an emotional hook, but this risks instrumentalising their trauma for audience impact.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. The instrumentalisation of player trauma for institutional image repair represents a problematic application of mortification. Rather than the institution itself expressing genuine remorse and committing to corrective action, it relies on the player's emotional response to convey sincerity. This strategy may be perceived as evading responsibility—the institution attempts to benefit from the player's authenticity without undertaking its own moral leadership. Benoit (1997) would argue that such an approach is unlikely to achieve lasting image repair, as it fails to address the underlying institutional failures that contribute to the crisis.

4.2.3. Agency, Consent, and Player Voice

A recurring concern across interviews was whether players actually want to take part in the institutional response following a racist incident. While some may choose to speak out, others may prefer privacy, particularly in the emotionally raw period immediately after the abuse. Every player is different. Every person is different. Several participants questioned how much say the player truly has in how their voice, image, or story is used in the messaging that follows.

"Sometimes the player just wants space, and instead you have media requests, camera crews, a club asking them to post something. It's overwhelming, and frankly, it's not always in their best interests."

—David Alexander

This pressure was especially evident in Saka's case, where the player was quickly framed as the central moral voice in the response, even before institutional actors had issued substantial public statements. Some participants suggested that clubs, sponsors, or national bodies may, intentionally or not, shift the emotional burden of the response onto the individual most affected, particularly when they believe that player is viewed favourably by the public. This raises serious questions about agency, and whether the player is a willing participant or simply a convenient face

for the organisation's public image.

"I personally like to always engage the client and make sure that they're comfortable with the response. Less so the messaging, that should be left to the experts, but definitely make sure they're happy with what you're going out with."

—Charlie Farmer, Senior Account Manager, Run Communications

While Farmer emphasised the importance of ensuring the individual is comfortable with what is being shared, his comment also highlights a power imbalance: messaging is often decided by professionals, with the player invited to approve rather than shape the core narrative. Several interviewees noted that in moments of reputational urgency, the desire to "get something out" quickly can override thoughtful consultation with the player, resulting in responses that feel corporate rather than personal, or worse, emotionally exploitative.

This again aligns with Cleland's (2014) critique of institutional responses to racism in football, where the individual experience is often reduced to a symbolic asset in the wider crisis communications strategy. The sport's governing bodies and clubs, Cleland argues, have a long history of reacting with surface-level gestures that appear responsive but avoid deeper structural or cultural introspection. In this context, involving the player, even without their full engagement or consent, can lend legitimacy to a message that lacks genuine institutional accountability.

Several participants described situations where social media posts appeared under a player's name but had been drafted entirely by a club's communications team. While often done with good intentions, such as protecting the player from direct media exposure, this approach risks stripping the individual of voice and autonomy, flattening a complex personal experience into a brand-safe moment. One interviewee described it as "well-packaged solidarity," where comms departments aim for emotional resonance without always ensuring emotional readiness.

Ultimately, this reveals a troubling pattern: the individual most affected by racism becomes central to the message but peripheral to the decision-making. In trying to present unity, institutions may unintentionally silence the very people they claim to support. As the interviews reveal, a more ethical and effective response must prioritise agency, giving the player real input, real choice, and the space to say no.

Some participants did recognise the value of allowing players to speak, particularly when the messaging feels personal. In Saka's case, his Instagram post was widely praised for its dignity and clarity. But as Miguel Delaney pointed out, the problem arises when this becomes the default solution, rather than the player's choice.

"There's no doubt Saka's post mattered. But the timing, the tone, that was all him. Not a coordinated plan. Institutions can't rely on moments like that to cover their own delay or vagueness."

—Miguel Delaney, Chief Football Writer, Irish Independent

This reflects a deeper issue of risk displacement. As David Alexander summa-

rised:

“You can’t outsource credibility. If the message only lands because of the player, then the institution hasn’t done its job.”

