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Operational crisis communication management: a content analysis of FIFA's communication during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Despite the high number of crises encountered within sport, crisis communication management in sport remains understudied. Operational crisis communication in particular can be considered an uncharted territory, regardless of its potential significant effects on sport organisations' reputation. In this study we explore the themes used in FIFA's communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, to understand how operational organisational crisis communication was managed by football's leading sport organisation in this unprecedented climate. Content analysis is conducted in all FIFA's press releases and Twitter messages related to Covid-19 from March 5th to July 3rd 2020, in order for insights to be offered to the content and meaning of FIFA's operational crisis communication, their attempts to emphasise the organisation's positive traits and actions, and the links built with managing and improving the organisation's reputation. The analysis of the themes used indicates that proactive planning of crisis communication management had been conducted, while lessons from previous handling of crises appear to have been learned. By outlining the crisis communication strategy adopted by FIFA, we offer insights to the unexplored area of operational crisis communication in sports, while presenting a roadmap for operational crisis communication management for other sport organisations and future studies exploring the topic.

Introduction

Since first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) has counted millions of confirmed cases throughout the world. The highly infectious virus raised concerns within the World Health Organisation (WHO), which, along with national governments, called for entire countries' lockdown measures to be implemented (Parnell et al., 2020). As part of these measures, a number of activities, including sport and within it football, came to a halt in the majority of countries around the globe (Manoli, 2020). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), as the dominant stakeholder and governing body of football, had the difficult task of dealing with the impact of Covid-19 firstly on their competitions and more importantly on

their affiliated federations, associations, leagues and clubs (Marcotti, 2020). One of the main challenges within this task was finding the right balance between dealing with the pressure and financial constraints on the football organisations which threaten to devaluate much of the equity in the sport, and managing the wider public opinion (Parnell et al., 2020).

Although the Covid-19 pandemic crisis did not originate from and is not limited to football and FIFA, it significantly influenced its operation, calling for special measures to be taken both within the wider management of the organisation and in terms of its communication management. Bearing in mind the crisis occurring, the way in which FIFA communicated about and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic allows us to observe their crisis communication in an attempt to understand both how it was managed and any potential effects it might have on their reputation. As Coombs (Coombs, 2018, p. 991) defines it, "crisis communication is a form of strategic communication that can lessen the negative effects of a crisis on the organization and its stakeholders". This also aligns with Miles and Shipway's (2020) argument, that the way in which crisis communication is managed can in fact endanger the reputation of an organisation, with poor crisis communication linked with severe reputational damage. While the term crisis can encompass a broad range of actions and incidents (Coombs, 1999), the way in which strategic communication takes place in such occasions can allow for valuable insights on crisis communication management and its potential reputational effects to be gained.

Despite the growing importance of the topic within the sport ecosystem, and the interest demonstrated in exploring crisis communications in sport, the need for further investigation in practitioners' practices is often emphasised in existing work (Harker & Saffer, 2018). That is because to this day crisis communication theories are primarily studied as theoretical lenses, with criticism often raised on their applicability in real-life contexts (Barkley, 2020; Pang et al., 2009). At the same time, the vast majority of existing studies examining crisis communication are focused on reputational crises, originating within the organisations (or by the athletes), such as scandals and failures by sport clubs and event organisers, as well as the public relations and reputational implications they might bear (LaGree et al., 2019). As a result, there appears to be a noticeable lack of academic studies on operational organisational crises, more commonly caused by external factors, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, as Coombs (2015) argued, which will be further discussed later in the study. Consequently, how operational crisis communication takes place in the occasions of such crises remains widely understudied, despite the key role it can play in crisis and reputation management for the organisations affected (Coombs, 2015). It is this gap that we aim to fill with this study by examining how operational crisis communication management took place in a major sport governing body such as FIFA.

In order for FIFA's crisis communication to be examined in detail, content analysis aiming to deconstruct and analyse communication (Choi, 2012) is conducted, guided by the following research question: How did FIFA structure their communication in response to the operational crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Literature review

Crisis communication

Crisis is "any action or failure to act that interferes with an organization's ongoing functions, the acceptable attainment of its objectives, its viability or survival, or that has detrimental personal effect as perceived by the majority of its employees, clients, or constituents" (Selbst, 1978, as cited in Booth et al., 1993, p. 85). As such, an unexpected event that interrupts, affects or could potentially affect an organisation in its running and delivering the expected outcomes could be considered a crisis. In the case of sport, Carey and Mason (2016) argue that when a sport organisation experiences challenges or fails to meet the expected standards, it is faced with an organisational crisis. Indeed, as Coombs (2015, p. 3) suggests, an organisational crisis is "an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environment, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes". As such, it is argued that organisational crises can be either operational or reputational, with the two categories often overlapping, when for example, a disruption in the operations of an organisation (in an operational organisational crisis) can cause a reputational damage to the organisation and vice versa (Coombs, 2015, 2018).

While the way in which crises occur and are subsequently managed is often the focus of scrutiny by mass media, it is worth exploring how the individuals or organisations involved react to this scrutiny, communicate externally and formulate a response to the crisis, in an attempt to influence news media coverage (Carey & Mason, 2016). According to Carey and Mason (2016), external communication should be aiming at influencing media coverage of a crisis, in order to better and more effectively respond to the crisis in hand, while Boin (2005) argued that communication between organisations and towards the citizens is equally of vital importance. Despite the target audience of communication, what is underlined is that the organizations associated with a crisis or disaster need to carefully manage their crisis communication in order to potentially seek to protect their reputation, avoid responsibility, minimize the negative effects and even shift blame if needed. As such, Sellnow et al. (2017) and McGuire et al. (2020) argued that stakeholders must act and protect themselves by using a carefully planned crisis communication strategy, with equally appropriately designed messages. Indeed, the language used by organisations is critical in affecting the individual and public behaviour, while the tone of the message can provide confidence and offer reassurance to the wider public (McGuire et al., 2020; Sellnow et al., 2017). It is thus argued that organisations must engage in strategic planning in order to be ready to respond to a crisis appropriately.

