

**Crisis Communication Project: Rubiales-Hermoso Case**

Zihan Yu

Department of Communication, Northeastern University

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Dr. Heidi Kevoe Feldman

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### **Crisis Communication Project: Rubiales-Hermoso Case**

The incident involving Luis Rubiales and Jenni Hermoso during the 2023 Women's World Cup, embroiling the President of the Royal Spanish Football Foundation (RFEF), Luis Rubiales, and soccer player Jenni Hermoso, didn't just yield immediate repercussions. It unveiled larger issues like socio-cultural negligence, communication gaps, and flawed Image Restoration Strategies within the soccer industry. This situation starkly highlighted the disconnect between crisis response and societal norms, particularly in terms of gender equality. The RFEF and Rubiales revealed limited understanding of diverse audience segments, shedding light on the pressing need for the RFEF to adapt to evolving socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, it stresses the significance of acknowledging and respecting varied audience interests during crises to effectively manage public perceptions. Ultimately, this study underscores the potential for leveraging crises to drive social change, specifically advocating for gender equity and women's rights in athletics.

To restore the RFEF's reputation in sports equality and women's rights, this paper will initially explore the root causes of the issue using Image Restoration Theory as a framework. It will then scrutinize the pitfalls of solely relying on Image Restoration Strategies and examine how unique socio-cultural factors within the football industry contributed to the Rubiales-Hermoso crisis. This study will dissect the crisis timeline, data collected from credible sources, and public sentiment expressed on social media platforms. Finally, it will investigate the transformation of the crisis from the Rubiales-Hermoso incident to a broader discourse on gender equality within the Spanish soccer industry. Through this comprehensive analysis, the study aims to propose a robust image recovery strategy for the RFEF, focusing on promoting equality in sports and advocating for the rights of female athletes. The outcomes of this research will guide

the RFEF in effectively managing similar crises in the future, fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment within the soccer industry.

### **Review of Literature**

The literature review section examines the fundamental concepts of the theory and numerous strategies that companies employ during crisis situations. The literature review examines five primary techniques and illustrating examples from various crises and their influence on company reputation. Additionally, the report delves into limits and complexities, underscoring the importance of taking into account the socio-cultural context and the distinctiveness of specific sectors when conducting crisis analysis. Furthermore, this study examines the significance of Luis Rubiales and the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) in the realm of soccer, thereby demonstrating the complicated dynamics of handling crises within a deeply ingrained cultural and industry structure. For successful crisis management and image restoration in the soccer industry, the literature review highlights the importance of structural change, the difficulty of addressing power dynamics, and the necessity of adjusting to cultural shifts.

### **Define Image Restoration Theory**

The core principle of Image Restoration Theory encompasses two elements: the company being blamed and held accountable for an action, and the behavior being perceived as offensive by the audience (Benoit, 1997, p.178). Primarily, regardless of the events that happened during a crisis, a corporation or institution can inevitably face accusations of both fostering and triggering such crisis. Therefore, the corporation or institution bears full responsibility for the action if it was carried out, directed, promoted, enabled, or allowed for the crisis to occur. Conversely, there is a possibility that the act may not be viewed as offensive by key audiences. Hence, the

statement "perception holds greater significance than reality" means that the audience perceives the organization's behavior as unoffensive, regardless of the nature of the situation (Benoit, 1997, p.178). It is imperative for a corporation to have a strong connection with several levels of audiences, including local citizens, regulatory organizations, stakeholders, employees, and news journalists. Organizations should determine how key audiences perceive the crisis, as key audiences are the main drivers in shaping public opinion about the crisis. Additionally, comprehending key audiences is necessary for identifying and implementing the appropriate Image Restoration strategies.

### **Types of Image Restoration Strategies**

When faced with a crisis, a company might express an effective and carefully constructed response. The discourse on Image Restoration strategies mostly focuses on message selection, which includes five main categories: Denial, Evasion of responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, and Mortifications (Benoit, 1997, p.179).

Denial and Evasion of Responsibility are intricately linked to the fundamental element of persuasion. To defend the accused actions the firm may opt to expressly deny the truth and attribute the crisis to being a reaction to an undesirable behavior committed by another individual. This allows the actions to be seen as a justifiable response to provocation (Bruns & Bruner, 2009, p.29). Additionally, an organization facing accusations of misconduct has the ability to mitigate the perceived offensiveness of its actions among audiences. The concept of Reduce Offensiveness is relevant in cases where a corporation is already facing allegations of misconduct (Benoit, 1997, p.180). The negative emotional impact of wrongdoing can be reduced by minimizing the level of harm and downplaying the seriousness of the problem. Finally, companies and individuals facing a crisis and allegations of wrongdoing can effectively

counterattack their accusers, therefore reducing the adverse impact of criticism (Benoit, 1997, p.180). The Exxon Valdez oil spill incident in 1989 serves as a prime example of how a firm may utilize Image Restoration strategy to effectively handle its public image following a severe environmental catastrophe. At first, Exxon expressed skepticism on the severity of the disaster and employ minimization strategies to decrease the scale of the spill and mitigate potential ecological harm. Exxon explicitly denied any responsibility by asserting that the spill was an inadvertent event that was unforeseen and impossible to prevent (Butler and Sayre, 2012, p.23). In the end, Exxon attempted to assign accountability to Captain Joseph Hazelwood, the person charged with the oversight of the Exxon Valdez during the incident, and further portrayed him as a rebellious staff member who executed irrational decisions (Butler and Sayre, 2012, p.21). Overall, the corporation employed a provocation strategy to divert blame from the audience and onto an individual to shift responsibility for the wrongdoing away from the organization.