—David Alexander, Calacus PR

When a player’s individual voice becomes the primary vehicle for the message, it allows the institution to remain publicly aligned with the cause without incurring the same reputational or political risk. As [Dixon et al. \(2016\)](#) argue, this signals a broader shift in public trust, where athletes are increasingly seen as moral authorities because institutions have lost that legitimacy. While this may reflect a positive turn toward player empowerment, it also reveals a strategic use of authenticity. [O’Boyle and Gallagher \(2023\)](#) highlight how modern sports PR carefully crafts athletes’ public images to align with institutional and brand objectives. In responses to racism, positioning a player like Saka as the spokesperson can appear empowering but may also serve as a strategic move to harness his authenticity while shielding the organisation from deeper accountability. This dynamic creates a form of “outsourced leadership,” where emotional resonance is leveraged through athlete-led messaging, allowing institutions to maintain a supportive yet passive role in driving meaningful change.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. The outsourcing of credibility to players represents a sophisticated but ethically problematic form of bolstering. By aligning with the player’s authentic voice, institutions seek to enhance their own image without undertaking the mortification or corrective action that would demonstrate genuine accountability. This strategy may be effective in the short term but risks long-term reputational damage if audiences perceive it as exploitative or insincere. [Benoit’s \(1997\)](#) framework suggests that sustainable image repair requires institutions to accept responsibility and commit to meaningful change, rather than relying on the credibility of others.

Players are often positioned as both victims and spokespeople in responses to racism, a dual role that is emotionally complex and ethically fraught. The case of Bukayo Saka demonstrates the power of player-led messaging, but also the institutional tendency to rely on individual credibility rather than institutional consistency. Effective responses should centre the player’s wellbeing, not exploit their visibility. As the interviews and literature both suggest, communication strategies that instrumentalise players risk appearing hollow, and ultimately fail to shift public trust back onto the institution.

This theme directly engages with the core research question by examining how stakeholders used Bukayo Saka’s personal voice as part of their PR responses following the Euro 2020 final. From the perspective of Image Repair Theory, this reliance on player-led messaging represents a form of bolstering, where institutions attempt to enhance their own credibility by aligning with a respected figure, rather than issuing direct mortification or corrective action themselves. While such tactics may create the appearance of sincerity, they often displace institutional responsibility and blur lines of agency. In doing so, they reveal the limits of image

repair in football, particularly when authenticity is difficult to come by.

4.3. Theme 3: Silence, Inconsistency, and the Role of Media Pressure

A third theme to emerge strongly from the interviews was the institutional tendency toward silence or delayed reaction in the face of racist abuse, particularly even when there is no immediate reputational threat. Participants repeatedly described a pattern of organisations withholding comment until prompted by media scrutiny or public pressure, often defaulting to minimal, vague, or belated responses. This theme explores how inconsistency, fear of backlash, and a lack of clear policy contribute to strategic silence, and how that silence is often broken only when external forces make it untenable. Drawing on the Bukayo Saka case, this section also explores how institutional delay interacts with media narratives and audience expectations, often at the expense of moral clarity and genuine leadership.

4.3.1. Strategic Delay and Reputational Risk

One of the clearest patterns to emerge from the interviews was the sense that institutions often hesitate before responding to racism, waiting to see how the story develops before taking a stance. This delay is not always rooted in malice or apathy, but often in strategic calculation. Several interviewees described the process as a mixture of legal consultation, risk management, and fear of “saying the wrong thing,” which frequently results in silence when urgency is required.

“Even if you’ve written something good and you want to go quickly, you’re then checking with public affairs, legal, leadership... suddenly it’s hours later and the moment’s shifted.”

—Charlie Farmer, Senior Account Manager, Run Communications

This delay risks undermining the very purpose of the response. In moments of racist abuse, public sentiment often moves rapidly—with fans, media, and political figures calling for action. When institutions delay their response, they risk appearing indifferent, reactive, or self-interested. The longer the silence, the more likely it is that the eventual statement is interpreted as PR damage control rather than principled leadership.