Several communication theories and models have been developed over the years which exhibit different ways to research and describe crisis communication management, depending on the audience, the environment in which the crisis occurs, and its outcomes to an organisation. Within these theories, a clear, almost monopolising emphasis on crisis communication following a crisis originating from the organisation is noted. For example, in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) which was designed with a focus on the audience and the allocation of crisis responsibility in order to limit any potential reputational damage to the organisation when the organisation is blamed for causing the crisis (Coombs, 2017). Similarly, in the image repair theory through which emphasis is

placed on how to safeguard an individual's or an organisation's image following a potentially harmful action they have done (Benoit, 2014). Or equally, in the covariation-based approach in which the stress is placed on stakeholders' responses when an organisation is blamed for a potentially offensive action (Schwarz, 2012). Within these theories, Coombs (2017) SCCT which is based on Benoit's (2014) work, appears to be the one most often used when investigating how a crisis is evaluated and the appropriate course of action in order to mitigate the potential reputational damage is decided (Ibrahim, 2017; Sisco, 2012). Nevertheless, criticism on the actual applicability of SCCT regarding post-crisis communication strategies remains, with recent research suggesting that SCCT can be applicable in only few contexts and industries (Barkley, 2020).

At the same time, academic focus has been also placed on the stakeholders or publics of the organisation, with the social-mediated crisis communication model, for example, being developed for the examination of crisis in an online environment where the actors involved on social media can play a key role in communicating about the crisis (Cheng & Cameron, 2018). Similarly, the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model was designed with a focus on stakeholders' emotions in order to guide an organisation's engagement in the crisis (Jin et al., 2010) and the Rhetorical Arena Theory through which a crisis dialogue among stakeholders is proposed (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). It is worth noting that while being appreciated as useful theoretical lenses, all the above theories have been often critiqued about their applicability in real-life scenarios (Pang et al., 2009).

Finally, some emphasis has been placed on the post-crises lessons, with the Discourse of Renewal Theory for example, proposed to highlight how an organisation can improve their communication strategies following a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2017). While this theory has received praise within academia, it is worth noting that its applicability in practice remains widely unresearched (Du Plessis, 2018). In fact, it is often argued that while crisis communications theories remain useful tools of analysis, studying their applicability is in need of more attention.

As research in crisis communication management grows, its link with the allied fields of risk communication, issues management and reputation management are further investigated, offering a wider and more thorough view of crisis communication management and its various variables, parameters and repercussions (Coombs, 2015, 2018). One such theory that can further illustrate the link between crisis communication and reputation management is framing theory. The use of framing in communication management involves "*selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution*", as Entman (2003, p. 417) suggests. According to his analysis, a communicator makes a judgment on what to communicate, using, emphasising and potentially overlooking particular frames, which in turn can influence the receiver of said communication (Entman, 1993). In response to framing, framing analysis whose tenets guided this study in order to explore crisis communications management, focuses on analysing and deconstructing communication with the perspective to reveal possible frames used by the communicator (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Framing analysis involves examining an organisation's communication efforts to effectively shape how the organisation or a particular issue is viewed, by selecting some aspects of the perceived reality and transforming them as the major ones in its communication, while subsequently excluding other potentially relevant facts (Fortunato, 2008). While framing analysis focuses on

identifying the frames and ways in which an organisation is communicating (e.g., the words and style of communication used – Sant & Mason, 2015; Sant et al., 2019), the content analysis conducted in our study focused on deconstructing the themes and meaning behind the organisation's communication (Choi, 2012).

Crisis communication in sport

The emergence and frequency of crises of varying severity and size within the sport industry in general and the football industry in particular have been reported repeatedly in existing academic studies (Manoli, 2016; Miles & Shipway, 2020). While in the wider field of crisis management, there has been considerable work on understanding the nuances of crisis communication as it was discussed above, one could argue that more work is needed in order for such understanding to be achieved in the context of sport (Harker & Saffer, 2018). After all, as Miles and Shipway (2020) argue, the investigation of synergies, concepts and research agendas around crisis management in sport is still at a very early stage, with our understanding of effective crisis communication strategies and management within sport in need of further enrichment.

Existing literature on crisis communication in sport suggests that in the event of an organisational crisis, for example, around the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games, and in an attempt to mitigate reputational damage, the event organizers focused on scapegoating and excuse responses (Carey & Mason, 2016). As a result, the authors suggested that the organisers did not appear to be successful in their management or containment of the media coverage of the crisis, worsening the media coverage they subsequently received. At the same time, a crisis response strategy appropriately termed "diversion" by Bruce and Tini (2008), allowed the sport organisation in their study, an Australasian men's rugby league, to limit the reputation damage during a salary cap scandal. As the researchers argue, this strategy, paired with the close and often intense "relationship" that fans can have with players, may allow team sports to focus the attention on players (and fans) as innocent victims, and as a result reduce the negative publicity. In a similar line, Koerber and Zabara (2017) examined the potential use of "buffers" in sport, which could block the need for any crisis response, allowing sport organisations to be protected from any damage arising from crisis. The authors argued that two special buffers exist in sport; communities and political economy. It is thus suggested that if sport organisations are able to pro-actively engage with these buffers, both or either of them could be used depending on the crisis in hand, in order to formulate a communication strategy that in a sense avoids crises at their origins.