The fourth and fifth Image Restoration strategies are Corrective Action and Mortification, both of which require a certain level of commitment to resolve problems. Mortification can be defined as the explicit recognition and acknowledgment of the wrongdoing, followed with a sincere longing for forgiveness. However, a potential disadvantage of this method is that it may incentivize those who have suffered to pursue legal actions (Coombs, 2012, p.31). For instance, the Chipotle Mexican Grill crisis in 2015 involved a series of incidents involving food-borne illnesses associated with its restaurants, most of which were caused by E. coli bacteria. Initially, Chipotle did not refute the issue but promptly acknowledged the incidents and the health risks. Chipotle expeditiously executed a corrective action by releasing a public apology from CEO Steve Ells, acknowledging accountability for the food safety issues, conducting a thorough investigation into the origin of the contamination, and temporarily closing multiple stores

(Chung et al., 2018, p.60). Chipotle effectively applied Image Restoration strategy, including corrective action, and mortification, leading to a gradual improvement in reputation and restore consumer confidence by adopting an open approach, prioritizing food safety, and implementing preventive measures to prevent future occurrences, despite the considerable time and effort required to address public concerns (Chung et al., 2018, p.63). This example underscores the importance of immediately and sincerely resolving a crisis by acknowledging the issues, implementing corrective measures, and continually engaging the public in a transparent and empathic manner to restore trust and reputation.

Simultaneously, there are no obligations mandating a corporation to address the accusations, even in the event of receiving criticism from key stakeholders. Simply shifting focus to another topic can serve as a strategy to evade public attention. Therefore, by strategically developing a crisis contingency plan before the outbreak of a crisis, an organization can prevent errors in its early response. Furthermore, prior to response a crisis, it is critical to ascertain two pivotal elements: the characteristics of the issue and the corresponding target audience (Seeger & Padgett, 2010, p.132).

FIFA's strategic response to the 2015 corruption scandal demonstrated the effectiveness of a thorough crisis management plan. FIFA employed targeted communication strategies to connect with diverse stakeholders, aiming to regain trust, address particular issues, and implement organizational transformations. A major dilemma for FIFA in 2015 was the corruption scandal, which involved several accusations of corruption and bribery at the highest levels of the organization, resulting in the indictment of senior FIFA management. FIFA recognized numerous key stakeholders, including the general public, football fans, sponsors, member associations, and governmental institutions, each with unique interests and expectations.

Sponsors voiced concern about being associated with a corrupt organization, while member associations and government bodies called for reforms and openness (Manoli & Anagnostou, 2022, p.299). FIFA's earlier response involved denial, which entailed downplaying the severity of the issue or attempting to distance themselves from the persons facing accusations. However, the gravity of the allegations and the legal actions taken by the U.S. Department of Justice made it hard to fully disprove the wrongdoing. FIFA responded by implementing numerous corrective actions to address the situation and regain their credibility. The assesses implemented include the creation of an unbiased ethics committee to investigate accusations and enforce reforms; the resignation of FIFA President Sepp Blatter, who had become a symbol of the crisis; efforts to revise the organization's governance structure and improve transparency, as well as the initiation of legal actions against individuals implicated in the scandal (Manoli & Anagnostou, 2022, p.306). FIFA primarily prioritizes the development of a communication strategy that explicitly targets specific key audiences and addresses their requirements and expectations. Additionally, FIFA demonstrated its commitment to transparency and honesty for the purpose of reassuring sponsors, as well as actively communicated with member associations to obtain their support for reform efforts. The challenging of rebuilding confidence and repairing reputation was successfully accomplished through their strategic approach of customizing messages to specific target demographics, while also establishing and maintaining transparent and precise communication channels with both the public and the media. In light of their overall success, the meticulous crisis management plan played a vital role in their overall success (Manoli & Anagnostou, 2022, p.308).

### **Limitation of Image Repair Discourse**

The potential for misinterpretations may arise due to the varied understanding of the term "image". Given the lack of consistency in corporate image, employing Image Restoration Theory may oversimplify the discussion on firm image and crisis responsibility, reducing it to a simplistic binary of good versus bad behavior and positive versus negative image. Moreover, when observed from the audience's point of view, the Image Restoration strategies may appear biased as they tend to prioritize the interests of corporations, potentially reducing the likelihood of forgiveness (Bruns & Bruner, 2009, pp.29). Nowadays, public discussions are greatly limited. Particularly, audiences who are cognizant of the influence of social media are inclined to favor an alternative interpretation of the text and its influence. In this regard, a "text" that is incorporated into the image restoration strategy may not be sufficiently persuasive to sway audiences (Bruns & Bruner, 2009, pp.32). After a passenger was forcibly removed from a United flight in April 2017, the airline's response to the incident was criticized for being insufficient and inhumane. At first, United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz issued a statement that described the situation as the need to "readmit" the passenger. The message was condemned for being unjust, not immediately addressing the mistreatment of the passengers, downplaying the gravity of the situation, and producing a high level of social media discussion. Munoz's initial response in this instance was erroneous; it disregarded the outrage stirred by the video on social media (Hearit, 2021, pp.4). Instead of relying on conventional verbal and written forms of communication such as accounts, excuses, and apologies, it is more effective to use a flexible approach that use slogans, ideographs, and nonverbal image recreation. Prior to implementing the Image Restoration strategy, it is essential to provide a thorough analysis of the evolving attributes of the present public realm. This evaluation should encompass an examination of cultural and socio-economic causes contributing to the issue (Bruns & Bruner, 2009, pp.32).



