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Image Repair Strategies in Public Relations Crisis: A Case Study of Real Madrid's Response Strategies to the Bernabeu Leaked Audio Scandal

Abstract

In July 2021, Real Madrid president Florentino Pérez was in the midst of a controversial leaked audio crisis in which he heavily criticized some historical icons of the team, such as Iker Casillas, Raúl González, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Luís Figo. The leaked audio clips by *El Confidencial* newspaper and secretly recorded ages ago by José Antonio Abellán ignited a firestorm of criticism that threatened Pérez's reputation and integrity. Pérez offered an official statement to repair his damaged image. This article analyzes and evaluates his image repair messages, which relied heavily on reducing offensiveness. It seems that his defense helped to dispel the cloud surrounding him, as Figo accepted Pérez's apology and adopted his point of view that the comments were taken out of context. Pérez succeeded in minimizing the event to the extent that the media shrank their discussion. He attempted to create new beliefs about *El Confidencial* and Abellán by *attacking the accuser* by undermining their credibility and honesty to diminish the attack. By employing the *transcendence* strategy, he tried to place the leaked audio clips issue in a broad context in a different frame of reference – the European Super League debate. Using *transcendence* and *attacking the accuser* helped Real Madrid frame the crisis in a way that backfired on the accuser. The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding how leaders at the helm of power of top sports clubs might communicate during a crisis and underscores the potential importance of image repair in sports organizations.

Keywords: image repair; sports communication; Real Madrid; public relations crisis; crisis communication.

Introduction

Real Madrid is one of the leading sports organizations in the world in terms of finances, fans, and awards. It is the most powerful brand in the football arena (García, 2021, p. 442). Successive presidents of the club constructed its positive image around the essence and values, including honesty, discipline, fighting spirit, leadership, tradition, and nobility (García, 2021, p. 444). One of these presidents was Florentino Pérez, who was first elected as president of Real Madrid on July 16, 2000, and re-elected again in 2004, and for the third time in

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2009. Pérez was awarded the fourth term in 2013 and re-elected unopposed for the fifth term in 2017. He also will remain in charge of the club until 2025, as he was named for the sixth time after being the sole candidate during the latest elections in April 2021. Under Florentino Pérez's presidency, Real Madrid transitioned from a traditional football club into a modern and global sports organization (RealMadrid, n.d).

However, on July 13, 2021, Real Madrid's President, Pérez, became controversial after several leaked audio clips outed him criticizing and insulting many of the club staff, legends, and most prominent stars. The audio recordings leaked by *El Confidencial* revealed Pérez's disrespect for several Real Madrid legends, which plunged him into a deep crisis that affected his image and reputation (MARCA, 2021c). A large section of Real Madrid fans censured Pérez's attacks on legends of the value of Casillas, Raul, and Ronaldo, which could lose him a lot of his popularity and threaten his position as the head of Real Madrid. The image of the club's president may affect the club's prestige, commercial sponsorship, and thus the overall financial revenue of the team. Image is crucial for team branding because a robust and favorable reputation makes it more attractive to customers, players, employees, and investors (Coombs & Harker, 2022, p. 150).

The leaked audio clips scandal also threatened the team's heritage, as Pérez has been at the helm of power in the club for 18 years in total. The club's legacy is integral to its image and culture (Rose et al., 2021). The club's heritage generates positive attitudes toward the sports team, the sponsorship, and the sponsoring brand (Rose et al., 2021). Therefore, on July 13, 2021, the official website of Real Madrid published a statement written by president Pérez about the leaked audio clips. He was quick to respond to the issue. This study attempts to reveal and evaluate the predominant image repair strategies used in Pérez's statement in his response to the leaked audio scandal. His statement represents his efforts to restore his image in response to the scandal. Some studies suggested that Real Madrid created a business model based on the emotions of its supporters (Rodríguez-Pomeda et al., 2017). Since sports teams represent a strong emotion-filled attitude object (Rose et al., 2021), it is vital to evaluate Pérez's statement to understand his strategies to deal with such a scandal. His statement is important because it will help us understand the discourse of one of the biggest football clubs in the world in response to a scandal that risked the club's image and valuable heritage. Since sports organizations invest resources to create a positive image to attract sponsorship, businesses, top players and influence the club's international standing (García, 2021), we should understand how they utilize image repair strategies to restore a threatened image. Vrints (2019) considers scandal equivalent to any behavior that threatens the carefully-built image of a positive self-representation. In this perspective, Benoit (1997b) argues that the theory of image repair discourse is viable for developing and understanding messages that respond to image crises. The findings of this study may provide sports leaders with guidelines on how to successfully benefit from image repair strategies.

Literature review

The scandal in sports signifies one of many challenges that athletes, managers of sports, and the sports industry face, since scandals often emerge unexpectedly and evolve rapidly. In some conditions, scandals may threaten the existence of sports businesses or prompt them to make substantial organizational transformations (Storm & Wagner, 2015, p. 293). Schol-

ars have examined sports scandals concerning doping (Duval, 2017; Engelberg et al., 2015; Galluzzi, 2000; Hermann, 2019; Laine, 2006), political intervention (Altukhov & Nauright, 2018; Harris et al., 2021; Leigh & McAllister, 2021), corruption (Andreff, 2019; Gardiner et al., 2017; Masters, 2015; Ncube, 2017; Philippou, 2021), governance structures (Dowling et al., 2021; Hanstad, 2008; Krieger, 2019; Mandel, 2016), media framing of scandal (Bie & Billings, 2015; Burch et al., 2015; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020; Stanley, 2021), awful defeats (Compton & Compton, 2014; Compton & Compton, 2022), and communication image repair (Allison et al., 2020; Glantz, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2015; Koa & Abu Hassan, 2022; Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2017; Smith & Keeven, 2019; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011).