A different yet similarly successful strategy to manage an organisation's public discourse comes from the analysis of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) responses to recent legal challenges to the organisation's rules regarding the compensation of college athletes in the U.S. (Nite, 2017). In this case, Nite argued that the organisation emphasised the harmful effects of potential changes to the institutional script, followed by a justification of its rules, before resuming its standard discourse. As a result, the organisation was portrayed as progressive and responsive, while prioritising and safeguarding the interests of college athletes, especially in the eyes of the media. Nite's study highlights how the NCAA's defensive narrative managed to address contestations that might have threatened institutional arrangements, thus providing insights into

an effective crisis communication strategy. Closely associated with the context of this study, football, Manoli (2016) examined the communication crisis practices adopted within English Premier League clubs, indicating a wide lack of proactivity and suggesting that two post-crisis communication strategies were followed. The appropriately named "wait for the dust to settle" or "react promptly before the noise grows" were presented as the main strategies identified, often paired with the use of personal relationships between the employees of the clubs and members of the media in order to assist in the clubs' crisis communication management.

Finally, interestingly, and echoing Miles and Shipway's (2020) argument mentioned above, within all studies focusing on crisis communication in sport the pressing need for further study of practitioners' actions is highlighted, alongside the previously discussed criticism on the applicability of existing crisis communication theories in practice (Manoli, 2016). This need is further stressed by the unfortunate emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and its resulting operational organisational crisis caused by industries such as football. It is thus the operational crisis management of football's representative governing body, FIFA, that we explore in this study, by analysing the themes used in their communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, and aiming to offer insights into the black box of operational organisational crisis communication management.

Method

Context – FIFA

The focus of this study is FIFA, the dominant stakeholder and global federation of football, often presented as the most popular, socially and economically important, and culturally embedded sport world-wide (Manoli, 2014). FIFA has attracted ample criticism due to the numerous crises they have encountered over the years and the way in which said crises were managed and communicated (Rowe, 2017). It is argued that a "deny" strategy has been historically adopted by FIFA in their crisis communication in order to avoid responsibility, distancing themselves from crises and excluding mass media from their communication (Ibrahim, 2017). While both their official website and social media are used, FIFA's communication is limited to few statements in times of crises (Ibrahim, 2017), while highly interactive social media such as Twitter are used as mostly one-way communication, mainly sharing stakeholders' news in their general communication (Winand et al., 2019). In response to the recent crises and the wide criticism they were faced with, a Reform Committee was created within FIFA, acknowledging the crises and naming them a unique opportunity for FIFA to reform itself (FIFA, 2015), thus making the organisation an interesting context for the study of crisis communication management.

In the context of this study, football as a sport and FIFA as its representative governing body failed to deliver the competitions on time due to Covid-19. At the same time, the football associations, leagues and clubs which operate under the authority of FIFA, also failed to deliver the expected standards of competitions and match organisation. As a result, an operational organisational crisis occurred, with potential to inflict reputational damage to FIFA, caused by a possible dissatisfaction of its stakeholders due to said disruption in their operations. Coombs (2015, 2018) argues that disasters and public health emergencies should be considered operational crises since they can disrupt the

operations of an organisation, which in this study allows us to consider the Covid-19 pandemic as an operational organisational crisis for FIFA, since it obstructed them from delivering their expected outcomes.

Data collection

In order to investigate FIFA's crisis communication management, the researchers collated and analysed all official press releases and Twitter announcements made by FIFA pertinent to Covid-19 from March 5th to 3 July 2020. The particular time period was selected using the following rationale. On March 5th FIFA made the first announcement on football calendar amendments, while proposing to postpone upcoming matches in the Asian World Cup 2022 qualifiers, due to the spread of Covid-19, thus marking the beginning of their operational crisis management. Since that date (March 5th) FIFA started to report several regulatory, financial, governance and safety developments in order to minimise the risks of the virus. On July 3rd FIFA communicated the President's participation in the World Football Summit to discuss the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic in football, having approved and announced the FIFA Covid-19 Relief Plan to support football cope with the pandemic, and as such it was considered the closing of the cycle of crisis communication and the end of their operational crisis management.

Press releases were selected since they constitute one of, if not the most used external communication tool during a crisis, addressing simultaneously a number of key stakeholders, such as the media and the organisation's publics (Choi, 2012). At the same time, Twitter, which was a dominant social media tool during the Covid-19 pandemic, is possibly the most popular social medium used by organisations including FIFA (Winand et al., 2019). Its popularity is due to its functionality to publish important information instantly to mass audiences, while simultaneously being suitable for collective communication and the spread of information through allowing the re-posting of information from the parent account by one or multiple users. In the case of FIFA, it was discovered that these were the main two tools used for their communication during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data analysis

Conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was adopted in order for the themes used in FIFA's crisis communication to be identified from the text data, by reverse engineering their external communication (Fortunato, 2008). Following the studies of Choi (2012) and Nite (2017), communication deconstruction was conducted using content analysis on the data collected. In more detail, all FIFA's press releases (posted on www.fifa.com) and Twitter messages (publicised through FIFA's Twitter account @fifamedia) released between March 5th and 3 July 2020 that referenced the Covid-19 pandemic were collected and analysed. A total of 31 tweets and press releases[1] referenced Covid-19 in this timeframe (i.e. official statement, president's message, operational update or

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[1]All press releases were posted on FIFA's website with a link to the press release also promoted through Twitter. The tweets promoting the press releases were not included in the total number of unique tweets and press releases analysed.

partnerships and campaigns), with 27 of them including an official announcement of the organisation and five among these 27 containing statements delivered by FIFA's President about the pandemic. All messages were published in English, a language that both experienced researchers are fluent in.

To identify the themes, a laborious and time-intensive manual inductive approach was implemented, without the use of any *a priory* codes, and using Choi's (2012) content analysis protocol. All data were closely examined in order for the units (whole paragraphs or sentences) within them to be identified (with each message containing three to 40 units). A total of 387 units were found, which were then coded and reviewed repeatedly by the two coders in regular cross-examination meetings. The units originating from data collected through Twitter and press releases were originally examined separately, in order for any differences between the use of the two communication tools to be identified. However, since no disparity was found, all 378 units were analysed together. The initial and refining coding allowed for the main codes and sub-themes to be pinpointed and for the wider themes used to be ultimately identified. The repeated reviewing of the codes allowed for the codes to be grouped under sub-themes, and ultimately for the sub-themes to be grouped under themes based on the patterns of messages, wording, information, scope, structure and meanings contained within them. Among the 387 units, 123 fell under the theme *Health & Safety*, 105 under the theme *Leadership*, 87 under the theme *FIFA Supports Football* and 72 under the theme *Football Fights Covid-19*. More details on the themes, sub-themes and codes that emerged through the data are offered in Table 1.