## **Sociocultural Context**

In general, the analysis of a crisis based solely on the Image Restoration Theory could limit consideration of the cultural and the industry system uniqueness. A sociocultural analysis is necessary to be established, especially the media reports, message from organization, and message from social media, thus, to provide an insight of the possibility to utilize innovated media tactic to restore corporation image (Boombs, 2012, pp.34). In the case of Rubiales' sexual harassment of Hermoso during the Women's World Cup, the sole examination toward RFEF and Rubiales' may result an overlook of the nature of football industry and the consideration toward protecting long-standing men-oriented football sporting reputation. Thus, the reality that Rubiales has a strong career relationship with the Spanish football industry and a positive reputational bond with the RFEF may be overlooked. After the crisis has been resolved, the focus shifts to sports equality and women's rights justice. Currently, the RFEF faces a critical period in which it must restore its public image and reputation. When making recommendations exclusively based on Image Restoration Theory, it fails to consider if such social justice movements, which may compel FFEF or the higher corporate UEFA to undertake structural adjustments, are expected and desired.

The alleged harassment of Hermoso by Rubiales during the Women's World Cup is a serious issue that highlights the problem of harassment and misconduct in the soccer industry. In football industry, power structure often reflects historical and culture norms that perpetuate male dominance. Boards, executives, and coaching staff are predominantly male dominated. This lack of diversity at the leadership level contribute to a culture where decisions and policies may not adequately consider gender-related issues (O'Brien, 1970). Therefore, Female players often face disparities in resources, pay, and visibility compared to their male counterparts. Additionally,

media coverage tends to prioritize men's football, which normalized a male-centric football culture. Thus, the invisibility and ignorance in female player eventually led to lack of sponsorship, media coverage and endorsement. In handling incident of harassment within the football industry, those misconduct may be normalized or dismissed. Female victim may fear repercussions or lack of confidence that their complaints will be handled seriously, thus creating a culture of silence among players who experienced harassment issues. Moreover, football industry lacks robust reporting mechanisms or policies that specifically tailored to address harassments. The absence of structural support hinder victim from coming forward, additional with gender imbalance in decision-making, the ultimate structural changes still made among the male-dominant leadership, without the considering the perspective and experience of female within the football industry, the structural changes may eventually perpetuate a cycle where issue related to gender dynamics are not effectively addressed (O'Brien, 1970). From this point forward, addressing the imbalanced power dynamics in football industry require the implementation of clear and comprehensive policies and reporting mechanisms for handling harassment and misconduct issue. The policy changes require educating stakeholders to hold accountable for their actions and prioritizing the safety of athletes over preserving organizational reputations. It is also important to arouse media and public attention from activists who are outside of football industry, thus, to challenge the normalized gender imbalance and encourage victim to speak out to ensure a more representative decision-making process.

### ***Luis Rubiales***

Luis Rubiales, the former professional footballer, and president of the RFEF, has a background deeply entrenched in the world of football. Rubiales pursued a career as a professional footballer before transitioning into football administration and leadership roles.

Rubiales's career as a player primarily revolved around his time as a defender in various Spanish football clubs, including Levante, Getafe, and Valencia, among others. His playing career provided him with firsthand experience of the dynamics within the footballing world, the culture of the sport, and the structures of power prevalent in the industry. Transitioning from a player to a football administrator, Rubiales assumed leadership positions within Spain's football administration. He became the president of the Association of Spanish Footballers (AFE), where he advocated for player rights and welfare, gaining prominence in football circles for his outspokenness and commitment to addressing issues affecting players; this advocacy work enhanced his reputation among players and stakeholders. In 2018, Rubiales assumed one of the most influential roles in Spanish football as the president of the RFEF. His tenure at the federation aimed to navigate various challenges and complexities within the football landscape, overseeing both men's and women's football programs (Sam, 2023).

During his tenure as President of the RFEF, Luis Rubiales has had a significant influence and visibility within the Spanish Football Federation as a result of his leadership style, advocacy work, vision for change and commitment to advancing all aspects of Spanish soccer, including women's soccer and player welfare. Rubiales faced a variety of challenges during his tenure, including the management of high-profile events, negotiations with other soccer organizations, and the resolution of controversies within Spanish soccer. His ability to navigate these complexities has elevated his position within the RFEF. At the same time, Rubiales is known for his confident and outspoken character, and he is not afraid to take a stand on key issues in the soccer world, demonstrating strong leadership qualities and a willingness to face challenges head on. Under Rubiales' leadership, Spain has worked to promote and develop women's soccer, helping it to increase its visibility, support, and investment. Rubiales' commitment to gender

equality in soccer has earned him recognition from the RFEF and the wider soccer community. However, Rubiales' influence has not been without controversy and criticism. His hardline approach has sometimes led to conflict, and there are differing views on the validity of some of the decisions made during his presidency (Sam, 2023). As a result, the sexual harassment incident during the Women's World Cup could have a serious impact on his reputation and influence within the RFEF and the wider soccer community, depending on how the incident is handled and the outcome.

