

# Crisis-Communications Management in Football Clubs

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An escalating number of crises appear in the sport industry in general and the football industry in particular that make the area of crisis communication an increasingly important matter in both the everyday running and the long-term viability of football. However, the sensitivity of the topic makes an extensive analysis on current practice in crisis communications a particularly challenging task. This study examines how crisis communications is managed by investigating the current practices and techniques employed in English Premier League clubs, as they were presented by communications professionals employed in the clubs. The analysis of the clubs' practices underlines the lack of proactivity and presents the most popular strategies of crisis-communications management: "Wait for the dust to settle" and "React promptly before the noise grows." In addition, an underdocumented technique is examined: the use of the informal personal relationships between the employees of the clubs and the members of the media. This study also introduces the "crisis communications management in football" model, which illustrates the practices identified through this study and can potentially act as a guide for crisis-communications analysis in a number of other industries.

**Keywords:** soccer, Premier League, crisis management, sport communication

The business world encounters unexpected events of various forms and sizes on an everyday basis. According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) an unexpected event can then transform into a crisis when its "overwhelmingly negative significance carries a high level of risk, harm and opportunity for further loss" (p. 54). As the quote illustrates, unexpected or unplanned events can potentially develop into crises of varying sizes that may bear harmful effects on both the short-term profitability and the stability of a company and its long-term viability. One of the key elements of coping with crisis situations is managing the strategic functions of the company, such as communications, at any time (Coombs, 1999).

Before presenting the focus of this study, a few clarifications will be made. First, due to the complexity and potential subjectivity of the topic (e.g., size, reach, spread, focus importance, implications of a crisis; Booth, 2015), the definition

provided by Seeger et al. (2003) was adopted in this study. According to their work, a crisis is an unexpected event involving either an organization or particular individuals within it, whose significant negative impact can harm and cause loss to the overall organization. Second, when referring to a crisis event, there are legal and ethical aspects involved that will not be analyzed, since they exceed the aim of this study. In addition, although there is a dense and compound relation between crisis management and communicating in a crisis, this study will present only the elements connected to the function of communication in regard to these escalated unexpected events. In more detail, the focus will be drawn on the ways in which the organizations/clubs manage their communications before, during, and after a crisis.

The football industry, often characterized as “scandalous and facing a crisis everyday” (Banks, 2002, p. 32), is an ideal example of an industry where crisis-communications management can be even considered a necessity. In light of recent events occurring in a number of sports, such as the domestic abuse cases in the National Football League (Megdal, 2014) and the match-fixing scandal in the Greek Super League (Manoli & Antonopoulos, 2015), the sport industry in general and the football industry in particular are no strangers to crisis events. Nevertheless, there appears to be a lack of academic studies on the matter of crisis-communications practices followed in the industry, as well as their efficiency, despite the growing popularity of some of the sports leagues (it is estimated, e.g., that the Premier League attracts the interest of more than 63% of the global population—more than any other football league; Sportfive, 2014). In fact it could be argued that the few studies that examine crisis situations in sports, such as those by Bruce and Tini (2008); Wilson, Stavros, and Westberg (2008); and Trosby (2010), tend to focus on the crisis itself and the public relations implications it might bear, while neglecting to examine the crisis-communication-management practices followed.

It is this gap that the present research will aim to fill by examining the current practice in crisis-communications management in football. In order for me to provide an answer to this question, the focus will be drawn on the English football industry, in particular the English Premier League clubs, which can allow for insights to be gained from industry leaders working in highly prominent organizations (as the study on Premier League’s popularity suggests; Sportfive, 2014). This study will therefore examine the communications-management practices followed by the clubs that participate in the league during periods of crisis, as presented to me by communications professionals employed by the clubs. The crises mentioned by the interviewees ranged from individual player/manager scandals (e.g., racist Twitter comments, violent assaults, extramarital affairs) to organization-wide threats (e.g., financial mismanagement, owner/sponsor facing business crisis). Through the data collected, the “crisis communications management in football” model will be presented, mapping the practices encountered and potentially acting as a guide to understanding crisis communications in football.

## Literature Review

This section sets out the main sources of literature that provide the basis of this study. It also presents the remarkably scarce literature available on crisis communications in sports and football.

## Common Styles of Crisis Communication

A distinction often made when managing communications during a crisis is between the interest groups/stakeholders of a company (e.g., employers, customers, investors, local community, media) and the general public. Dividing the potential audience into two groups, stakeholders and general public, and further categorizing the former into smaller subgroups was often advised to companies to help them possibly alter their communication messages, depending on the group that is receiving them, in order for a more audience-centric approach to be followed (Benoit, 1995b, 1997; Gouran, 1982). It was later suggested by various academics such as Kheng-Hor (1998), Coombs and Holladay (2002), Coombs (2004), and Stephens, Malone, and Bailey (2005) that this practice could be rather inefficient when dealing with a crisis, since it could lead to mixed and confusing messages, which can harm an organization's long-term reputation.

According to the academic studies on the subject, companies today respond to a crisis in one of the following three ways:

- Denying the existence of a crisis and refuse to cooperate with the media
- Providing incomplete and inaccurate information often reluctantly and delayed
- Developing and sustaining open and accurate communication channels with the environment and the press (Wilcox, Ault, Agee, & Cameron, 1998)

Most academics agree on the importance of the third approach (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Fink, 1986; Ramee, 1987; Ressler, 1982), which can yield better results in terms of public relations, image and brand management, relationship marketing and human resources management (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Barton, 2001; Rensburg, De Beer, & Coetzee, 2008; Sriramesh, Grunig, & Dozier, 1996).