This pattern aligns with [Bruce and Tini’s \(2008\)](#) analysis of crisis communication strategies in sport. They argue that organisations often prioritise reputational containment over early, values-driven engagement. Rather than confronting an issue publicly at the outset, institutions may opt to manage exposure through delayed or carefully controlled messaging, a strategy that minimises risk but also forfeits moral leadership. In the case of Saka’s abuse, this type of institutional silence was especially stark, given the immediacy and scale of public backlash following the Euro 2020 final.

Participants also reflected on the reputational consequences of this hesitation. As one interviewee put it, “by the time they speak, everyone’s already made up their mind about where they stand.” In the absence of a timely message, the public narrative fills in the blanks, often assuming cowardice, complicity, or opportu-

ism.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. Strategic delay reflects an attempt to manage reputational risk through evasion of responsibility—waiting to assess public sentiment before committing to a position. While this approach may seem prudent from a risk management perspective, it often results in missed opportunities for effective image repair. Benoit (1997) argues that timely responses are essential for mortification and corrective action strategies to be perceived as sincere. Delay can undermine the effectiveness of even the most well-crafted message, as audiences interpret it as reluctance to engage with the issue.

4.3.2. Inconsistency and Public Memory

Another recurring point made by participants was that silence is not just a matter of timing—it also reflects deeper inconsistency in how institutions treat racism depending on context. Some clubs and governing bodies speak out swiftly in certain cases, but remain silent in others, leading to confusion and public scepticism.

As David Alexander put it:

“The worst thing you can be is unpredictable. If your response depends on the player’s profile, or whether a sponsor’s involved, or how bad the backlash is, then what are your values really?”

Alexander, who has experience advising clubs during crises, noted that inconsistency undermines the trust needed for statements to be seen as genuine. He stressed that:

“You earn the right to speak on racism by showing up every time.”

These remarks highlight how credibility is cumulative: organisations cannot rely on isolated gestures or selective engagement. Audiences form impressions based not only on what is said, but when, how often, and under what circumstances. This concern is also echoed by Sean Connell, editor at The Sponsor, who observed that hesitation around anti-racism responses often stems from a lack of clear principles or planning. In the absence of pre-defined standards, brands and institutions fumble, exposing themselves to reputational risk:

“Some brands immediately cut all ties... whereas others fumbled around with it for a couple of days and experienced a lot of negative PR. That really convinced me that the ones who acted quickly had already drawn up their hard lines.”

—Sean Connell, The Sponsor

Connell emphasised that sponsors and institutions alike must define their red lines in advance if they are to respond consistently and credibly. Without such planning, they are more likely to act in ways that appear reactive or self-serving.

Both of these statements align with Cleland’s (2014) critique of institutional inertia in football. He argues that the sport’s key organisations have long favoured symbolic gestures over structural change, treating racism as a public relations issue rather than a moral or systemic one. According to Cleland, the failure to respond consistently not only erodes institutional credibility but also signals that racism is being managed tactically, not addressed with a long-term vision in mind.

In the Saka case, many public reactions reflected this scepticism. Fans and jour-

nalists noted that both Arsenal and the FA weren't quick to act, and only made more visible interventions after the abuse had gained widespread media attention. This contributed to a perception that their actions were reactive, not principled. This concern about inconsistency also echoes a point raised earlier by Miguel Delaney, who remarked on the lack of institutional urgency in the immediate aftermath of Saka's abuse.