Throughout the coding process, meetings between the coders allowed for ideas to be exchanged and for the intercoder reliability to be calculated. Both coders also calculated their intracoder reliability by coding the same units at different points in time. Adopting this attentive intercoder and intracoder process, and ensuring that regular cross-examination meetings between the coders occur, allowed for their individual biases to be controlled, and is believed to increase the confidence of the coding process (Boyatzis, 1998).

Findings

Through the analysis of the data, four main themes were identified. Within these themes, a number of sub-themes and codes emerged, as it can be seen in Table 1,, with some being more prevalent than others. Before the analysis on the themes commences, it is worth noting that the two communication tools examined, press releases and Twitter, were used complimentary by FIFA, with Twitter often used to further promote the press releases issued and the press releases assuming the role of the dominant communication tool for FIFA in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, both tools allowed for one-way communication to occur, with Twitter's interactive features, such as commenting, not being used by FIFA, while the examination of all messages suggests that no individualised communication to any stakeholder occurred through press releases or Twitter, with all messages adopting a "blanket" tone.

Table 1. Themes, sub-themes, codes & representative quotes.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes	Representative Quotes
Health & Safety	Health Comes First	Unprecedented health challenge	The world is facing an unprecedented health challenge and clearly a global and collective response is needed (17th March)
	Football Resumes Safely	Working with WHO	"More than ever, especially now, one thing must be clear to everyone, health comes first", said FIFA President Gianni Infantino. (6th April)
		Football must work with Public Health authorities	We are working in close cooperation with relevant national and international public health authorities (most notably the World Health Organisation) and, taking into account the expert advice that we have received on the matter, we consider this measure and recommendation to be the most appropriate and responsible step to take under the current circumstances (13th March)
		Protection of public health and safety	It is very important that football follows the instructions of the health authorities and governments, and it is very important that football gives a good example, because it's clear that no match is more important than a human life. (2nd April)
		Protection of players' and participant's welfare	All sports bodies must be ready to follow national guidance, based on thorough risk assessments, to stage safe events or take other required Actions that protect the health of fans, players, coaches and the broader communities (13th March)
		Risk recommendations for football stakeholders	For both FIFA and the AFC, the well-being and health of all individuals involved in football matches remains the highest priority (5th March)
			FIFA is sharing a football risk assessment tool with its 211 member associations, the six continental confederations and other stakeholders in order to facilitate the planning of the resumption of football activities by competition and match organisers, as soon as health authorities and governments consider it safe (29th May)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes	Representative Quotes
Leadership	Leading and working together with football stakeholders Support, Unity, Solidarity and shared sense of responsibility	Football survives and moves forward FIFA solid financial situation FIFA's President leads FIFA Monitors Covid-19 Solidarity to lower levels of football and women's football Cooperation, mutual respect and understanding	FIFA President Gianni Infantino has stressed that no football match is worth a life and health remains the top priority, but that football needs to take its own responsibility to ensure the sport "survives and moves forward" (2ⁿᵈ April) In the meantime, and thanks to its solid financial situation, FIFA is in a position to propose proactive solidarity measures specifically targeting the coronavirus disease crisis "Nevertheless, with the aim of finding balanced solutions for the good of football and to protect the interests of all stakeholders and competition organisers, whether they be national, continental or worldwide, I have called for a Bureau of the Council conference call tomorrow to see how we can progress matters collectively. During this call, I will suggest the following next steps … " (17ᵗʰ March) Concerning football regulatory matters: To support the work of the FIFA-led task force on transfer matters (composed of all key football stakeholders – confederations, member associations, leagues, clubs and players) in order for guidelines and recommendations to be issued as soon as possible. (3ʳᵈ April) It is important at this stage to remember that the main purpose of FIFA's competitions, including those mentioned above, is to ensure both global football development and worldwide solidarity programmes and that the vast majority of member associations around the world depend on FIFA's solidarity programmes for their activities for both women's and men's football to take place (17ᵗʰ March) Particularly in football, finding appropriate and fair solutions at global level is imperative This requires unity, solidarity and a shared sense of responsibility (17ᵗʰ March)
FIFA supports Football	Financial Support to football stakeholders International match calendar amendments Football Rules and Regulatory amendments	Support to Member Associations Global Support Fund for football Transparency in subsidy distribution Events postponement and flexibility Adaptability and flexibility in regulations Securing sporting integrity	"You have to know that we will be there and we will find solutions together", he said. "You will never be alone … " (10ᵗʰ April) FIFA starts immediate financial support to member associations in response to COVID-19 impact. (24ᵗʰ April) We want the financial relief plan to have a broad reach that includes women's football and that operates in a modern, efficient and transparent way. This means having a robust governance structure, which also ensures accountability on how the financial sums will be allocated. (6ᵗʰ June) With an eye to the future, the FIFA President added that the right balance needs to be found to protect both national team and club football in relation to the international match calendar (10ᵗʰ April) FIFA will also consult with professional football stakeholders to be able to shortly announce any necessary amendments or temporary dispensations to the Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players to protect contracts for both players and clubs (17ᵗʰ March) At the same time, FIFA will try to ensure, where possible, an overall level of coordination and will also bear in mind the need to protect the regularity, integrity and proper functioning of competitions, so that the sporting results of any competition are not unfairly disrupted. (7ᵗʰ March)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes	Representative Quotes
Football Fights Covid-19	Marketing campaigns FIFA supports key organisations	Awareness raising campaigns Financial Support to WHO FIFA supports UN Raising funds	*In that respect, the latest joint WHO-FIFA video campaign, entitled "pass the message to kick out coronavirus" involves 28 international football stars who reiterate the message for all people around the world to follow five key steps to stop the spread of the disease, which are focused on hand washing, coughing etiquette, not touching your face, physical distance and staying home if feeling unwell.* (24th March) *To donate USD 10 million to the World Health Organisation COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund and working together with the WHO to ensure these funds are used to support the fight against the virus in all regions of the world* (18th March) *FIFA has joined forces with the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in supporting the #BeActive campaign launched on the UN International Day of Sport for Development and Peace to encourage people to be #HealthyAtHome as the world comes together in the fight against COVID-19, today and every day.* (6th April) *The FIFA Foundation will organise its first-ever official football match to raise funds for Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT), a global collaboration to accelerate the development, production and equitable global access to new coronavirus essential health technologies, including diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines.* (18th May)