## Time-Related Approaches to Crisis Communication

According to Barton (1993), every crisis has five stages: detection, prevention or preparation, containment, recovery, and learning. Communication, in different forms, is an element of importance in all five stages and can even be the tool that will interrupt the progression of a crisis to its next stage. Another approach is the one outlined in the "best practices in risk and crisis communication" figure designed by Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2006, p. 236) for the National Center for Food Protection and Defense, which comprises three phases (strategic planning, proactive strategies, and strategic response), as well as of a continuous evaluation and update loop. Although this particular figure was developed for the health industry, the guidance it provides can be implemented in most industries, as Seeger's analysis suggests. In fact, it is the potential assistance a model like that could provide that informed the present research in designing the "crisis communications management in football" model that will be presented later on in this study.

Following Millar and Heath's (2003) study, coping with a crisis, in terms of both management and communication, has two distinctive stages: the proactive and the reactive. Academics suggest that all advanced companies in any industry should be placing equal emphasis on developing both phases of coping with a crisis (Benoit, 2000; Collins & Porras, 1997; Grunig, 1992).

Proactive, which means operating in advance, has a strong element of planning and speculating the often-mentioned “worst-case scenario.” Fearn-Banks (2007) suggests that this should take place in order for the crisis-communication management plan to be generated. This plan is a part of the company-wide crisis-management plan and could include details, such as selecting the spokesperson and deciding on particular aspects that should be covered in any future press release, in advance. By preparing strategically for a number of unexpected events and the course of action the company has to follow, the element of surprise in such an occasion can be significantly reduced. What Fearn-Banks is emphasizing, however, is the consistent and coherent nature of the plan, in terms of involvement throughout the company. The proactive part of the communication function resembles risk-communication theory as discussed by Chess (2002) and Covello (1992), which includes the risk estimates and the possible consequences.

Reactive practice is the line of actions taken after the breakout of the crisis, both before and after the media and the public become aware of it. In the reactive phase, the line of actions suggested depends on the specific crisis event and cannot always be generalized. However, some general guidelines seem to be apparent in all cases. For example, the importance of the company’s responding throughout the crisis coherently is emphasized though the work of Sellnow (1993) and Williams and Treadaway (1992). Their analysis provides examples of companies in which different departments reacted independently when a crisis occurred, such as Union Carbide and Exxon. As was underlined in their work, both short-term inconvenience and possible long-term reputation damage was caused due to the disjointed corporate image that was projected by these organizations. Advocates of the importance of reactive actions include Marra (2000), who argues that detailed potential crisis-communication plans can be poor predictors of a crisis and its results if the company proves to be unable to react efficiently. What is also suggested by Pinsdorf (1999) is that outsourcing communications while experiencing a crisis might guarantee an efficient and prompt reaction.

Sturges (1994) argued that the reactive role of communicating in a crisis should not have a defensive nature, as is commonly perceived. On the contrary, it should be informative rather than apologetic, while at the same time projecting the strong overall identity of the company. According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2006), efficient communication in a crisis is the proof of control on behalf of the company that aims not only at reducing uncertainty but also at maintaining or even enhancing public perception of the company. Depending on the size and the effects of the crisis, strategies that are suggested in Benoit’s image-restoration theory (1995a) can be implemented within the company so that the communication function can be provided with further guidelines of action (denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, etc.). Millar and Heath’s (2003) study of the two distinctive stages of crisis communications has informed this present research, as it will be further discussed in the Results section.

## **Crisis Communication in Sport/Football**

The sports industry in general and the football industry in particular have faced numerous crises of various nature and size. From individual players’ and managers’ personal and family scandals to clubs’ financial problems and organizational-

structure issues, the industry has experienced unexpected events with high frequency that have attracted considerable attention (Andreff, 2007; Barajas & Rodríguez, 2010; Clavio, Eagleman, Miloch, & Pedersen, 2007; Dietl & Franck, 2007). It has been pointed out with numerous examples (Smith & Elliott, 2007; Trosby, 2010; Wilson et al., 2008) that the crises taking place both in the wider sport industry and particularly in the football industry are of such frequency and variety that they require the constant attention of the organizations/clubs. The number, power, and legitimacy of football's interest groups (stakeholders) puts the industry under constant scrutiny, and thus any conflicting interest between any of the parties involved can be a potential crisis (Manoli, 2014).

Depending on the industry in which the crisis takes place, different communication models have been developed that embody the unique characteristics of each business sector. For example, the aforementioned "best practices in risk and crisis communication" model (Seeger et al., 2006) was created for the health business sector to provide detailed guidance for companies and their communication departments in that industry. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, there does not seem to be a similar academic interest on crisis-communications management in sport or football. The few studies available tend to focus on the analysis of the crisis itself (from a public relations point of view) but not on the communications function (Elliott & Smith, 2006; Frick & Prinz, 2006; Gordon & Helal, 2001; Lago, Simmons, & Szymanski, 2006), with only a few exceptions. These limited studies link crisis communications with public relations and image management, focusing on either the sport organizations' (Bilbil & Sutcu, 2008; Bruce & Tini, 2008) or the individual athletes' (Bernstein, 2012; Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012; Kristiansen & Hanstad, 2012; Trosby, 2010; Wilson et al., 2008) image-restoration practices. This lack of academic resources could be due to the fact that gaining access to such valuable and sensitive information as crisis communication can be exceptionally difficult.

After examining the main issues that emerged through the analysis of the literature, such as the proactive and reactive approaches to crisis communications and the lack of relevant sources for the sports and football industry, I will present the empirical research on crisis-communications management in football.

## Method

To examine the current practice of crisis communications in football, an empirical investigation had to take place. First, the research sample was selected. Based on the wide disparity of organizations that operate in the realm of football in terms of structure, finance, size, and nature, the sample had to be reduced to the clubs of one league in one country, in order for potential hurdles to this research to be avoided. As a result, clubs participating in the English Premier League were selected as the sample of this study.

