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Crisis communications management in football clubs

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Crisis Communications Management in Football Clubs

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Abstract

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 crisis communications current practice 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 pro-activity and presents the most popular strategies of crisis communications management; the "wait for the dust to settle" and the "react promptly before the noise grows". In addition, an under-documented 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.

Introduction

The business world encounters unexpected events of various forms and sizes on an everyday basis. According to Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (2003, as cited in Heath & Vasquez, 2004, p. 54) 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”. As the quote illustrates, an unexpected or unplanned event can potentially develop into a crisis of varying sizes that may bear harmful effects on both the short-term profitability and 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. Firstly, 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, as cited in Heath & Vasquez, 2004, p. 54) 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. Secondly, 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. Additionally, although there is a dense and compound relation between crisis management and communicating in a crisis, the study will present only the elements connected to the function of communication in regards with 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 the 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 some of the sports leagues have (it is estimated, for example, that the Premier League attracts the interest of more than 63 per cent 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 the ones by Bruce and Tini (2008), Wilson, Stavros, and Westberg (2008), and Trosby (2010) tend to focus on the crisis itself and the PR 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 the researcher to provide an answer to this question, the focus will be drawn on the English football industry, and in particular the English Premier League clubs, which can allow for insights to be gained from industry leaders working within 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 the author 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 organisation-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 in understanding crisis communications in football.

Literature Review

This section sets out the main sources of literature which 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, etc.), and the general public. Dividing the potential audience in two groups, stakeholders and general public, and further categorizing the former to smaller sub-groups was an advice provided often 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, 1995a, 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 the long-term reputation of an organization.

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

- (a) To deny the existence of a crisis and refuse to cooperate with the media;
- (b) To provide incomplete and inaccurate information often reluctantly and delayed or;
- (c) To develop and sustain 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; De Beer & Coetzee, 2008; Rensburg & Barton, 2001; Sriramesh, Grunig & Dozier, 1996).

Time Related Approaches of 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 (2006, p. 236) for the National Center for Food Protection and Defense, which comprises of 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, both in terms of management and communication, has two distinctive stages; the pro-active and the re-active. 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).

Pro-active, 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

hypothesis takes 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 spokes-person 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 through her work, 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 the Risk Communication theory as discussed by Chess (2002) and Covello (1992) which includes the risk estimates and the possible consequences.

Re-active 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 re-active 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 responding throughout the crisis coherently is emphasized through 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 it 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 in these organisations. Advocates of the importance of the re-active 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) argues in his study that the re-active 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 not only aims at reducing uncertainty, but also at maintaining or even enhancing the 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 (1995b), 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 findings 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 the crisis takes place, different communication models have been developed that embody the unique characteristics of each business sector. For example, the “Best Practices in risk and crisis communication” model (Seeger, 2006, p. 236) discussed above, was created for the health business sector, to provide detailed guidance for companies and their communication departments in this industry. However, as it was mentioned earlier in this study, 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 PR 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 PR and image management, focusing on either the sport organisations’ (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.

Having examined 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, the empirical research on crisis communications management in football will be presented.

Method

In order to examine the current practice of crisis communications in football, an empirical investigation had to take place. Firstly, the research sample was selected. Based on the wide disparity of organisations that operate within 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 in order to select the sample which consists of cases that share an important characteristic or set of characteristics, which in this study was that they 'participated in the Premier League in any of the past five seasons'. Since at the end of each playing season, three 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 assisted the author in acquiring 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, etc) and reach (current and potential fans, social media followers, etc.) of the clubs.

Qualitative semi-structured 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 research approach chosen was the 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 the interviewer with the flexibility needed in order 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,

as cited in Heath & Vasquez, 2004, p. 54), 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, and thus 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 two to 12 people. It is also worth underlining 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 the researcher's professional network of contacts. Since the researcher was at that time a Communication professional working within 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 the author was also encouraged to provide them with feedback on the crisis communication practices implemented in the industry. The researcher was able to secure interviews from the senior communications employees of 25 out of the 30 clubs that participated in the Premier League in any of the past five seasons, that will be the sample of this study.