Health & safety *theme*

The most commonly adopted theme was the one of *Health & Safety*. Since the early beginning of disseminating messages, FIFA used the *Health & Safety* theme to promote the view that individuals' health should be prioritised under any costs, including stopping football and resuming it only when it is safe for individuals to do so, despite the organisational and financial challenges such a decision poses. When promoting this theme, FIFA repeatedly emphasised that they were adhering to the WHO's guidelines regarding measures to avoid the spread of Covid-19, while stressing that sports governing bodies and decision makers should work with public authorities and always put health in the forefront of their decisions in order to protect the health of fans, players, coaches and the broader communities. Through this theme, FIFA's statements emphasised the unprecedented risks posed by Covid-19, while underlining that it should be everyone's main concern, while football, the main focus of FIFA, should in fact be considered second, as the following quote from FIFA's president's statement shows:

> Health Comes First. I cannot stress this enough. No match, no competition, no league is worth risking a single human life. Everyone in the world should have this very clear in their mind. It would be more than irresponsible to force competitions to resume if things are not 100% safe. If we have to wait a little longer we must do so. It's better to wait a little bit longer than to take any risks. (10th April)

The idea that football comes second since health comes first was a consistent theme running through FIFA's press releases and tweets until late May. From May 29th onwards FIFA's *Health & Safety* theme shifted its focus onto a slightly different theme, the *Football Resumes Safely*. This theme followed the wider considerations of European and Asian football leagues to resume matches, while it could be also considered a result of the pressure imposed on FIFA by other football stakeholders (i.e., national Leagues, broadcasters) to resume and conclude the 2019/20 season (Marcotti, 2020).

> The aim of this joint effort is to consider the health of all participants in footballing activities, the risk assessments and the factors that need to be in place in order for football, both at a professional and at an amateur level, to resume safely. (29th May)

As the above quote shows, FIFA's emphasis on *Football Resumes Safely* was paired with strong recommendations that football needs to work with public health authorities and follow medical recommendations in order to resume football in a careful manner. Once again, the wider theme of *Health & Safety* dominated FIFA's communication messages in order to highlight their interest in the protection of players' and fans' health, even if the tone of the recommendations themselves had changed. Interestingly, these later messages retained the stress on "health comes first", but this time with no mention that "football comes second".

Leadership *theme*

The second most used theme in FIFA's communication was the one of *Leadership*, stressing the important role of FIFA within the football ecosystem, even during the Covid-19 pandemic. This theme suggested that FIFA was willing to lead the way in

stressing the importance of unity and solidarity towards all football stakeholders, as it was repeatedly stated within the press releases and the statements of FIFA's president included within them, which emphasised that FIFA as the dominant governing body of football had to lead by example and show that in these hard times they are present and working together with other football stakeholders.

The messages that followed the theme of *Leadership* emphasised how FIFA stressed the need for unity, solidarity and a shared sense of responsibility, encouraging member associations and leagues to work together with other football stakeholders, such as local governing authorities, players, broadcasters, and even the local communities, as FIFA themselves were doing, in order to ensure that football moves forward, as the following quote shows.

> FIFA President Gianni Infantino has stressed that no football match is worth a life and health remains the top priority, but that football needs to take its own responsibility to ensure the sport 'survives and moves forward'. (2nd April)

As the quote illustrates, FIFA's President Gianni Infantino was used to promote this theme, with messages under this theme often including portrait photos and direct quotes from him, further stressing the importance of leadership within and beyond the organisation. Throughout the *Leadership* theme messages, FIFA communicated that regular contact with all members of the football community should be kept and that football should work in a collective spirit. In personal statements made by FIFA's president, as they were quoted in the press releases and tweets, it was stressed that solutions need to take into account the interests of all stakeholders and thus FIFA will keep monitoring the situation as it develops. As the following quote illustrates, the important role of FIFA as a leader within football in this crisis was stressed repeatedly, along with several mentions of FIFA's financial stability.

> In the meantime, and thanks to its solid financial situation, FIFA is in a position to propose proactive solidarity measures specifically targeting the coronavirus disease crisis. (17th March)

Within the *Leadership* theme, FIFA stressed that football needs to resume responsibility in order to ensure that football "survives and moves forward". As such, it was argued that football has to look ahead, and thus it cannot remain passive, since it is football's responsibility and obligation to ensure that it can survive and then move forward once again. This in turn suggests that while FIFA is indeed leading the efforts, they are allocating responsibilities on all those involved to resume football and restate its previous status, in order to in effect safeguard its future.

FIFA supports football *theme*

Following from the *Leadership* theme, FIFA paid particular attention in promoting the *FIFA Supports Football* theme through their communication. This theme entailed details on the practical actions and steps taken by FIFA in order to ensure that football is supported throughout this period of uncertainty, while highlighting that FIFA is prepared and willing to invest effort, time and money to protect football's present and future. What differentiated this theme from the one of *Leadership*, is the focus on practical issues and tangible ways in which FIFA would assist football, rather than the emphasis on FIFA's role within the football ecosystem that was evident in the theme above.