Criterion purposive sampling (Myers, 2009) was employed to select the sample, which consists of cases that share an important characteristic or set of characteristics, which in this study was that they had participated in the Premier League in any of the past five seasons. Since at the end of each playing season, 3 of the 20 clubs are relegated from the Premier League to the Championship/second national

division, while another three are promoted from the Championship to the Premier League (Szymanski & Valletti, 2005), this particular criterion helped me acquire information in relation to crisis-communications practices in football clubs in that particular moment in time. Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging that even within this sample disparities exist regarding the size (e.g., employees, resources, financial data) and reach (current and potential fans, social-media followers, etc.) of the clubs.

Qualitative semistructured interviews were selected for the collection of the primary data, since they provide more focus than the unstructured or informal approach but still allow a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting the information from the interviewee. The interview approach chosen was emotionalist or subjectivist, which would allow the interviewees to draw on their authentic experiences of the current practice in the industry (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). In more detail, the questions posed to the interviewees were not in the form of a questionnaire with multiple possible answers. On the contrary, an interview checklist with a number of open-ended questions was used, providing me the flexibility needed to acquire the most information possible. A sample of the questions asked can be found in Appendix A. It is worth noting that in the beginning of each interview the interviewees were presented with the definition of crisis by Seeger et al. (2003) in order for the term to be clarified, limiting the potential subjectivity the topic might bear.

The interviewees were selected carefully from the clubs of the sample. The communication department was considered the suitable target, since it is the department in charge of communicating during a crisis, so employees of these departments in all Premier League clubs were contacted. A wide disparity can be noted between the departments of different clubs, which can employ from 2 to 12 people. It is also worth noting that while communication is regarded as a separate department, the most senior employee of the communications team might not always bear the title of the head of the department, mirroring in that way the fact that communications may not be considered such an important component to the club. Senior employees were chosen as ideal participants and were contacted using my professional network of contacts. Since I was at that time a communication professional working in the football industry and the study was conducted purely for academic purposes, all interviewees were eager to offer their input. It is worth mentioning that the interviewees welcomed the idea of academic research on football communications and that I was also encouraged to provide them with feedback on the crisis-communication practices implemented in the industry. I was able to secure interviews from the senior communications employees of 25 of the 30 clubs that participated in the Premier League in any of the past five seasons, which will be the sample of this study.

The list of interviewees includes professionals such as clubs' heads of communications, heads of marketing and communications, or communications directors. It is worth underlining that not all interviewees were of the same management level, even though an effort was made for the most senior communications employee of each club to be selected. In the case of inconvenience for a selected interviewee, I was directed to the next person in seniority line in five clubs. The total number of interviews conducted for this research is 25 (one interview per club—Appendix B).

An important factor when analyzing the findings was to produce a thorough study on the matters discussed with truthful and accurate information. For this

reason, the interviewees were encouraged to give their honest opinion that would offer valuable and factual insight of the industry. In order for me to include accurate information, the interviewees will remain anonymous and will therefore be referred to as “interviewees” throughout the study, while any individual examples that could be linked to a particular club will be avoided. Due to the sensitivity of the matter under study, I was often asked to stop recording the interviews when particular examples of crisis were mentioned (i.e., crisis incidents such as drinking and/or gambling or violent assault involving players or the manager or even financial scandals implicating the owner or any sponsors of the club); however, I was allowed to keep notes on the topics discussed. Based on the fact that the study did not aim to identify the details of each case but, instead, the underlying patterns among the clubs, it could be argued that this did not affect the quality of the data acquired.

Efforts were made to conduct all interviews in person either in the offices or the training ground of each club; however, due to schedule inconveniences and time restraints six of them were conducted over the phone. Even though using telephone interviews could be considered a limitation to this research, based on the absence of visual cues, which can result in loss of contextual and nonverbal data, telephones may allow respondents to feel relaxed and able to disclose sensitive information, which proved useful for this study (Myers, 2009).

The interviews took place between April and September 2014, with the duration of each varying from 20 to 40 minutes. Since the interviewees were ensured of their anonymity, the interviews were recorded (except from the moments in which I was asked to turn off the recording) and later transcribed in order for their analysis to be facilitated. Finally, based on the relatively small amount of data collected, no analysis software was used. Instead, I examined the findings based on thoroughly reading the transcribed interviews and isolating the information that would be relevant and valuable for the study through thematic analysis coding. In order for the validity and reliability of the study to be enhanced, intracoding was used, which required that I conduct the coding process twice at different times. Creswell (2013) suggests that this method eliminates the discrepancy or inconsistency that may occur while coding caused by a coder’s mood, tiredness, or meticulousness. After intracoding, intercoding was also employed, and as a result the coding process was carefully and independently reviewed by an industry “insider” for an assessment of the interpretive process. The expert selected is an experienced practitioner who had worked in the football industry for a number of years (and had been previously employed in four of the clubs studied), as well as conducting research. As requested, this expert’s anonymity will also be protected in this study. The “outside expert” consulted conducted independent scrutiny by coding samples individually and then comparing the points of agreement and disagreement. Taking both the intra- and the intercoding process into consideration, and after agreeing on the final codes, the themes identified in the data allowed me to pinpoint and unfold the underlying patterns of crisis communications in football clubs. During this procedure, the findings were reexamined and verified with five interviewees (through additional discussions), in order for me to be able to clarify the facts and hence reach sustainable conclusions that will be presented in the following section.