The list of interviewees includes professionals such as clubs' Head of Communications, Head of Marketing and Communications, Communications Director, etc. It is worth underling 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. Due to interviewees' inconveniences the author 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 analysing the findings was for the author 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 the author to include accurate information, the interviewees will remain anonymous and will therefore be referred to “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, the researcher 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, she was allowed to keep notes on the topics discussed. Based on the fact that the study does not aim to identify the details of each case, but 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 was proven useful for this study (Mayers, 2009).

The interviews took place between April and September 2014, with the duration of each one varying from 20 to 40 minutes. Since the interviewees were ensured of their

anonymity, the interviews were recorded (except from the moments in which the author was asked to turn off the recording) and later transcribed in order for their analysis to be facilitated. Finally, based on the relatively small number of data collected, no analysis software was used. Instead, the examination of the findings was done by the researcher based on reading thoroughly 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, intra-coding was used, which required the author to conduct the coding process twice in different times. Creswell (2013) suggests that this method eliminates the discrepancy or inconsistency that may occur while coding caused by the author's mood, tiredness or meticulousness. Following intra-coding, inter-coding was also employed, and as a result the coding process was carefully and independently reviewed by an industry "insider", in an attempt for an assessment on the interpretive process to be provided. 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. Following their request, their 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 inter-coding process into consideration, and after agreeing on the final codes, the themes identified in the data allowed the author to pinpoint and unfold the underlying patterns of crisis communications in football clubs. During this procedure, the findings were re-examined and verified with five interviewees (through additional discussions), in order for the author 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' approach to a crisis will be 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 pro-active and re-active communication actions, in line with Millar and Heath's (2003) work. This distinction will help the reader better understand the current practice, while facilitating the author in presenting one of the key discussion points of the findings, the lack of pro-active crisis communication. As this section will show, the re-active crisis communication practices are substantially more than the pro-active, 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 re-active or post-crisis 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 pre-crisis (proactive) communications actions on behalf of the clubs, which is illustrated with a dashed lined box in the figure. Following the unexpected event, an initial crisis evaluation takes place before the post-crisis course of action is decided (illustrated with a dotted lined box in the figure). In terms of reactive

responses, two post-crisis 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 it will be further explored below. Leveraging the media relationship, a rather understudied technique that appears to be popular among PL clubs, precedes these re-active steps, taking place before one of the two post-crisis communication approaches is chosen. Finally, depending on the reactive strategy selected, the respecting courses of action are followed. The model and its various steps (themes that emerged through the data) will be further explored in this section.

###Insert Figure 1 here###

Pro-Active versus Re-Active Approach

As already identified by the literature review (Fearn-Banks, 2007), crisis communication has a two-fold nature; the pro-active and the re-active. Each approach is equally important in the overall communication of an organisation while facing a crisis and should not be excluded from the overall communication process. However, when examining football clubs’ practices one approach was clearly favoured over the other.

Pro-active Crisis Communications

As far as the pro-active 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 pro-active 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 to collect any information and details needed in order for the press release to be as accurate as possible. This release will then be sent to the media and published on the clubs' own media (magazine, web-site, social media accounts, etc.), representing the opinion of the club. While, relegation can potentially develop into a crisis following a rapid snowball effect (players' complaints, manager's resigning, administration's accusations, fans' outrage, etc.; Banyard & Shevlin, 2001), it is worth underlining 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:

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 pro-active course of action was the only example mentioned in all the interviews regarding pre-crisis communication planning. In other words, drafting a Press Release when the likelihood of a potential crisis is very high is the only pro-active 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, they should be firstly 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 pre-crisis 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 pro-active communication planning of a crisis would not be functional and effective in football for various reasons. Firstly and most importantly, 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, as well as the individuals involved. In most cases these characteristics are unique and bear many differences with 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).

Secondly, as it 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 pro-active 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 pro-active 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 in which crisis or unexpected events take place in football does not allow for planning to take place. According to the interviewees, the fast pace in which football clubs are functioning impedes the communications professionals from planning future actions, since their workload consists mostly or re-acting to unexpected and unplanned events and requests from various stakeholders of each club.