### ***Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF)***

The difficulties faced by the RFEF in dealing with harassment stem from the need to manage the intricate interplay between the cultural significance of soccer in Spain, the reputation of the organization and the responsibility to uphold ethical standards. Soccer represents more than just a sport in Spanish society; it is closely linked to regional identity, social pride, and national unity. Addressing sensitive issues such as harassment in this cultural context requires navigating the complex emotions and perceptions associated with the sport. As a governing body, the European Football Confederation is a role model for players, clubs, and fans. How the Confederation deals with issues such as harassment sets a precedent for how such issues are dealt with across the soccer community, influencing perceptions and behaviors in the sport. And soccer is seen as representing the promotion of values such as teamwork, fair play, and sportsmanship. The harassment incident is contrary to these principles and poses a threat to the ethical standards that RFEF upholds in the sport. The reputation and credibility of the Foundation is of paramount importance not only in the soccer world but also in the eyes of the public. Mishandling the harassment incident could seriously damage the organization's reputation and undermine trust in its leadership and management (Rampling, 2023). Overall,

striking a balance between delivering justice to those involved and preserving the organization's public image is a delicate task. Coupled with this, addressing harassment requires a cultural shift and systemic change within the organization. However, the deep-rooted Spanish soccer culture is perhaps resistant to change, which, combined with the entrenched norms of the soccer world, can make it challenging to implement effective measures quickly. Therefore, an effective response to these challenges requires a careful and thoughtful approach that prioritizes justice and the preservation of the values and integrity of the game.

### **Data and Method**

In initiating an investigation into the crisis involving RFEF President Rubiales and Spanish women's soccer player Hermoso, the focus was directed towards evaluating the organizational response and the efforts aimed at restoring Rubiales' reputation. The rapid responses from RFEF, Rubiales, and Hermoso during the initial week of the crisis were apparent in the media. However, the plethora of stakeholders involved, spanning various levels including the Spanish governor, FIFA, RFEF, FUTPRO, and Hermoso, seemed to pursue self-serving agendas, leading to a muddled information landscape confusing the public and social media. The primary goal here is to structure the crisis timeline coherently for better tracking. Additionally, credible sports channels like ESPN and The Athletic served as key sources for authenticating and obtaining chronological details. The reliability of statements and news releases from stakeholders across the hierarchy was cross verified through reputable sources such as Forbes, New York Times, ABC News, and CNN.

When examining the factors that contribute to the gathering of data on social media and public opinion about gender equality, it is important to take into account the societal influences, such as public outrage and pressure put on the stakeholders. Furthermore, it is worth noting that

the data collection primarily relies on comments found in news articles, as well as hashtags and postings on the popular social media platform, Twitter. Upon further investigation, it becomes apparent that the public's attention has shifted from Rubiales's sexual harassment case to the broader issue of gender equality within the Spanish women's soccer industry. In addition to this, the data will be collected to determine the specific timeframe during which this shift in public opinion occurred. This will enable a more comprehensive analysis to ascertain whether this change can be attributed to an image repair strategy or if it is a voluntary action undertaken by the public to raise awareness.

### **Pre-Crisis: 2022-2023**

In September 2022, Rubiales and RFEF faced heavy criticism for their handling of concerns raised by 15 players in the Spanish women's team. These players sought a more structured and professional approach to the team and expressed discontent with Coach Jorge Vidal's management style. Instead of fostering an open environment for RFEF to address these issues, accusations surfaced that they pressured the FA to dismiss Vidal and even threatened a potential ban of up to five years, conditioning the players' return on acknowledging mistakes and offering apologies (Flynn, 2023).

By January 2023, the Spanish Players' Association (AFE) and Tebas, among others, accused RFEF of disrespecting women's football. This stemmed from Barcelona players being limited to collecting their medals from a table on the sidelines after winning the Supercopa de España, contrasting with previous practices in men's Copa del Rey matches, as argued by RFEF. In June, internal discussions prompted changes following the women's soccer crisis in the preceding September. To enhance professionalism, the RFEF appointed more reserves to the women's national team and agreed to grant each player a €15,000 travel allowance for their

families to attend the World Cup in New Zealand and Australia. Rubiales claimed RFEF's contribution surpassed that of any other country, citing England's €11,000 allowance as second highest. As a result of these changes, three players returned home, five were not selected, and seven continued to decline playing for Spain under the existing regime (Panja, 2023).

### **Crisis Occurrence: August 20, 2023**

Spain secured victory in the 2023 Women's World Cup, clinching a 1-0 win against England courtesy of Olga Carmona's goal in the first half at Sydney's Australia Stadium. Following the final whistle, RFEF President Luis Rubiales enthusiastically celebrated, joining the Queen of Spain and her 16-year-old daughter in the VIP section of the stands. As the awards ceremony unfolded, each Spanish player received their medals amid the crowd's exuberant cheers. Rubiales embraced Hermoso and then lifted her into the air, concluding with a kiss. Hermoso, in a live Instagram video with her teammates in the locker room post-celebration, remarked, "Yes, it happened, but I didn't like it" (Lewis, 2023).