## Results

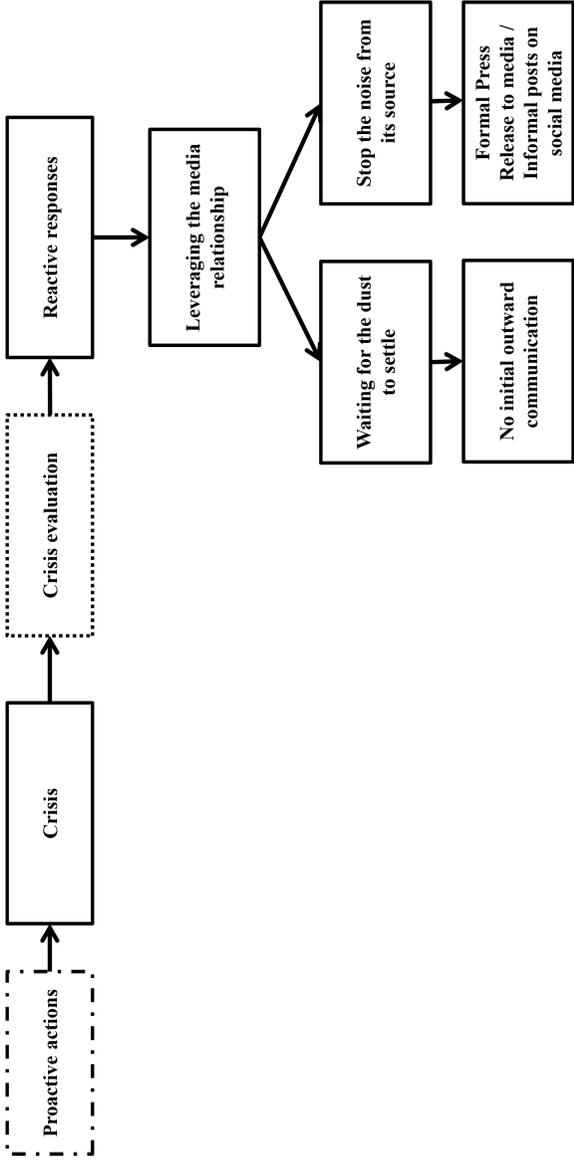
In this section, the clubs' approaches to a crisis are examined, as provided by the communications professionals employed by the clubs. Based on the findings, a distinction has to be made regarding the time-related approaches in football crisis communication. In more detail, the distinction will be made between proactive and reactive communication actions, in line with Millar and Heath's (2003) work. This distinction will help the reader better understand the current practice, while helping me present one of the key discussion points of the findings, the lack of proactive crisis communication. As this section will show, the reactive crisis-communication practices are substantially more common than the proactive, with the latter category being often presented as "impractical" (Interviewee A) or "irrelevant" (Interviewee C) to football. In light of this, further analysis will be provided on reactive or postcrisis communication, with additional details on the most popular approaches. Finally, an important aspect of communicating during a crisis will be investigated: the relationship between clubs and the media and how it can facilitate or even provoke a crisis.

In order for the analysis of the findings to be facilitated, the main themes/codes that emerged through the data were used to map the current crisis-communications practices in a figure. This "crisis communications management in football" model can be then used to illustrate the current practices and, thus, assist in understanding and potentially improving crisis communications in the future.

The analysis in this paper underpins the model outlined in Figure 1, whose development is discussed fully in the section that follows. In summary, to indicate its main features, the figure shows the very limited precrisis (proactive) communications actions of the clubs, which are illustrated with a dashed-line box in the figure. After the unexpected event, an initial crisis evaluation takes place before the postcrisis course of action is decided (illustrated with a dotted-lined box in the figure). In terms of reactive responses, two postcrisis communications strategies were encountered ("waiting for the dust to settle" and "stop the noise from its source"), with one approach favored over the other among football clubs as will be further explored. Leveraging the media relationship, a rather understudied technique that appears to be popular among Premier League clubs, precedes these reactive steps, taking place before one of the two postcrisis communication approaches is chosen. Finally, depending on the reactive strategy selected, the respective course of action is followed. The model and its various steps (themes that emerged through the data) will be further explored in this section.

### Proactive Versus Reactive Approach

As already identified by the literature review (Fearn-Banks, 2007), crisis communication has a twofold nature, the proactive and the reactive. Each approach is equally important in the overall communication of an organization facing a crisis and should not be excluded from the overall communication process. However, when examining football clubs' practices, one approach was clearly favored over the other.



**Figure 1** — Crisis communications management in football.

## Proactive Crisis Communications

As far as the proactive state of the crisis is concerned, little practice exists in the majority of the football clubs. It is worth noting that all 25 interviewees, when asked about a crisis-communication proactive plan, used the words *not practical* and *impossible*. As mentioned by some of the interviewees, the planning of the worst-case-scenario situation takes place only when the possibility of it happening is considered high, while it tends to consist of only a few details on how it could be handled.

How can we decide on a plan before a crisis occurs? We cannot predict the future, and, unfortunately, each crisis differs from the other. We have to deal with each crisis individually when it happens and see all its aspects in detail. (Interviewee L)

In more detail, when the likelihood of an unpleasant event that can potentially be a crisis (e.g., relegation—example mentioned by Interviewee S) becomes considerable, the director of communications, head of media, or press officer (depending on the club) has the responsibility of writing a press release after consulting with the board of directors. Depending on the event, its nature, and size, the same person is also responsible for collecting any information and details needed in order for the press release to be as accurate as possible. This release is then sent to the media and published in the club's own media (magazine, Web site, social-media accounts, etc.), representing the opinion of the club. While relegation can potentially develop into a crisis after a rapid snowball effect (players' complaints, manager's resigning, administration's accusations, fans' outrage, etc.; Banyard & Shevlin, 2001), it is worth noting that it was the only example of proactive crisis communication mentioned in all 25 interviews, by a single interviewee. Even when the interviewees were asked directly whether they should design a crisis-communication management plan, their unwillingness to do so was explained as follows:

It makes no sense to create a crisis-communications plan. Should something happen, we'll deal with it then. Trying to decide on a plan would only make sense if we knew the crisis or its nature. But we don't. Each one is unique and unpredictable. It could start with a footballer's Tweet or Facebook post, a newspaper's article, the manager's statements, anything. There is no plan that can capture that. (Interviewee V)

This proactive course of action was the only example mentioned in all the interviews regarding precrisis communication planning. In other words, drafting a press release when the likelihood of a potential crisis is very high is the only proactive action taking place in football clubs according to the interviewees. That is because, as the interviewees put it, "crisis-communication planning should not take place unless a crisis is about to happen" (Interviewee A). As it was further justified, developing a communication plan when there is no possibility of a crisis will only provide the club with false guidelines. So, since each crisis has unique characteristics, it should be first comprehended before the plan is created. This opinion resembles Marra's (2000) view that crisis-communication planning can be a poor predictor of the actual results but is in absolute disagreement with the

view expressed by academics such as Fearn-Banks (2007) who argue that precrisis communication planning can have a great effect on the overall management of a crisis. The lack of proactive planning is illustrated in the model with a dashed line.