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 re-active 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 clubs’ both short-term operation and long-term reputation, as already studied by Sellnow (1993) and Wilson et al. (2008). The re-active 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 that are involved. It is worth noting that the answer given by all 25 interviewees when asked about the communications re-action 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, to represent the club when needed, and communicate its opinion to both the media and the general public. This initial crisis evaluation includes an additional consultation with the legal and financial advisors, in order for any further implications to be assessed. During the post-crisis activity, efforts are made in order for the club to re-act 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 it 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 are conducted promptly (often through quick phone calls) and therefore do not impede or delay the course of actions that follow. This quick but vital step in crisis communications management is presented in a dotted line box between the crisis event and the reactive strategies that follow.

What was also underlined as a vital factor of re-active crisis communication is the ability of the individuals employed by the club, as Grunig’s (1992) Excellence model also suggests. As emphasised by the majority of the interviewees, the ability and talent of the

club's employees (Director of Communications, Head of Media, Press Officer, etc.) is 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 in order to function efficiently. In fact, as it was argued repeatedly by the interviewees, their skills are often overcompensating 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 post-crisis communication approaches to be presented. However, through the examination of the post-crisis practices presented by the interviewees two general themes / strategies or reactive response were identified and will be further analyzed below.

Post-Crisis Strategies

Regarding the general approaches on post-crisis line of action, two strategies were presented that bear no similarities between them. On the 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 of the sample), a large number of events that appear as 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 broadcasted every day, the media and public's interest are likely to focus on each event for a relatively small amount of time. So, by implementing patience and not re-acting 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 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).

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 communicate the crisis to the media and the public but at 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 of the sample), is that when a crisis is likely to attract significant media and public interest, thus "producing a lot of noise" (Interviewee M), by re-acting 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 re-action can provide the media and public with information and details at a very early stage, that 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 organisation 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 (website/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 re-acting 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 the 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 following a crisis, as underlined by all the interviewees, is the informal personal relationships 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 it 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 either in re-acting or even preventing a crisis. Regarding the former (re-acting), 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 re-active procedures. These procedures might include arranging Directors' meetings and discussions with players, or even acquiring financial and legal advice. Most importantly, this additional time provides the club with the opportunity to re-act promptly and communicate 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' behaviour 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 the latter (preventing) is concerned, when information concerning the club can be a potential crisis if publicized, precluding their announcement to the public is likely to prevent the entire crisis. By informing the employees of the club about the forthcoming news and their 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 the relationship 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 the media relationship can be discussed.

Even though leveraging the media relationship would require for 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 and it is, therefore, presented as a reactive response step in the Crisis Communications Management in Football model.

It is worth underling that the above mentioned 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 impeding the communications professionals from using this technique. However, as all interviewees argued, leveraging the media relationship is still considered a focal point of the crisis communications practice in the industry, even though it can be expected that its use will gradually reduce.

Also, based on the long-term viability of crisis communications, it is worth noting that this technique relates directly to the informal personal relationships 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 a club's asset. Therefore, the individual's network will remain their asset and will not be converted into the club's asset should the employee-employer relationship ceases to exist.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Crisis communication management was chosen as the topic of this research due to its greater impact on the football industry, regarding corporate reputation and image management.

Whilst 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, the reader was presented with a thorough examination of the current practice of crisis communication in football. Firstly, the pro-active and re-active approaches were examined while underlining the lack of pre-crisis planning. Pro-active 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 pro-active planning when crisis communications are concerned. The unpredictability of each crisis' 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, regardless the media training provided by the clubs, were prone to be involved 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 it was mentioned in the literature review. This could therefore raise a question on the football industry's persistence to avoid planning, which could lead to a lack of strategic responses and an overall less efficient reaction.

Additional practitioner focused research is required in order for this question to be answered in detail.