This suggests a broader pattern where institutions follow the lead of individual players, rather than providing leadership themselves. When that inconsistency becomes visible, it creates reputational volatility. Organisations that are perceived to prioritise self-image over ethics, or to speak only under pressure, invite criticism, even when their eventual response is well-crafted. This reflects [Bruce and Tini's \(2008\)](#) argument that symbolic alignment with moral causes must be underpinned by a pattern of behaviour in order to be seen as sincere. When public messaging is applied selectively, or only after reputational pressure builds, it is often interpreted as crisis containment, not values-driven communication.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. Inconsistency represents a failure of bolstering and mortification. Organisations that have not consistently demonstrated anti-racism commitment cannot effectively use bolstering during a crisis, as audiences will recall past silences or selective responses. Similarly, expressions of solidarity or remorse (mortification) are perceived as insincere if the organisation has not previously engaged with the issue. [Benoit's \(1997\)](#) framework suggests that image repair strategies must be aligned with an organisation's established reputation; inconsistency undermines this alignment, making any crisis response appear opportunistic.

4.3.3. Media Pressure as Catalyst

Participants also described how the media often acts as the real catalyst for institutional response. Rather than proactively addressing racism, some organisations appear to wait until journalists, broadcasters, or social media pressure force the issue into public focus. At that point, the risk of staying silent becomes greater than the risk of speaking out, and only then does the communications machine activate.

Delaney again captured this dynamic:

"You can almost see the choreography sometimes. It's only when the media narrative solidifies, when journalists start asking questions, that you get a response. They don't really lead, they follow."

This reflects [O'Boyle and Gallagher's \(2023\)](#) framing of modern sports PR as primarily reactive and focused on managing reputational risk. They argue that in moments of controversy, institutions often align their responses with prevailing media or fan sentiment to mitigate criticism, while avoiding proactive leadership or accountability. In this sense, media pressure serves both as a catalyst for institutional response and as a protective shield behind which organisations can position themselves.

Alexander also commented on this interaction:

“Media attention sets the tempo. If a story gains traction, then the club wants to be seen saying the right thing. But they’re not usually the ones driving that conversation.”

This “tempo-setting” function of the media also creates pressure to appear coordinated, even when institutions are still internally navigating their response. Multiple participants spoke about “scrambling” to respond not because of moral urgency, but because the media cycle demanded it—even though, as mentioned previously, taking your time is generally touted as the best course of action. But now as a result, the message may be hastily constructed—vague, legalistic, or emotionally distant—and driven more by optics than impact.

Dr. Colm Kearns noted that this dynamic is often intensified on social media:

“When something goes viral, a racist tweet or a news clip, the public expects instant action. That expectation lands on the club, but sometimes the club just isn’t ready. So you get these short, empty statements that try to buy time.”

This echoes earlier analysis in Theme 1 around timing, but here it reveals something more specific: the reactive DNA of institutional comms. In racism cases, the message is often less about what the organisation believes and more about what the public demands. In trying to meet those demands, but without a deeper strategy, institutions risk appearing performative, rushed, or hollow.

Synthesis: Image Repair Theory Application. The reactive nature of institutional responses to media pressure reflects a defensive application of image repair strategies. Organisations wait until the reputational risk is immediate and unavoidable before issuing corrective action or mortification messages. This reactive approach may be effective in the short term—it can mitigate immediate criticism—but it fails to build long-term trust or address underlying issues. Benoit (1997) would argue that proactive, consistent engagement with issues is essential for effective image repair; reactive responses are often perceived as insincere and may intensify criticism in the long run.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine how institutions in elite football respond to reputational crises rooted in racism, using the case of Bukayo Saka’s abuse following the UEFA Euro 2020 final as its central case study. Drawing from seven in-depth interviews with experts across PR, media, sponsorship, and sport, alongside a robust engagement with image repair theory and literature on institutional communication, the findings provide a textured picture of how organisations balance strategy, ethics, and reputation under immense public scrutiny.

At the core of this study is the observation that responses to racism are rarely driven solely by moral clarity. Instead, they are frequently shaped by legal oversight, stakeholder dynamics, internal caution, and the desire to manage reputational risk. When moments of racial crisis emerge, institutions are expected to act swiftly and decisively, demonstrating leadership and values. Yet the reality, as shown in this research, is often more hesitant and reactive. Time and again, or-

organisations waited to see how the media narrative unfolded or how the player responded before issuing their own statements. In these instances, silence was not a neutral act; it was part of the message.