As explained by the interviewees, clubs believe that the proactive communication planning of a crisis would not be functional and effective in football for various reasons. First and most important, the unpredictability of the nature of each crisis requires different actions to be taken depending on the characteristics of each event, its nature and size, and the individuals involved. In most cases these characteristics are unique and bear many differences from previous occasions, which make planning and predicting impossible.

An unpredicted event can be anything in the club. Something happens every single day that was not planned to happen. And it's different every time, from something small to something big; we have unpredicted events occurring in all aspects of the club. How can we know which one will be tomorrow? (Interviewee U)

Second, as was argued by the interviewees, football players and managers have over time been the cause of numerous crises due to their unpredictable behavior, which provides football with a unique and great difficulty regarding proactive crisis management and communication. From an unexpected decision to leave a club to an unforeseen public action with social and legal consequences (e.g., violent assault, racist comments), players and managers make it challenging, if not impossible, for clubs to have a proactive plan, as stated by the majority of the interviewees. The crisis examples available (from extramarital affairs to gambling and drug use; Jones, 2008) can explain why interviewees felt that "working with players is like working with a ticking bomb. You can't predict when and how it will explode. There is no crisis plan that can manage that" (Interviewee P).

Finally, the frequency with which crises or unexpected events take place in football does not allow for planning to take place. According to the interviewees, the fast pace at which football clubs are functioning impedes communications professionals from planning future actions, since their workload consists mostly or reacting to unexpected and unplanned events and requests from the various stakeholders of their clubs.

The industry is moving in a running speed, we really don't have time to plan. We spent 90% of our time fire-fighting rather than planning what to do next. Of course something might happen tomorrow, but we can't plan for what to do then, since we must first respond to the things that happened yesterday, or this morning. (Interviewee C)

## Reactive Crisis Communication

As far as the reactive approach is concerned, as acknowledged by all the interviewees, the procedures followed after the crisis takes place are the main and most important part of crisis communication. The promptness and efficiency of those actions can have significant effects on the club's short-term operation and long-term reputation, as already studied by Sellnow (1993) and Wilson et al. (2008).

The reactive course of action, as explained unanimously by the interviewees, does not follow a norm or pattern but is designed depending on the nature and the size of the crisis, as well as the individuals involved. It is worth noting that the answer given by all 25 interviewees when asked about the communications reaction to a crisis or an unplanned event with potential to develop into a crisis included or was limited to the word *depends*. The actions are decided “depending on the crisis in hand, how big or small it is, how much buzz it can create, who is involved, etc. There are a number of factors that dictate what has to be done” (Interviewee G).

The individual in charge of crisis communications is again the director of communications, head of media, or press officer. Their responsibilities include, after consulting with the board of directors and collecting all the information needed in order for an initial evaluation of the crisis to take place, representing the club when needed and communicating its opinion to both the media and the general public. This initial crisis evaluation includes an additional consultation with legal and financial advisors, in order for any further implications to be assessed. During the postcrisis activity, efforts are made for the club to react as a group with a unanimous “voice,” which agrees with the suggestions of academics such as Coombs and Holladay (2002), Coombs (2004), and Stephens, Malone, and Bailey (2005). As was argued, it is due to this emphasis on accurate representation that the board is consulted before a response is decided. However, as some interviewees mentioned, due to the nature and the different and conflicting interests of the individuals involved, such an effort is considered difficult, if not impossible. In more detail, it was actually suggested that in some cases, it is even preferable to distance some members of the club from others or from the club in general (e.g., players, managers, sponsors from club), so that the club overall will be protected in terms of brand associations. It was argued that this initial crisis evaluation and the relevant consultations be conducted promptly (often through quick phone calls) and therefore not impede or delay the course of actions that follow. This quick but vital step in crisis-communications management is presented in Figure 1 as a dotted-line box between the crisis event and the reactive strategies that follow.

What was also underlined as a vital factor of reactive crisis communication is the ability of the individuals employed by the club, as Grunig’s (1992) excellence model also suggests. As emphasized by the majority of the interviewees, the ability and talent of the club’s employees (director of communications, head of media, press officer, etc.) are a fundamental aspect when communicating in a crisis. As discussed in another study on the football industry (Manoli, 2015), it is the human capital rather than the business structure that provides the industry with the assets needed to function efficiently. In fact, as was argued repeatedly by the interviewees, their skills often compensate for the occasional lack of appropriately designed structures and protocols.

Since each crisis requires individual and particular communication management according to the data collected, it would be challenging, if not impossible, for all individual postcrisis communication approaches to be presented. However, through the examination of the postcrisis practices presented by the interviewees, two general themes/strategies or reactive responses were identified and will be further analyzed following.