### ***Rubiales' Initial Response***

Following the incident, Rubiales employed three primary Image Restoration Strategies to address the situation: Denial, Shift Blame, and Attack Accuser. Rubiales initially dismissed criticism of his behavior during an interview on Spanish radio station Cope, stating: "We don't focus on idiots and stupid people; it was two friends celebrating. Criticisms are nonsense, they're just losers, they don't know how to see the positive" (Lewis, 2023). However, Rubiales' swift denial created a disconnect with crucial audiences, sparking increased outrage and extensive discussions on social media. The substantial attention garnered on social platforms and the extensive coverage by global reporters damaged Rubiales' public image. Rubiales immediate response failed to consider the diverse range of key audience groups. Beyond sports fans and

sponsors, worldwide news outlets, social media users, feminist unions, and activists advocating for equal rights were all significant audiences affected by the crisis due to the Women's World Cup's prominence and the narrative of "Spain Won the Women's World Cup for the First Time."

### **Post-Crisis: August 21**

Due to the widely condemned on social media, with Spanish Equality Minister Irene Montero and Sports Minister Miquel Iceta voicing their criticism. The RFEF released a statement to the Spanish news agency EFE in which Hermoso was quoted as saying: "It was a mutual and completely spontaneous gesture because of the great joy of winning the World Cup. Rubiales and I have a great relationship. It is a natural affection and gratitude" (Rampling, 2023). RFEF's immediate response is in line with Rubiales—denial Rubiales from perform the sexual harassment act, while shift the blame to accuse the victim Hermoso, arguing that Hermoso misinterprets Rubiales' behavior. However, RFEF failed to identify the key audiences who initiated the outrage and discussion on social media, those audiences (social media users, feminist union, and activists) who dissatisfy Rubiales' denial would consider RFEF's denial as approval of the wrongful act. At the meantime, worldwide news reporters who notice the raising media trend and discussion of the crisis would spend more coverage to elaborate Rubiales corruption and sexual private party history. At the end, it affects the perception of audiences (sport fan and sponsors) who originally perceive the crisis as unoffensive.

### ***Rubiales Posts Video Response***

Instead of following the RFEF's strategy in the early days, Rubiales released a video message apologizing to anyone "who felt hurt by his actions," stating:

"It was normal, natural, and not malicious at all. It seems to have caused a stir and if anyone feels hurt by it, I need to apologize, I have no choice. There is a lesson to be learned from this and an understanding that presidents of important bodies like the



Federation must be more careful – especially when it comes to ceremonies and issues like this" (Rampling, 2023).

However, as the outrage and intense discussions had already unfolded, Rubiales' apology video lacked sincerity, potentially being perceived as a forced compromise to prevent further damage to the reputation and sponsorship of the Spain women's soccer team. By the time Rubiales posted the response video, social media users had emerged as key influencers capable of shaping public perception of the crisis. Yet, the inconsistent response within the same day, combined with a lack of corrective action in the apology video, tarnished the images of both RFEF and Rubiales.

### **Post Crisis: August 22-25**

In the following day (August 22), the crisis dominated in the Spain news, the dominant voice states that Rubiales' apology was insufficient. As response, Spain's acting deputy prime minister, Yolanda Diaz, said Rubiales must step down. In August 23, FIFPRO, the global union of soccer players, issued a statement calling for immediate action, adding that it is deeply regrettable that such a special moment should be tainted by the inappropriate behavior of a man who bears so much responsibility. Hermoso then spoke through FUTPRO and her representatives: "My union FUTPRO, in coordination with my institution TMJ, is responsible for defending my interests and being an intermediary in this issue" (Sam Marsden, 2023).

Furthermore, in August 25, FUTPRO released a letter signed by 81 Spanish players, including the entire 2023 World Cup winning team, stating that they will refuse to be called up to the national team until there is a change in leadership at the RFEF and describing Rubiales' behavior as a violation of women's dignity. The letter includes a statement from Hermoso outlining that she did not consent to allow Rubiales to kiss or lift her into the air: "I would like to clarify that, as the pictures show, I never consented to the kisses that he gave me, and of course, under no circumstances did I try to lift the president. I will not tolerate my words being

doubted”. The letter further states that such an unacceptable incident is seeking to tarnish the greatest sporting achievement of Spanish women's soccer and all the players who signed this letter will not return to the national team call-ups if the current leadership continues.

***Response: Rubiales Refuse to Resign, RFEF threaten Hermoso with Legal Action***

In August 25, following a meeting at RFEF's headquarters in Madrid, Rubiales announced that he would not be stepping down as president, slamming his critics and defending his actions.

"Do you think this incident is so serious that I should go, after the best management in the history of Spanish football? Let me tell you: I'm not going to resign. I'm not going to resign. I'm not going to resign...I've come under a lot of pressure. Perhaps somebody will look to remove me on Monday. But we live in a country of laws. Is a consensual kiss enough to remove me? I'm going to fight until the end. I hope the law is followed, and that as there's no reason to remove me, it won't happen" (Lewis, 2023).

In response to FUTPRO's statement, RFEF threatened Hermoso with legal action following her confirm of sexual harassment. RFEF states that FUTPRO's statement included four photographs of Hermoso and Rubiales embracing, as well as descriptions and analyses of Rubiales' and Hermoso's body language to justify Rubiales' behavior. As FUTPRO is overstate the seriousness of the content to the press releases, the RFEF and the Rubiales would take legal action accordingly.