Within this theme, FIFA ensured that any updates needed on the international football calendar, competitions and match postponements, and regulatory changes were communicated, while stressing their flexibility, allowing deviations from the regular calendar and regulations, and thus highlighting their willingness and commitment to support football. Additionally, FIFA's communication stressed their commitment to support football by creating a Covid-19 Working Group to assess the economic impact faced by the various football stakeholders in each continent to analyse if a financial support fund at a global level was required and how in that case concrete support mechanisms should be defined. FIFA's emphasis in promoting their support towards football and their promptness to do so, can be illustrated in the following quote, included in an April 24th press release, communicated shortly after it was reported that the working group recommended the creation of the global support fund for football.

> FIFA starts immediate financial support to member associations in response to COVID-19 impact. FIFA will release all operational funding due to member associations for the years 2019 and 2020 in the coming days as the first step of a relief plan to assist the football community impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure will mean that a total of around USD 150 million will be distributed among the 211 national football governing bodies around the world.

Through the announcement, it was stressed that a consultation process was underway to assess the financial impact across football and to prepare the right response based around a fund with an independent governance structure. In line with this financial support, it was made clear through FIFA's communication that additional support would be provided to the member associations through existing funding mechanisms. Throughout the *FIFA Supports Football* the tangible ways in which FIFA was willing to support football were stressed, as the following quote from June 25th demonstrates:

> FIFA's Council unanimously approved the FIFA COVID 19 Relief Plan that would make available up to USD 1.5 billion to assist the football community through a system of grants and loans and more specifically: a universal solidarity grant of USD 1 million to all member associations and a grant of USD 500,000 specifically to women's football.

As the quote shows, the theme ensured that all football is supported is promoted as a key theme of FIFA's communication, as it is illustrated through the particular mention of the support provided specifically for women's football. In order to further emphasise their support and respond to potential questions to be raised around the appropriate distribution of funds, FIFA ensured that their efforts for transparency are communicated, including the supervision of the administration of the scheme, the strict controls on the use of funds, the audit requirements and the available loan repayment conditions.

Football fights Covid-19 *theme*

The fourth and less used theme in FIFA's communication was that of *Football Fights Covid-19*. This theme was used by FIFA as a demonstration of the role that football as a global sport can play even in times of crisis, while the moto "Football Fights Covid–19" was used by official communication messages from FIFA, in order to accentuate their tone and potentially ensure that a coherent and systematic approach to their communication is promoted.

This theme included messages promoting the organisation of awareness and fundraising campaigns and the publication of FIFA's financial support to a number of key organisations fighting Covid-19, such as WHO. In term of promotional campaigns, FIFA was able to organise and promote a number of awareness campaigns, using FIFA's president and world-renowned managers and footballers, stressing once again the reach that football has in the world. As it was published through FIFA's press release, WHO's director stressed the contribution of FIFA and world football in his own personal statement arguing that:

> Be it through campaigns or funding, FIFA has stood up to the coronavirus, and I am delighted that world football is supporting WHO to kick out the coronavirus. I have no doubt with this type of support that together we will win. (23rd March)

As the above illustrates, FIFA were eager to maintain an active role as a major football governing body, even when football per se was on halt, aiming through the communication of their actions to showcase the importance of football to help fight Covid-19, through awareness campaigns and support towards key organisations and using the global reach of the sport.

Throughout these messages analysed in all four themes, FIFA portrayed the image of an organisation willing to provide support during this period of crisis, as the following quote from FIFA President included in a press release on April 2nd shows: "*FIFA stands for credibility, something that we couldn't say some years ago*". Through this message and the presentation of the themes above, it is highlighted that FIFA's Covid-19 crisis communication was designed in a manner that allowed them to promote particular themes showcasing that the organisation is in control of the situation and able to protect the interests of the sport and its stakeholders, while also conducting a wider effort to improve the previously tainted public image that FIFA had due to their involvement and handling of numerous crises, as it was discussed earlier and is further underlined in the quote.

Discussion and implications

The case of managing crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic by FIFA is of particular importance, not only because there has not been a similar study in the past around major operational crisis communication management by big sport governing bodies but also because FIFA being the leading and most popular team sport confederation, can be considered a potential benchmark for other sport governing bodies and organisations. This is also further stressed by the lack of theoretical frameworks available within the existing literature that could be implemented or compared to this particular case, since the Covid-19 pandemic is an operational crisis unprecedented in the history of sports.

The analysis of the course of action that FIFA followed in their crisis communication management allows us to draw the following theoretical and practical implications. As is illustrated in this study, while the pandemic called for the suspension of football, FIFA maintained an active role through their communication and promotion of relevant activities, adopting what Carey and Mason (2016) refer to as the "saviour" approach. As is shown above, adopting this approach in an operational crisis could allow an organisation to not only maintain their relevance but also to potentially improve how it is perceived even in an era of inactivity. To this end, FIFA's operational crisis communication

management and the structure of their communication using carefully selected themes allowed them to portray themselves as a potential "saviour" in the face of Covid-19 crisis, and thus enabled them to legitimise their promotion of the new image of leadership and morality highlighted in their reform report (FIFA, 2015).

The analysis of the themes that FIFA selected for their crisis communication, indicates the existence of a wider strategy to shape how the organisation is perceived, as previous research suggests (e.g., Fortunato, 2008; Gandy, 2001; Reese et al., 2001). Unlike what previous studies examining FIFA's response to reputational crises have argued (Ibrahim, 2017), FIFA did not adopt a "deny" strategy or distanced themselves in their communication of this operational crisis. While we once again acknowledge that no similar operational crisis had occurred, potentially justifying the lack of studies on operational crisis communication management, this change is worth noting. That is because based on FIFA's prior history in crisis communication and their proclaimed willingness to improve (FIFA, 2015), it could be argued that steps might have been made for post-crises lessons to be learned. This in turn would make FIFA a potentially suitable example for the real-life application of the under-studied Discourse of Renewal theory (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2017) to be examined in future research. At the same time, it would also indicate that FIFA's practices are resembling the basis of image repair theory (Benoit, 2014), potentially illustrating how image repair theory can be applied and studied in the context of operational crises.