## Postcrisis Strategies

Regarding the general approaches to postcrisis line of action, two strategies were presented that bear no similarities to one another. On one hand, there is the idea that “today’s news is going to be yesterday’s news tomorrow” (Interviewee D). As explained and supported by the majority of the football clubs (18 of the 25), a large number of events that appear to be significant crises at present are very likely to be insignificant news once the “dust settles” (Interviewee L). Due to the high volume of news that is broadcast every day, the media and public’s interest are likely to focus on each event for a relatively small amount of time. So, by being patient and not reacting spontaneously when an unexpected event that could potentially develop into a crisis takes place, the majority of the interviewees expressed certainty that the possibility of the media and public to be less interested in the details of it as time passes is very high, as explained in the following quotes:

The media are always after the “hot” news, the big story; however, their interest wears off quite quickly. People are the same, they’ll focus on the story for a nanosecond and then move on. So what if there is a personal scandal with a player? Tomorrow a new celebrity scandal will appear and the player’s transgression will be forgotten. (Interviewee N)

What you need to do is be patient. The storm passes really quickly, since another crisis will break out soon. Your footballer’s scandalous tweet will be forgotten the moment the next player’s tweet appears. Just wait patiently and you’ll see the media’s interest shifting to another story. (Interviewee S)

By following this course of action, more information on the event can be collected and processed, providing each club with the opportunity to decide on any further future actions.

In practice, this approach suggests that the club should not immediately communicate the crisis to the media and the public but wait until a later point. In case the news of the crisis is communicated without the agreement of the club (through traditional or social media), the club’s opinion should not be given promptly but after a considerable amount of time. As suggested, “In this way, if there is nothing official to write or talk about, chances are that they will soon stop talking about it altogether” (Interviewee X). As carefully explained by the supporters of this opinion, this approach is implemented only when there are no legal or financial implications.

On the other hand, the opinion expressed by the minority of the clubs (the other 7 of the 25), is that when a crisis is likely to attract significant media and public interest, thus “producing a lot of noise” (Interviewee M), by reacting promptly when the news of the crisis is made public, the club has high possibilities to “stop the noise from its source” (Interviewee O). As clarified by the interviewees, a rapid and effective reaction can provide the media and public with information and details at a very early stage, which could prevent any speculation on the subject and its consequences. By addressing the subject punctually, the interviewees also believe that the public’s opinion about the club can be effected positively, portraying the club as a united and well-functioning organization and thus enhancing its reputation. As suggested,

If you don't provide the media or the public with an official statement or any kind of a clarification, they will keep writing and talking about it. And you never know what they might say. Soon, they will run out of information and might start speculating, whilst by reacting quickly, you will be able to control what they talk about. (Interviewee B)

Responding promptly can take place both formally, through a press release given to the media or published through the official club's media (Web site/magazine/TV/radio), and informally, through posts on the club's social-media accounts (Twitter/Facebook/mobile application).

Both approaches presented, waiting for the dust to settle and reacting before the noise begins to grow, were justified and supported passionately by the clubs. However, they seem to bear little relevance to what academics such as Fearn-Banks (2007) have suggested regarding a more strategic and well-planned approach to a crisis. In fact, it could be argued that the academic theory available does not provide the reader with a typology of common practices or even adequate information on how football clubs communicate after a crisis.

## Leveraging the Media Relationship

Finally, an interesting crisis-communication technique that is rather common in football will be presented: the use of informal personal relationships between the employees of the clubs and the members of the media. This technique resembles the personal relations between athletes and media discussed by Kristiansen, Roberts, and Sisjord (2011); Kristiansen and Roberts (2011); and Kristiansen and Hanstad (2012); however, since the relation is built between the media and the club employees, the physiological aspects discussed by academics do not apply in this particular context. Although this technique cannot be described as a well-structured, clear, and proper communications-management method, its use in football has proven, according to the findings of this research, enormously useful.

A defining aspect of reactive communication after a crisis, as noted by all the interviewees, is the informal personal relationships that clubs' employees have developed with members of the local and national media. This type of relationship between individuals employed in the two industries exceeds the professional relationship between the football industry and the media but can benefit the club on the occasion of an unexpected event. As was argued by the interviewees, it is the personal and informal aspect of this relationship that differentiates it from the formal relationship formed between the employees of the two parties, which ensures that a more direct, prompt, and efficient channel can be established.

This relationship can be beneficial in reacting to or even preventing a crisis. Regarding the former (reacting), when a member of the media informs the clubs' employees about the details of a story that could potentially develop into a crisis when publicized, before the story is actually made public, the club is provided with valuable time that can enable them to prepare for the reactive procedures. These procedures might include arranging directors' meetings and discussions with players, or even acquiring financial and legal advice. Most important, this additional time provides the club with the opportunity to react promptly and communicate while

having being informed fully of the details. A number of examples were mentioned by the interviewees as crises that they were informed of beforehand by the media. Most of these examples included players' behavior or actions (e.g., excess alcohol consumption, extramarital relationships) that were still made public, but the club was aware of the media's intentions beforehand.

When we get a phone call that the X player was spotted in a night club misbehaving the night before the match, we cannot get all the photos deleted or make sure everyone who witnessed the event will not talk to the media. What we can do, however, is find all the details from the player first, making sure we know who he was with, until what time, what they were doing, etc. It's crucial we're not caught off guard after a story is published and the player's actions are all over the news. (Interviewee Q)

As far as prevention is concerned, when information concerning the club can be a potential crisis if publicized, precluding the announcement to the public is likely to prevent the entire crisis. By informing the employees of the club about the forthcoming news and its potential consequences and by agreeing to not publish any information about it, some crises have been moderated or even avoided in the past. This technique of "stories exchange" (Interviewee E), as called by the interviewees, is simply the agreement that the members of the media will not publicize information on something, in exchange for information provided by the club on another subject that the media and public will be interested in. As explained by an interviewee,

Sometimes reporters want to publish an exclusive, and a crisis can be a very good exclusive, indeed. But it is often that that they can be convinced not to publish an exclusive of crisis, if you can offer them another story, also exclusive, equally interesting, but with no crisis elements involved. You can give them, for example, an exclusive on a signing a day before anyone knows, in exchange of a drunk player's misbehaving the night before. (Interviewee O)

This practice is based on the informal relationship formed between individuals and is relatively frequent in football, for both crisis- and non-crisis-communication management. Unfortunately, examples of the avoided crises mentioned above cannot be provided. It can be suggested, however, that based on the interviewees' emphasis on this practice and its success, leveraging relationships with the media to avoid a crisis is an efficient approach. Due to the fact that this practice is rather understudied, it is only after further research on the efficiency of this step that the short- and long-term effectiveness of leveraging media relationships can be discussed.