***Forced Response of Suspension from FIFA***

After receiving a criticism from the initial response, both RFEF and Rubiales did not response for four days. Without the changes of Image Restoration Strategy, RFEF and Rubiales's credibility and reputation are heavily damaged. Still, as the crisis is evolving with wider attention globally, higher authority FIFA is forced to step in to take the action—suspended Rubiales for 90 days. The President of the FIFA Disciplinary Committee, to safeguard the fundamental rights of

Hermoso, as well as the good order of the disciplinary proceedings of this disciplinary body, issued two additional directives (Article 7 of the FDC) ordering Rubiales to refrain from contacting or attempting to contact, either through himself or through third parties. Similarly, the RFEF and its officials or employees, directly or through third parties, are prohibited from contacting Jennifer Hermoso and her close environment (Rampling, 2023).

### **Crisis Solved: September 5-15**

On September 5, RFEF release a written apologize statement for Rubiales's action. Three days after (September 8), Spanish prosecutors have filed an indictment against Rubiales for sexual assault and coercion and formally submitted it to the Audiencia Nacional (Spain's National Court of Justice), a development that means that Rubiales, the president of the RFEF, may now face criminal charges. In Spain, sexual assault charges are punishable by one to four years' imprisonment (Rampling, 2023).

In September 10, Rubiales has confirmed his resignation as president of the RFEF. At the end (September 15), a judge of the High Court of Justice in Madrid, Spain, issued a restraining order against Rubiales, and the investigation into Rubiales' behavior continues. Meanwhile, Spanish women's soccer players demanded structural changes to the national team and continued to boycott it, postponing matches against Sweden and Switzerland (Rampling, 2023).

### **Analysis**

The analysis of the Rubiales-Hermoso crisis during the 2023 Women's World Cup brings to light critical issues in Rubiales and the RFEF's crisis management strategies. The communication gap span from sociocultural neglect, inadequate consideration of key audiences, misaligned image repair strategies, and an overall failure to adapt responses effectively. The crisis's origins trace back to overlooked signs preceding it, notably the mishandling of player

concerns in 2022. The initial denial strategy and inconsistent messages from Rubiales fuelled public outrage, creating a stark disconnect with diverse audience groups. As the crisis evolved into a platform for broader social justice discussions, the need arose for a nuanced image restoration plan centered on sports equality and women's rights within Spain's soccer industry. To mend its public image, the RFEF now faces a critical juncture necessitating structural reforms, genuine apologies, and strong support for female players advocating for equal rights.

### **Sociocultural Context Neglect**

A purely theory-driven approach might overlook the broader cultural, societal, and industry-specific nuances, impacting the interpretation and effectiveness of image repair strategies (Boombs, 2012, pp.34). The overall crisis response strategy relies heavily on image restoration theory without fully recognizing the intricate sociocultural factors at play, including social norms, gender dynamics in soccer and the historical context of male dominance in the sport. Beyond the Rubiales-Hermoso crisis, Rubiales and the RFEF did not realize that the crisis reflected and perpetuated gender differences and a male-dominated soccer culture. By ignoring these key socio-cultural factors, the crisis response failed to resonate with diverse audiences, perpetuating a disconnect between the organization's actions and broader societal values and expectations regarding gender equality and ethical conduct.

### **Inadequate Consideration of Key Audiences**

Throughout the crisis, the responses from RFEF President Rubiales lacked a comprehensive understanding of various stakeholders. The failure to address key audience groups, such as social media users, activists, feminist unions, and global news publications, led to a significant disconnect in communication. The Rubiales' Sexual Harassment Crisis during the Women's World Cup in 2023 revealed a significant communication gap within the RFEF's crisis

management strategy. Prior to this crisis, the RFEF had faced criticism regarding sexual harassment and unequal treatment of women soccer players during the 2022 events. This earlier scrutiny potentially impaired their ability to anticipate the crisis and overlooked crucial audience groups.

Early warning signs emerged in September 2022 when 15 female players from Spain's national team expressed their refusal to play under coach Jorge Vidal. Despite this, the RFEF staunchly supported Vidal, demanding player apologies for their conduct and threatening severe penalties. Eventually, certain players rejoined under Vidal's guidance (Panja, 2022). Crucial audiences, such as soccer fans and sponsors, were inadequately addressed during this crisis. The limited transmission of news restricted its spread to sports coverage and select social media channels. Consequently, the RFEF's strategy revolved around persuading fans of Vidal's importance, reframing news coverage, and employing Image Restoration Theory tactics like Denial, Shift Blame, and Attack Accuser.

The success from previous similar crises boosted confidence within the RFEF regarding their response strategy and communication with audiences. However, this confidence led to the oversight of the complexity of audience groups under broader attention. Consequently, the RFEF's initial perception of key audiences solely as sports fans and sponsors proved flawed, resulting in an ineffective response strategy. This narrow focus failed as the crisis expanded during the World Cup, involving wider audiences like social media users, activists, and equal rights advocates. The continued denial and inconsistent apologies further aggravated dissatisfaction. In conclusion, the RFEF's original perception of key audiences solely as sports fans and sponsors, influenced by pre-crisis circumstances, led to a misguided response strategy

when the crisis occurred. As a result, audiences remained dissatisfied with both the RFEF and Rubiales' responses to the extent that a lawsuit seemed the only solution.

### **Misaligned Image Repair Strategies**

Rubiales and RFEF's initial responses, marked by denial and dismissal of the issue, created a substantial gap in communication with the public and key stakeholders. The responses did not resonate with the diverse audiences involved, exacerbating outrage and discussions on social media. Subsequent attempts at apology, such as Rubiales' video statement and RFEF's statement quoting Hermoso, were perceived as insincere and insufficient. The inconsistency in responses, coupled with a lack of genuine acknowledgment of wrongdoing, further widened the communication gap. Despite widespread criticism and calls for accountability and structural changes, Rubiales and RFEF's responses continued to disregard the demands of various stakeholders. This lack of responsiveness intensified the communication gap, leading to ongoing public outcry and legal actions against Rubiales.