Moreover, it is worth noting that overall FIFA's approach in their communication management was one that resembled the often celebrated developing and sustaining open and accurate communication channels with the environment and the press (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Fink 1986), without nevertheless building on the theoretically acclaimed much-needed dialogue between the organisation and its publics (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). As such, this study showcased how an organisation can adopt a presumably open communication strategy with its publics, while maintaining its "blanket", one-way approach of messages dissemination through its own channels. This in turn raises a wider question on the necessity and applicability of often celebrated pre-prescribed practices, such as the above-mentioned dialogue between an organisation and its publics.

Taking all the above into consideration, a roadmap of operational crisis communication management can be drawn (see, Figure 1), allowing us to illustrate the lessons that can be learned through FIFA's crisis communication management, which deviates from pre-prescribed suggestions offered by existing crisis communication theories. As such, the four main themes identified in FIFA's communication could be considered the four stages to be followed in operational crisis communication, thus representing the main theoretical and practical implication of this study.

Stage one represents the acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation and the acceptance that the organisation's prior activity is disrupted. This aligns with previous recommendations for clarity and transparency (Boin et al., 2013; Jong et al., 2016), as well as with the first steps of the SCCT in which the crisis is evaluated (Coombs, 2017), while accounting for the operational disruption caused by the crisis in hand. In this stage, no responsibility is to be allocated, unlike what SCCT suggests (Coombs, 2017). Instead, communication is to focus on details about the potential gravitas of the crisis, while informing the organisation's publics about any changes in their normal activities as the situation unravels and avoiding potentially harmful speculation and
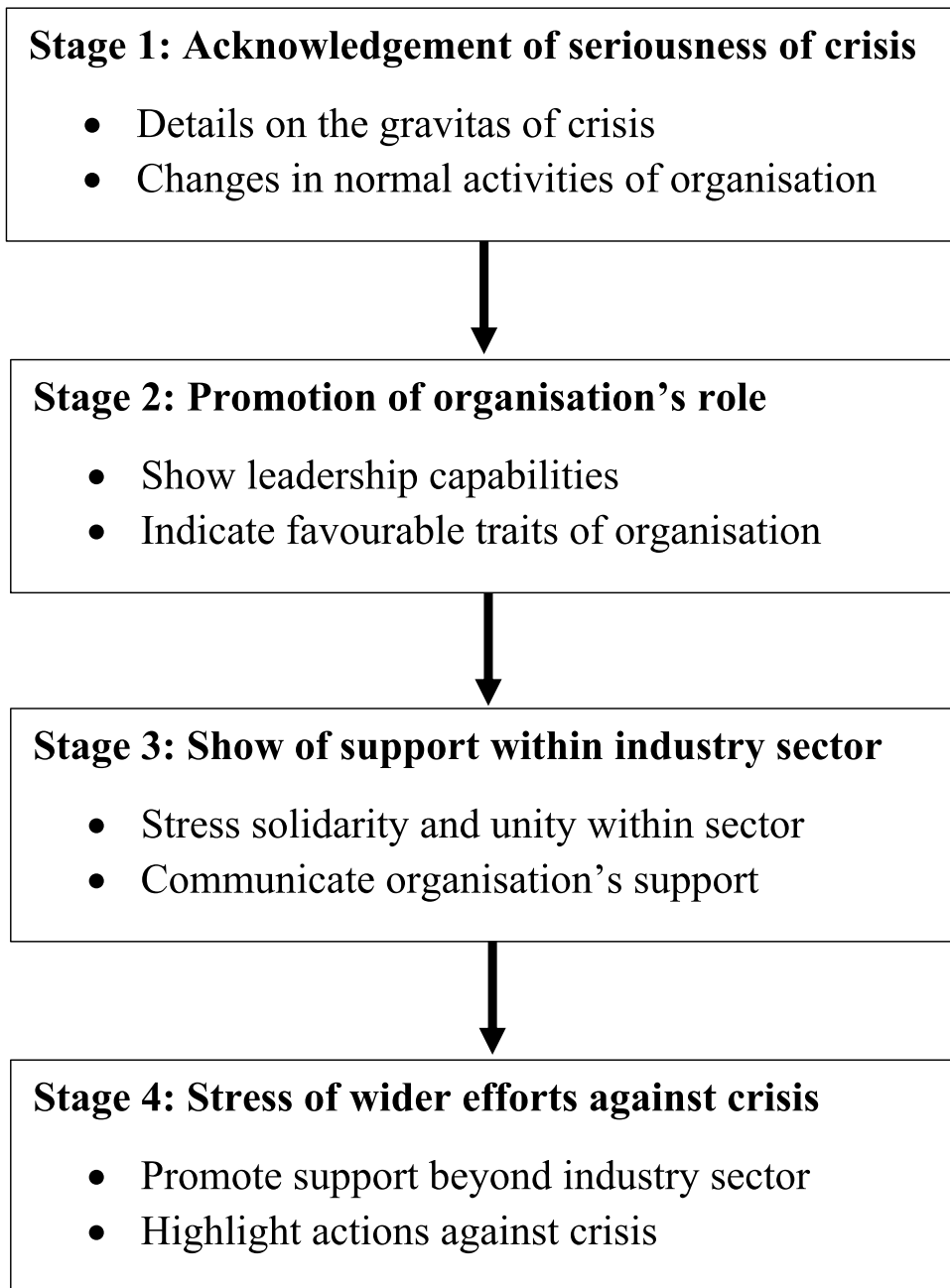

Stage 1: Acknowledgement of seriousness of crisis

- Details on the gravitas of crisis
- Changes in normal activities of organisation

↓

Stage 2: Promotion of organisation's role

- Show leadership capabilities
- Indicate favourable traits of organisation

↓

Stage 3: Show of support within industry sector

- Stress solidarity and unity within sector
- Communicate organisation's support

↓

Stage 4: Stress of wider efforts against crisis

- Promote support beyond industry sector
- Highlight actions against crisis

Figure 1. Operational crisis communications management roadmap.

confusion (Coombs, 1999; Manoli, 2016). Unlike what SCCT proposes, in stage one communication should not distance the organisations from the crisis. Instead, appropriately structuring their crisis communication can allow organisations to identify the aspects that are to be stressed in their messages in order for the intended interpretation

to be promoted regarding both the crisis and its operational implications, while also overlooking elements that might influence the audience's perceptions negatively as Entman (1993, 2003) suggests.