A central insight of this dissertation is that communication in these moments is not just about what is said, but when, how, and by whom. The effectiveness of any response is inseparable from its timing and tone. When institutions delayed their reactions or relied on vague, templated messaging, audiences often interpreted this not as caution, but as cowardice. Conversely, when responses were tied too closely to the voice or image of the player, as was the case with Saka, it raised difficult questions about authenticity, consent, and emotional labour. Organisations were seen to benefit from the dignity and resonance of the individual's message, while remaining at arm's length from the controversy itself.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the sequence of communication following the Euro 2020 final. Saka's own Instagram post, heartfelt, articulate, and composed, arrived before any formal message from Arsenal or the English FA. Participants in this study consistently referenced this timeline as emblematic of a deeper reputational pattern, in which institutions allow individuals to speak first, then strategically align themselves with that voice to gain credibility.

One of the most compelling takeaways from this study is the economic logic that underpins much of institutional behaviour in elite football. Football now is seen as more than just a ball and two goalposts—it is a global entertainment product, backed by billions in commercial investments and brand partnerships. Within this ecosystem, reputational damage is not just a matter of public image; it is a potential financial liability. As multiple interviewees noted, racism is now seen as intolerable not only because it is morally reprehensible, but because it endangers commercial stability. Sponsors, broadcasters, and investors are increasingly unwilling to be associated with institutions that fail to act decisively on issues of race.

Scott Dougal captured this clearly when he noted that in moments of reputational crisis, the key audiences aren't just fans or media, but also "commercial and broadcast partners, and the people who are invested in the Premier League." His comment highlights that communication strategy in modern sport must be designed with commercial stakeholders in mind, and that silence or missteps can damage more than just public image—they threaten the commercial backbone of the sport.

David Alexander added further weight to this commercial perspective by highlighting the branding power of players like Saka. He referenced endorsements with New Balance and Persil to illustrate how Saka is not just a footballer, but a globally marketable asset. According to Alexander, while missing a penalty might not affect a player's value, off-pitch issues like racial abuse do. Sponsors become more actively concerned and involved when discrimination is at play. As such, Saka's global likeability becomes an asset that institutions and sponsors are highly motivated to protect. This gives the player unprecedented symbolic influence, while also highlighting the calculated responses of institutions seeking to preserve

commercial integrity.

This broader economic framing is crucial. As Kearns (2025, personal communication) noted, “racism becomes economically unsustainable” once it generates media momentum or public backlash; the cost of institutional silence rises dramatically. Responses are issued not out of genuine moral compulsion, but to protect commercial relationships and prevent sponsor fallout. The calculus is stark: reputational damage triggers financial risk, and therefore corrective messaging becomes not an act of conscience, but a strategy of capital and income protection.

This logic helps to explain the reactive nature of many responses studied here. Rather than leading with moral urgency, institutions often waited until external forces—the player’s own message, media pressure, or viral social media discourse—tipped the reputational balance. Only then was a statement crafted, often carefully sanitised, and then released with the aim of signalling alignment without exposing the organisation to deeper scrutiny or responsibility. The institutions followed rather than led, positioning themselves as supportive without ever appearing accountable.

This dynamic is particularly visible in how stakeholders framed Saka himself. At just 19 at the time of the case, he became the moral centre of the response. He was expected to speak, to carry the emotional weight, and to represent strength and dignity. This study has shown how such expectations are ethically fraught. Relying on the player’s visibility and authenticity may create a powerful message, but it also shifts the burden of institutional failure onto the individual most harmed. Organisations used his voice, his image, and his reputation to front messages that they themselves hesitated to own.