### ***Rubiales—Lack of Strategy Adjustment***

Despite the swift reaction, Rubiales' sole reliance on denial is the primary catalyst for the audience's outrage, portraying a consistently disrespectful attitude. During the crisis, this strategy might have seemed successful, given that Hermoso didn't explicitly accuse Rubiales of sexual harassment. Leveraging his reputation as the president who led the Spain women's soccer team to their first World Cup win, key audiences might have viewed the crisis as less offensive and accepted his denial. However, with significant support for Hermoso from women's soccer unions, feminist groups, activists, and social media users, Rubiales' actions were increasingly perceived as sexual harassment in the eyes of the public.

To salvage his individual reputation as a soccer coach, Rubiales was expected to apologize. Yet, he failed to adapt, portraying himself as a victim and refusing to acknowledge the gravity of the crisis, resulting in irreparable damage to his reputation. Moving forward, corrective actions such as apologies and compensation, along with an adjustment in Image Restoration Strategy to prevent further reputation damage (including potential legal consequences like criminal lawsuits or suspension from the soccer industry), are imperative.

However, Rubiales continues to position himself as a victim, refusing to resign. On August 28 (eight days after the crisis erupted), Rubiales' mother, Angeles Bejar, staged a hunger strike inside a church in Granada to protest. His cousin, Vanesa Ruiz Bejar, addressed the media, claiming the situation was unfair and urging Hermoso to reveal the truth (Sam, 2023). On September 1, Rubiales claimed he was facing a "media lynching" after a lawsuit was filed against him by the Spanish Administrative Court of Sports (TAD). Rubiales maintains that the kiss with Hermoso was consensual and insists on defending his position and the truth. Even after resigning from his position as president of the Spanish Football Federation on September 10, Rubiales continues to deny his actions. In an interview with Piers Morgan Uncensored, he stated:

"I can't continue in my position. I made this decision after discussions with my father, daughter, and close friends. They know this isn't just about me. Louis [Rubiales], now is the time to focus on your dignity and move forward in life—if not, you risk hurting the ones you love" (Lewis, 2023).

In summary, Rubiales' failure to adjust his response strategy, particularly as the crisis gained traction on social media and solidified a fixed public perception of his behavior as offensive and disrespectful, contributed significantly to the communication gap. His response conveyed an irresponsible attitude without appropriate actions, making it challenging for audiences to empathize or understand Rubiales' defensive standpoint.

### ***RFEF—Inconsistent Response Messages***

Throughout the crisis, the RFEF's response messages consistently lacked coherence, resulting in significant damage to the corporate reputation. Following Rubiales' initial denial strategy, the RFEF's immediate response echoed Rubiales—denying Rubiales' involvement in the sexual harassment act while shifting blame to accuse the victim, Hermoso, arguing that she misinterpreted Rubiales' behavior.

After Rubiales' suspension on August 26 and widespread condemnation on social media, the RFEF subsequently issued two separate statements. The first, shared on social media, acknowledged the wrongdoing, and confirmed Rubiales would defend himself. The second, a 399-word response (now deleted) posted on the RFEF's official website but not shared on its social media channels, further accused Hermoso of lying, pointing to "serious contradictions" in her account and alleging she was "kidnapped by FUTPRO" (Lewis, 2023).

The inconsistent response strategy employed by the RFEF is noteworthy, given the amplification of every word and response in the eyes of social media users. Such inconsistent apology statements lacked consideration and respect for the gravity of the sexual harassment issue. In addition, coupled with FIFA's suspension command, these conflicting messages within the same day generated confusion among the general public. Overall, the RFEF's inconsistent response messages, mirroring Rubiales' denial and blame tactics, further tarnished the corporate reputation. Conflicting statements exacerbated the crisis, amplified public confusion, and led to credibility damage within Spain's soccer industry.

### **Potential Image Restoration Strategy**

Addressing this communication gap would have required a more nuanced understanding of the diverse audience groups involved, a culturally sensitive approach, and a genuine effort to



acknowledge and address the concerns raised. Moving forward, a potential Image Restoration Strategy for the RFEF involves shifting the focus towards social justice issues, using the crisis as an opportunity to highlight sports equality and women's rights. This could entail making structural changes, offering heartfelt apologies, and providing support to female players advocating for equal rights within the Spanish soccer industry.

With Rubiales' resignation, the crisis has pivoted towards social justice matters before its resolution. Hence, the RFEF can seize the chance to redirect public attention towards sports equality and women's rights issues. Following Rubiales' public mention of facing a "media lynching," his stance seemingly ignited a widespread feminist movement protesting sexual inequality in Spanish society (Lewis, 2023). On September 9, female players in the country's F-League began preparing to strike for higher salaries, significantly lower compared to those of professional male players. "Se Acabo" (it is over) emerged as a trending hashtag on social media and became a symbol during the strike, signifying the rejection of male dominance in women's sports. Furthermore, after the crisis was resolved, players from Spain and Switzerland unfurled a banner reading, "It's over. Our fight is a global fight" on September 26. The Spanish women's national soccer team resumed action after securing a victory over Sweden in the Nations League, their second match since Luis Rubiales stepped down. During the game, players from the starting XI displayed white tape on their wrists, one inscribed with Hermoso's number 10 and the other with the message "It's over," while raising their fists in the team photo before the match (Mukherjee, 2023).