Even though leveraging the relationship with the media would require proactive groundwork actions to take place (e.g., developing a relationship between the media and the clubs' employees), its main use occurs after each crisis emerges, so it is presented as a reactive response step in the "crisis communications management in football" model.

It is worth noting that this technique is very common in football, but only regarding the crises that would be communicated to the public through the media. Since the rise of social and new media, a more direct way of communication has been established that has limited the use of this technique. As a recent study by

Brown and Billings (2013) shows, social media allow for sports fans to become crisis communicators themselves, ostracizing the media from the process and preventing communications professionals from using this technique. However, as all interviewees argued, leveraging the media relationship is still considered a focal point of crisis-communications practice in the industry, even though it can be expected that its use will gradually reduce.

In addition, based on the long-term viability of crisis communications, it is worth noting that this technique relates directly to the informal personal relationships that employees of the clubs have developed, which can be linked to the value of personal networks and social capital examined by Burt (1997) but which nevertheless does not translate into an asset for the club. Therefore, an individual's network will remain his or her asset and will not be converted into the club's asset should the employee-employer relationship cease to exist.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Crisis-communication management was chosen as the topic of this research due to its great impact on the football industry, regarding corporate reputation and image management. While this research makes no claims of representativeness of the data sample in relation to the wider population of sport organizations, it does maintain that the new empirical material on crisis communications in football clubs and the "crisis communications management in football" module make a contribution to our understanding of how football and/or sports are communicating in case of a crisis.

### Discussion on Findings and Managerial Implications

According to the analysis of the findings, I have presented a thorough examination of the current practice of crisis communication in football. First, the proactive and reactive approaches were examined while emphasizing the lack of precrisis planning. Proactive planning was in fact presented as impractical and unrealistic by the vast majority of the interviewees, who therefore disagree with the opinions expressed by academics on the matter. Unlike what the literature review suggests about other industries' responses, football clubs appear to disregard proactive planning when crisis communications are concerned. The unpredictability of each crisis's characteristics was presented as the main reason behind the impracticality of planning, which only takes place when the possibility of a potential crisis is high. The frequency of unexpected events that could develop into crises and working with footballers and managers were also presented as impeding factors in crisis-communications planning. In particular, players and managers were presented as the most challenging category of individuals, who, despite the media training provided by the clubs, were prone to be involved in or cause a crisis often and unexpectedly. While most industries do not work with footballers and managers, unpredictable and frequent crises can be considered a common phenomenon in other industries, as was mentioned in the literature review. This could therefore raise a question about the football industry's persistence in avoiding planning, which could lead to a lack of strategic responses and an overall less efficient reaction. Additional practitioner-focused research is required for this question to be answered in detail.

In addition, the two main approaches regarding postcrisis communications were discussed, while arguments were presented for both the “wait for the dust to settle” and the “react promptly before the noise grows” strategies. The former, more popular practice is followed by the clubs that believe that media’s and people’s interest in a crisis lasts for a very short time, until another crisis appears, while the latter, less popular approach aims to address the issue the moment it is made public, so that any information publicized is accurate and speculation is limited or stopped. Both approaches resemble practices followed in other industries, with the less popular approach being the one favored by academics and other industries. Football clubs seem to favor a more patient and reserved approach that does not allow for accessibility to the media and public. According to the interviewees, this approach allows for a more controlled reaction on behalf of the club, promoting a more coherent response, which might not have been possible if the club had responded right away. It is worth noting that regardless of the strategy they follow, football clubs appear to be responding in an organization-wide coherent and consistent way, thus presenting a “united front” and protecting the long-term reputation of the organization.

Finally, a very common technique when communicating during a crisis was presented: the use of informal personal relationships between employees of the clubs and members of the media. This popular technique in football allows for news or stories to be “exchanged” with other information to prevent the details of an event from being communicated to the public (immediately or at all) and, therefore, delaying, diminishing, or even preventing a potential crisis. Since this technique has yet to attract adequate academic interest, its popularity and success in other industries are still rather understudied. According to the interviewees, however, it is one of the most popular and efficient techniques that allows for communications professionals to respond in crisis. Additional research on this technique is required in order for its short-term and long-term efficiency to be examined, while bearing in mind that the increasing use of new and social media has already created an additional hurdle in leveraging media relations. Since social media can allow for direct communication channels to be created between the fans and the athletes and even permit fans to be the crisis communicators themselves, it could be argued that the need for athletes’ media and public relations training in regard to crisis communication should be highlighted.

Since the lack of research on crisis-communication practices and the absence of a typology of approaches followed in the industry is the gap this research was trying to fill, the “crisis communications management in football” model was introduced that illustrates and summarizes the key findings of this study. The model includes the two approaches presented by the interviewees, as well as an additional step—leveraging the relationship with the media. This model illustrates the full process of crisis-communications management in football clubs and can also act as a guide in order for the crisis-communications practices in the wider sports industry, or in other industries, to be examined. As has already been argued, crisis communications is an underresearched topic, so mapping the current practices can be a first step in understanding it.

An element that appears to be missing from crisis-communications approaches in football and from the “crisis communications management in football” model is the reflection or learning step that is emphasized in practices in other industries.

Evaluating the efficiency of a particular response could potentially lead an organization to identify the most suitable approach, which can then be followed in the future. Once again, not including this step raises the question of lack of strategic focus in the industry's response to a crisis, which can be answered after additional research.