This is not to suggest that institutions never supported the player, but that their support often came after the fact, and was shaped by reputational pressures. The emotional labour involved in responding to racism should not fall solely on the shoulders of players. Several participants expressed concern that players are often given statements to share, drafted by comms teams, or are pressured to participate in messaging before they are emotionally ready. In doing so, institutions may unintentionally instrumentalise trauma, turning lived experience into a strategic tool.

Equally troubling is the inconsistency in institutional behaviour across similar cases. Participants pointed out that responses to racism vary depending on the profile of the player, the intensity of media coverage, or the level of sponsor concern. This variability erodes credibility. As one interviewee put it, “you earn the right to speak on racism by showing up every time” (Alexander, 2025, personal communication). When organisations are seen to act only under pressure, or only when the commercial stakes are high, their messaging is quickly dismissed as performative.

This raises a larger question about leadership and values in elite sport. Institutions that delay, deflect, or outsource their responses to individuals risk forfeiting the moral authority they claim to hold. In the age of social media, audiences are

increasingly attuned to insincerity. They can detect when a message is crafted for brand preservation rather than genuine change. And once that scepticism sets in, even well-intentioned communications are tainted by mistrust.

Another critical insight is the paradox of player power. On one hand, athletes like Saka now carry immense commercial and cultural capital. They are not just employees; they are brands, influencers, and in some cases, global ambassadors. Their credibility is a precious asset to clubs and sponsors alike. On the other hand, that very visibility makes them vulnerable. When something goes wrong, their prominence means they are expected to lead the response. This creates a double burden: celebrated for their marketability, but exposed when institutions falter.

This study has also highlighted how the institutional logic of PR, built on caution, consensus, and control, often clashes with the speed and intensity of reputational crises driven by racism. Social media moves fast. Emotions run high. The public expects instant responses. Yet institutional communication processes are slow, legalistic, and risk-averse. This mismatch leads to statements that feel flat, late, or overly cautious. And in moments of moral urgency, that caution is interpreted not as professionalism, but as apathy.

For institutions to regain trust, they must move beyond reactive messaging and toward a more proactive, consistent engagement with racism as a structural issue. This means having predefined values, protocols, and personnel in place before the crisis hits. It means empowering communications teams to act with both speed and substance. And it means ensuring that player involvement is voluntary, supported, and never used as a shortcut for institutional accountability.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for PR professionals and sports organisations. First, institutions should establish clear, predefined protocols for responding to racial abuse, including designated decision-making timelines and communication channels. This would reduce the reliance on reactive, ad hoc processes that often result in delays and inconsistent messaging. Second, organisations must invest in building sustained, authentic anti-racism commitments that extend beyond crisis moments. This includes ongoing education, community engagement, and transparent reporting on progress. Third, PR professionals should advocate for greater player agency in crisis responses, ensuring that affected individuals have genuine input into how their story and image are used. Fourth, institutions should empower communications teams to lead during crises, streamlining approval processes to enable timely and morally clear responses.

Ultimately, the case of Bukayo Saka is about the broader systems through which race, reputation, and responsibility are negotiated in elite sport. It reveals the limits of traditional image repair strategies when they are applied to moral crises, and it challenges institutions to reimagine what leadership looks like in these moments. A tweet is not enough. A delayed statement is not enough. A photo opportunity is not enough. What matters is consistency, sincerity, and a willingness to act even when it is uncomfortable or risky to do so.

This research contributes to the growing literature on race and sports PR by grounding its analysis in real-world insights from practitioners. It demonstrates that while PR strategy can offer valuable tools for navigating crisis, it must be rooted in ethics, not just optics. The reputational logic of modern football will always be complex, but complexity should not be an excuse for inaction.

As football and its satellite businesses (media, sportswear, gambling) continue to grow as a massive global business, the stakes of getting this right will only rise. Racism, in all its forms, remains a pressing challenge. The institutions that respond to it must do so not only with professionalism, but with courage. Because in the end, silence is not neutral. Delay is not objective. And reputational safety cannot come at the cost of moral failure.

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