At present, the RFEF faces a critical period demanding the restoration of its public image and reputation. The implementation of this strategy must drive the RFEF or the higher corporate UEFA to initiate structural modifications and offer a certain level of apologies. Additionally,

sincere support and compensation must be extended to female players striving for equal rights within the sports industry.

### **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of the crisis, both the RFEF and Rubiales swiftly adopted a defensive stance, denying the problem's existence and engaging in disputes with FUTPRO (Spanish Footballers' Union), which opposed and condemned their responses as wrongdoing. These attitudes and responses rapidly damaged Rubiales' and RFEF's reputations. After Rubiales was confronted with public pressure, he then tried to shift the blame to the victim Hermoso. After the crisis-solve, RFEF and Rubiales issued apologies without explicitly admitting the wrongdoings. When evaluate the effectiveness of each Image Restoration Strategies employed. Denial and evasion of responsibility might temporarily shield Rubiales. But with the substantial evidence and outrage on social media, the strategy implementation eventually led to credibility damage. Thus, Image Restoration Theory serves as the fundamental framework for examining the response messages of RFEF and Rubiales, aiming to assess the effectiveness of strategy. It's important to note that Rubiales and the RFEF employed typical and reasonable tactics, such as shifting responses, denials, and attributing blame to the accusers. One potential strategy involves reducing offensiveness by diverting public attention from the RFEF's inadequate response (denial, suing the victim Hermoso, and inconsistent apologies post-accusations) toward advocating for equal rights in sports and supporting the social justice movement on social media. However, demonstrating support for the social justice movement would require structural modifications within the RFEF. Proper action steps need meticulous planning, alongside necessary structural changes, and adjustments from higher corporations like FFEF and UEFA.

Generally, the response from RFEF and Rubiales hinges solely on Image Restoration Theory-driven approach, overlooking broader cultural, social, and industry-specific nuances. By ignoring these factors, the response failed to resonate with different audiences, disconnecting the organization's actions from broader societal values regarding gender equality and ethical behavior. At the same time, Rubiales' response throughout the crisis lacked a comprehensive understanding of the various stakeholders, creating a significant communication gap. Key audience groups such as social media users, activists, feminist labor unions, and global news publications were not attended to. The crisis revealed RFEF's failure to recognize its broader audience, ignoring important groups beyond sports fans and sponsors, resulting in ineffective response strategies as the crisis rose to the global stage during the Women's World Cup. Responses initially marked by denial and repudiation widened the communication gap with the public and stakeholders. Attempts to apologize, including Rubiales' video statement and RFEF quotes, were deemed insincere and insufficient. Subsequent responses ignored calls for accountability and structural reforms, leading to a public outcry and legal action against Rubiales.

Rubiales' unwavering insistence on denial provoked public outrage, which irreparably damaged his reputation. Despite growing support for Hermoso and calls for him to be held accountable, Rubiales persisted in his defensive stance, leading to a fixed public perception of his behavior. At the same time, the lack of consistency in the RFEF's message throughout the crisis was exacerbated by conflicting statements and denial tactics, creating confusion among the public and damaging the credibility of the Spanish soccer industry. Addressing this communication gap requires a culturally sensitive approach that honestly acknowledges and addresses the issues raised. RFEF can turn to issues of social justice, using the crisis as an

opportunity to emphasize equality in sport and women's rights. Restoring its image will require structural reforms, a heartfelt apology, and support for female players in their fight for equal rights within the Spanish soccer industry. The RFEF is at a critical juncture and a sincere effort is needed to restore its public image and reputation. Implementing a strategy that involves structural changes, a sincere apology and support for equal rights advocates in sport will be critical.

### **Crisis Communication Plan**

This crisis communication plan serves as a foundational guide for the RFEF to navigate the Rubiales-Hermoso case, steering the conversation towards social justice issues and gender equality in soccer.

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

The primary goal of this crisis communication plan is to address the communication gap and restore the reputation of the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) following the Rubiales-Hermoso crisis. This plan aims to:

- Demonstrate a genuine understanding of diverse audience groups involved.
- Employ a culturally sensitive approach in crisis communication.
- Redirect public attention towards social justice issues, particularly sports equality and women's rights.
- Initiate structural changes, offer heartfelt apologies, and support female players advocating for equal rights within the Spanish soccer industry.

#### **List of Key Publics**

Spanish and international soccer fans.

Women's soccer players, leagues, and associations.

Activist groups, feminist unions, and social justice advocates.

Media outlets and sports journalists.

Local and international governing bodies in soccer industry

Sponsors and stakeholders of RFEF.

### **Notifying Publics**

- Utilize multi-communication channels: press conferences, official statements on RFEF platforms, social media releases, and direct engagement with key stakeholders, especially social media users.
- Issue a formal apology acknowledging the crisis's impact and RFEF's commitment to addressing underlying issues.
- Proactively engage with affected female soccer team and Hermoso, seeking transparent feedback and offer level of compensation to demonstrate sincerity.

### **Key Message**

1. Acknowledge the crisis's impact on women's soccer and express genuine regret for the situation.
2. Emphasize the commitment to rectify past shortcomings and implement structural changes promoting gender equality.
3. Affirm support for female players' rights and advocate for fair treatment within the soccer industry.

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