Once the crisis and its operational implications are clarified through the organisation's communication, the second stage entails promoting the organisation's role during the crisis. In this stage, the organisation can demonstrate their leadership capabilities, as well as their favourable traits in the eyes of its publics, such as solidarity, collaboration and compassion. By structuring their communication around the promotion of these or similar favourable traits, as previous research argues (Carey & Mason, 2016; McGuire et al., 2020; Wooten & James, 2008), the organisation can construct and promote a positive image for themselves, while taking the attention away from the crisis in hand and any operational repercussions it has. This second stage aligns with the basis of Benoit's (2014) image repair theory, in which the aim is to protect and further promote the organisation's image within the crisis, even when the crisis in hand is not reputational as originally suggested in his work, but operational. Communication in stage two can in turn allow the organisation to not only focus the attention on the selected positive aspects but also to potentially further strengthen its brand image in the eyes of their publics resulting in long-term benefits for the organisation (Fortunato, 2008).

The third stage is when the organisation can demonstrate and most importantly communicate those traits more emphatically through their tangible support to other organisations and individuals within their industry or ecosystem. Structuring their communication around the organisation's support within their industry sector can allow them to promote a positive narrative around the organisation, which research suggests can bear beneficial reputational effects (Fortunato, 2008; Gandy, 2001; Reese et al., 2001), even during an era of crisis, while once again distracting from the operational crisis itself. Depending on the role each organisation holds, different pressures and expectations might exist, so an analogous line of actions and communication messages regarding the said support should be adopted and paired with the promotion of tangible actions in which this support is demonstrated. In this third stage the importance of publics' or stakeholders' views and emotions in time of crises is acknowledged, as is suggested in the ICM model (Jin et al., 2010), with the notable difference however, that actually engaging with them can be circumvented. As a result, in this study, we highlight that the celebrated crisis dialogue among stakeholders that is proposed through the Rhetorical Arena Theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010) can be avoided, with crisis communication management focusing instead on a one-way approach, through appropriately designed communication themes.

Finally, the fourth stage is when this support can be extended beyond the immediate industry or ecosystem in which the organisation operates, ideally addressing the crisis directly. In this stage structuring the communication appropriately can allow the organisation to focus on the operational crisis, but not in a defensive way as Nite (2017) suggests in the case of a reputational crisis. As with stage one, stage four calls not for disassociation, but for engagement with the crisis in hand, unlike what SCCT suggests (Coombs, 2017), with the organisation focusing on the crisis in their communication. This focus on the operational crisis should centre around the promotion of support beyond the immediate environment of the organisation and towards the ones most affected by the crisis, in order for the wider promotion of the sector and the organisation guiding the efforts to be achieved. Through this operational crisis communication management, the organisation can further extent

a positive narrative around themselves, potentially reaping the associated reputational effects of their efforts (Fortunato, 2008; Gandy, 2001; Reese et al., 2001). Once again, the size and role of the organisation is to be taken into consideration when the actions and messages are being designed, with particular emphasis drawn on using the organisation's own resources and if needed partnering with key actors dealing directly with the crisis in hand.

FIFA's design of the above-mentioned roadmap of operational crisis communication management can be traced back to their well-documented efforts to reposition themselves as an ethical leader in the football ecosystem (FIFA, 2015), while the roadmap's implementation and the themes selected allowed them to legitimise such efforts and engage in a positive image promotion through crisis communication (Nite, 2017). In fact, one could argue that the Covid-19 operational crisis gave FIFA a platform on which to engage and widely promote their new image (similarly to how organisations like BP engaged in an extensive PR exercise using CSR in response to a crisis – Choi, 2012). Consequently, it could be argued that implementing the roadmap with analogous themes of leadership and support would allow other organisations in similar or less similar contexts to reposition themselves as "saviours" (Carey & Mason, 2016) or leaders in the face of (and with the pretext of) a crisis.

Limitations and further research

An examination of how FIFA responded to the pandemic and the communication management that they employed may assist other sports and organisations in the development of operational crisis communication strategies to deal with unforeseen circumstances in the future. As the Covid-19 pandemic illustrated, football and sport in general can be highly vulnerable to external crises, and thus after the pandemic useful lessons could be learned from how the most popular sport confederation handled their communication. However, a limitation of this study is that the themes used in FIFA's communication might not be generalised or applicable in other sport governing bodies, and as such further research examining similar or less similar organisations in equally similar or dissimilar contexts is needed. It is argued that the absence of a crisis communication strategy could be catastrophic for the image and reputation of the sport, and while this seems to have been avoided through the crisis communication strategy followed, future research could also examine the reputational effect of this strategy through media and audience perceptions analysis. At the same time, further research is required in operational organisational crisis communication to improve our currently limited understanding and create potential benchmark and best practices of handling the communication of such crises with significant operational repercussions.

Highlights

- The study highlights the main themes used by FIFA, focusing on positive traits of the organisation.
- FIFA's crisis communication management deviates from pre-prescribed recommendations.
- A roadmap for operational crisis communication management for sport organisations is offered.

Disclosure statement

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