Also, the two main approaches regarding post-crisis communications were discussed, while presenting arguments 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 on a crisis lasts for a very short amount of time, until another crisis appears. While the latter, less popular approach aims at addressing the issue the moment it is made public, so that any information publicised is accurate, and speculation is limited or stopped. Both approaches resemble practices followed in other industries, with the less popular approach being the one favoured by academics and other industries. Football clubs seem to favour a more patient and reserved approach, which 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 each club, promoting a more coherent response, which might not have been possible if the club had responded right away. It is worth underlining that regardless of the strategy they follow, football clubs appear to be responding in an organisation-wide coherent and consistent way, thus presenting a 'united front' and protecting the long-term reputation of the organisation.

Finally, a very common technique when communicating during a crisis was presented, the use of informal personal relationships between the employees of the clubs and the members of the media. This popular technique within football allows for news or stories to be 'exchanged' with other information, in order for the details of an event not to be communicated to the public (immediately or at all), and therefore a potential crisis to be delayed, diminished or even avoided. Since this technique has yet to attract adequate academic interest its popularity and success in other industries is still rather understudied. According to the interviewees, however, it is one of the most popular and efficient techniques

that allows for communications professional 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, as discussed above. 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 PR training in regards with 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 is trying to fill, the Crisis Communications Management in Football model is introduced, which illustrates and summarizes the key findings of this study. The model includes the two approaches presented by the interviewees, as well as the additional step – technique of 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 it has already been argued, crisis communications is an under-researched topic and therefore mapping the current practices can be a first step in appreciating it.

An element that appears to be missing from crisis communications approaches in football, and respectively from the Crisis Communications Management in Football model, is the reflection or learning step that is underlined in practices in other industries. Evaluating the efficiency of a particular response could potentially lead an organization in identifying 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, that can be answered following 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 its 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 on very capable communications practitioners. Since guidelines on various aspects are absent, it is often the employees' initiatives and abilities that assure the well-functioning of the industry. Consequently, it is the human assets that enhance the efficiency of communications in the football industry at the moment and 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 within football leagues. Efforts have been made to select an accurate and representative sample of the league for this study. The number of the clubs included in the sample, 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.

Additionally, due to further inconveniences, as it was mentioned in the methodology 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 the data 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 on any efforts to generalise the findings. However, as it was underlined in the introduction of the thesis, the aim of this research was not to generate findings that could be generalised to a wider population in a statistical sense. On the contrary, this study aimed at offering rich insights regarding crisis communications in football clubs, by detecting patterns in the data that can be conveyed to similar settings. Additionally, a number of actions were taken in order for the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis to be ensured, including member checking, intra and inter-coder agreement. Additional details on the actions employed to reduce potential limitations and increase the reliability and validity of this study were provided in the methodology section.

Another limitation, as far as presenting and analyzing the findings is concerned, is the accuracy and truthfulness of the information acquired. As discussed above, in order for the data to be presented in the most accurate way, the anonymity of the interviewees has been maintained in this study and neither the transcribed interviews nor the full list of interviewees can be provided. Additionally, excluding any particular crisis examples that were mentioned in the interviews but could be linked to an individual club could be considered a limitation, however, it was considered a necessity due to the sensitivity of the topic discussed.

Future Research Implications

Having provided an answer to the aim of this study through an extent analysis of crisis communication management in football, this paper can now set the basis for future research on the matter. The lack of pro-active crisis communication and the belief of its ineffectiveness 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.

Additionally, 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 to provide 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. Also, the effects of the two post-crisis approaches presented above could be further explored, with more emphasis put 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 allow for additional light to be shed on crisis communications. For example the model's potential implementation in a wider sporting context or in different country context could be investigated in future research, that could be influenced by dissimilar sporting cultures and different country contexts, where significant variations and differentiations in the practices might be encountered. Equally, in the wider context of industry sectors, crisis communications should be studied in organisations operating in similar or less similar sectors, which are based in less developed and non-English speaking countries.