As an overview of crisis-communication management in football, the general guideline given unanimously by the interviewees is that since each crisis is unique, communicating cannot follow norms or patterns. Depending on the crisis's nature, size, characteristics, and possible implications, as well as the individuals involved, the communication practices in the clubs are designed in a reactive and customized manner. Another key element of the findings, as presented by all the interviewees, is that currently crisis communication in football is not based on a proper business structure or protocol but, instead, on very capable communications practitioners. Since guidelines on various aspects are absent, it is often the employees' initiatives and abilities that ensure the good functioning of the industry. Consequently, it is the human assets that enhance the efficiency of communications in the football industry at the moment, not its business structure and well-established techniques.

## Research Limitations

In terms of sample size and integrity, a limitation arises from the effect of promotion and relegation in football leagues. Efforts have been made to select an accurate and representative sample of the league for this study. The clubs included in the sample were 25 out of the 30 that participated in the Premier League in any of the past five seasons, with some participating in it ever since its beginning, and thus it could be argued that increasing the size of the sample would not add significant value to the research piece.

In addition, due to further inconveniences, as mentioned in the Method section, the interviewees were not all of the same management level or position, and thus the information that some were able to provide was not as detailed as that given by others. Nevertheless, all the interviewees are employed under the wider department of communications, which is the department in charge of communicating during a crisis.

As far as the qualitative method of this study is concerned, concerns can be raised about any efforts to generalize the findings. However, as noted in the introduction of the thesis, the aim of this research was not to generate findings that could be generalized to a wider population in a statistical sense. On the contrary, this study aimed to offer rich insights regarding crisis communications in football clubs by detecting patterns in the data that can be conveyed to similar settings. In addition, a number of actions were taken in order for the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis to be ensured, including member checking and intra- and intercoder agreement. Additional details on the actions employed to reduce potential limitations and increase the reliability and validity of this study were provided in the Method section.

Another limitation, as far as presenting and analyzing the findings is concerned, is the accuracy and truthfulness of the information acquired. As discussed herein, in order for the data to be presented in the most accurate way, the anonymity of the interviewees was maintained in this study, and neither the transcribed interviews nor the full list of interviewees can be provided. In addition, excluding any particular

crisis examples that were mentioned in the interviews but could be linked to an individual club could be considered a limitation, but it was considered a necessity due to the sensitivity of the topic discussed.

## Implications for Future Research

Having provided an answer to the aim of this study through an extensive analysis of crisis-communication management in football, this paper can now set the basis for future research on the matter. The lack of proactive crisis communication and the belief that it is ineffective in football could be further investigated with the use of observation over a period of time and considering real-time practitioner decisions in relation to the academic believes and findings that planning proactively can assist.

In addition, the process of crisis communication could be further examined in search for the best practice (structure and techniques) in football. By investigating each club individually with the aim of providing a benchmarking measure, best and worst practice cases could be presented. These cases could then act as a guideline for future practice in the industry. In addition, the effects of the two postcrisis approaches presented herein could be further explored, with more emphasis on their long-term effects.

Examining the potential application of the “crisis communications management in football” model in different similar or less similar contexts could also shed additional light on crisis communications. For example, the model’s potential implementation in a wider sporting context or in a different country could be investigated in future research that could be influenced by dissimilar sporting cultures and different country contexts, where significant variations and differentiations in practices might be encountered. Equally, in the wider context of industry sectors, crisis communications should be studied in organizations operating in similar or less similar sectors that are based in less developed and non-English-speaking countries.

Bearing in mind the current prominent role of social media in the way news is disseminated, additional research could also be conducted on the current role of traditional media in crisis communications. Examining whether their role has decreased or transformed could allow for a more thorough view of communications practices to be provided while linking it with the methods and ways that football clubs are managing it.

Finally, the football industry or the wider sports industry can benefit from additional research focusing on cross-case comparisons between sports, or even among various other communications functions and crisis communication. In this way, professional sports could be provided with the opportunity to further develop toward a more mature managerial approach that could prove beneficial for their future.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions/Checklist

- Have you encountered a crisis while working for the club?
- How often does a crisis take place?
- What is your role in a crisis?
- What is the line of action in communicating when a crisis occurs?
- Can you walk me through what happens communication-wise?
- Is there a plan for communicating in crises? If no, why? If yes, can you give me details about it?
- Are there any actions taken before a crisis takes place to prepare you/the team for when a crisis comes? If no, why? If yes, can you give me details about it?
- Has there been an attempt to create a plan on how to communicate in a crisis?
- Do you believe a plan would help? Why?
- Once a crisis takes place, what is the club's communication practice?
- How is crisis communication organized? Who leads? Are there any particular steps that are followed?
- Is it the same for all crises? Are there any patterns/particular practices you follow?
- Is there a crisis-communications strategy?
- What role do the media play in crisis communications?
- How close is your relationship with the media?

## Appendix B: List of Interviewees

Club	Role	Rank within the football club
A	Marketing and communications manager	Head of department
B	Head of marketing and communications	Head of department
C	Head of communications	Head of department
D	Communications director	Head of department
E	Communications manager	Middle management
F	Communications manager	Middle management
G	Head of communications	Head of department
H	Communications director	Head of department
I	Marketing and media manager	Middle management
J	Communications executive	Middle management
K	Communications manager	Middle management
L	Head of communications	Head of department
M	Online marketing and communications manager	Head of department
N	Head of communications	Head of department
O	Communications director	Head of department
P	Head of communications and media	Head of department
Q	Head of communications and marketing	Head of department
R	Communications director	Head of department
S	Head of communications	Head of department
T	Head of communications and marketing	Head of department
U	Head of communications and media	Head of department
V	Head of communications and marketing	Head of department
W	Communications manager	Head of department
X	Communications director	Head of department
Y	Communications director	Head of department

*Note.* The clubs are presented in the chronological order in which the interviews took place.