Bearing in mind the current prominent role of social media in the way in which 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 on the communications practices to be provided, while linking it with the methods and ways in which 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 towards a more mature managerial approach which 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 in order 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 organised? 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

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

Club	Role	Seniority 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	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

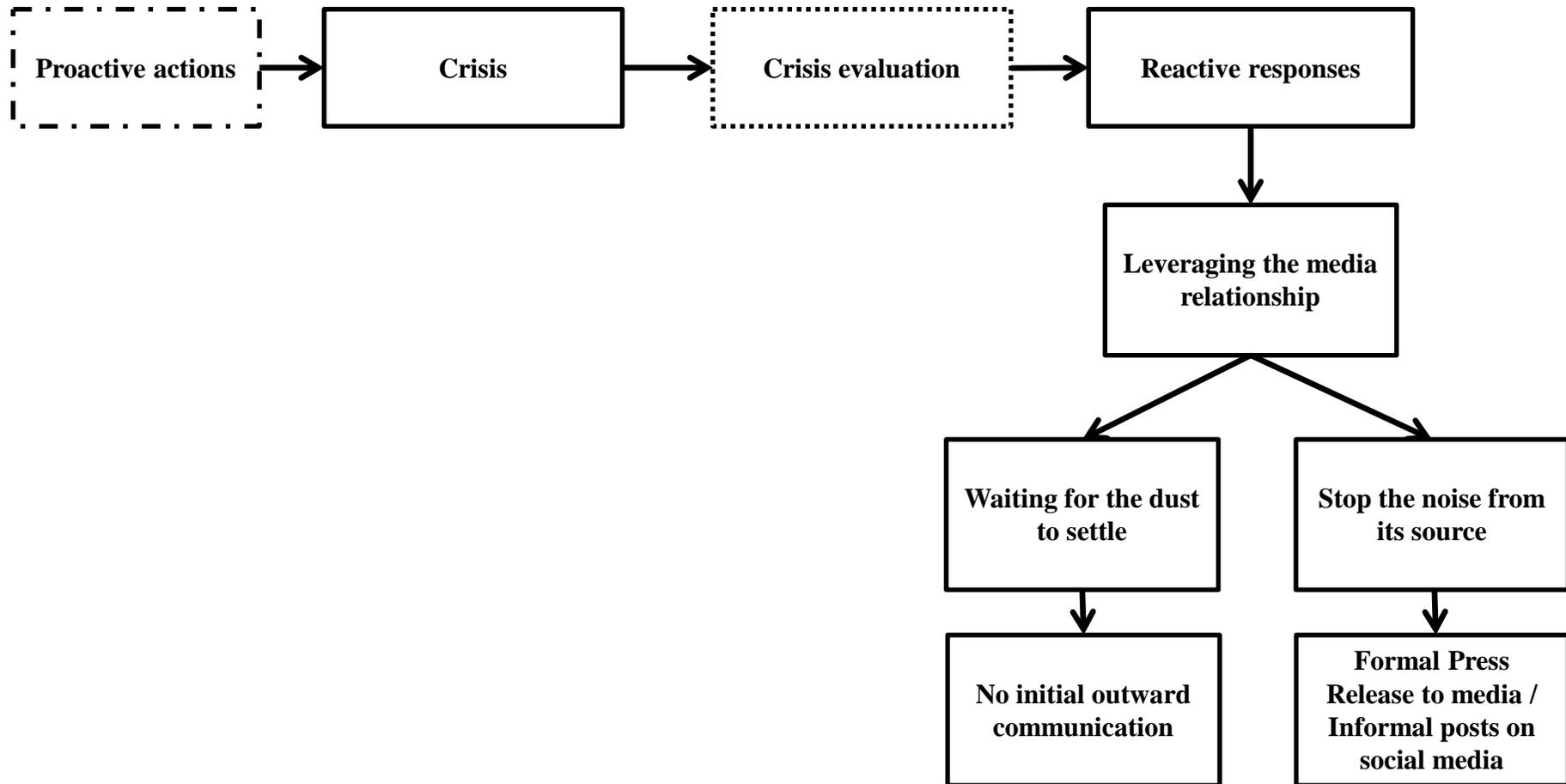


Figure 1. Crisis communications management in football