This study contributes to the scholarship on scandals in sports and the efforts of image repair while also revealing additional opportunities for sports leaders to understand how image repair may benefit them once their reputation faces a threat. Many scholars attempted to explain how athletes and sports organizations respond to the tarnished images resulting from scandals. However, scholars have yet to reach a consensus about the strategies to be used in image repair. The right approach varies according to time, place, context, availability of information, and evidence about the act. Among such studies, many scholars have examined an individual athlete's image repair attempts. For example, Glantz (2010) investigated the case of the original winner of the 2006 Tour de France, cyclist Floyd Landis' image repair, following the scandal of illicit substance use during the race. After that, second-place finisher Óscar Pereiro was officially declared the winner. Landis used *denial*, *differentiation*, *attacking the accuser*, and *evading responsibility* strategies. The study showed that these strategies were ineffective because they were confusing and failed to counter the potency of evidence against the cyclist. These findings contrast with an investigation by Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011). They explored the case of swimmer Michael Phelps whose image was damaged after the release of a photo of him smoking marijuana out of a bong. The study results revealed that Phelps used *mortification* and *corrective action* strategies by apologizing and promising never to repeat the offense. The athlete also employed reducing the offensiveness strategy through the *bolster* technique by reminding the audience of his swimming successes. In addition, he used *defeasibility* by invoking his youthful indiscretion. Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) argued that Phelps' image repair strategies successfully maintained his career and sponsorships. It seems that using positive strategies, such as in the case of swimmer Michael Phelps, yields a better outcome than using negative techniques, such as in the case of cyclist Floyd Landis. However, this assumption needs more investigation and validation.

These two studies used the "appropriateness standard" to evaluate the tactics' effectiveness based on Benoit's theory. This approach describes "effectiveness" with respect to how well-selected tactics or strategies have been used (Burns & Bruner, 2000, p. 35). Other studies ((Hambrick et al., 2015; Meng & Pan, 2013) confirmed and assessed this approach. Hambrick et al. (2015) explored how the road racing cyclist Lance Armstrong applied image repair strategies in 2012 and early 2013. In this turbulent period, he faced a doping investigation by the U.S. government. He later admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs during a nationally televised interview with Oprah Winfrey. The study analyzed Armstrong's 859 tweets during this period and his comments during the Oprah Winfrey interview. Results indicated that Armstrong used *attacking the accuser*, *bolstering*, and *stonewalling* strategies via Twitter. Through the discussion, he demonstrated contrition by employing *mortification*, *shifting blame*, *simple denial*, *provocation*, and *victimization*.

Similarly, Meng and Pan (2013) examined the effectiveness of apology techniques in image restoration of athletes involved in sex scandals. Three athletes sex scandals were comparatively analyzed, including golfer Tiger Woods, quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, and the basketballer Kobe Bryant, based on apology statements made by each athlete. The study examined sports-news coverage of the scandals from *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*. The results confirmed that image restoration is significant during sex-scandal crises and suggested that these athletes were strategic in their communication management, using *mortification* and *corrective action* as their key strategies. All three athletes continued to have flourishing careers, which could be seen as result of the effectiveness of these strategies.

Many scholars in the paradigm of sports communication also advocated the possible effectiveness of *mortification* in repairing a damaged image (Allison et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2012; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). For example, Allison et al. (2020) investigated the cases of soccer player Abby Wambach's arrest for driving under the influence and tennis player Maria Sharapova's admission of a failed drug test. They examined each athlete's image repair strategies on Facebook. The findings showed that Wambach used *mortification* and *corrective action* strategies, while Sharapova avoided responsibility and reduced offensiveness.

When combined, as in Wambach's case discussed above, *mortification* and *corrective action* strategies appear to achieve a successful outcome. Compton (2014) stressed that *mortification* and *corrective action* could be effective strategies for image repair in public relations. Conversely, when Brazeal (2008) examined Terrell Owens's case, the study found that Owens' use of *bolstering*, and *mortification* strategies was a massive failure. The author concluded that Owens should have used *mortification* and *corrective action* if he had hoped to repair his image. Owens was one of the National Football League's most talented athletes but also extensively attacked as one of its most self-centered. When the Philadelphia Eagles declined to renegotiate his contract after one season, he became belligerent with the coaching staff and publicly critical of his team.

Consequently, the Eagles deactivated him. In a press conference, Owens and his agent tried to repair the damage. Owens showed a contrite demeanor, emphasizing *mortification* and *bolstering* strategies. Rosenhaus sealed his client's fate by launching frequent indignant attacks against Owens' accusers and employed *bolstering* and *mortification* strategies. Both presented Owens as the victim, and neither discussed any *corrective action*. Eventually, their rhetoric proved a complete failure to understand the team sports culture, which demands unity, commitment, and sacrifice.

Other studies have evaluated sports organizations as estimations of the effectiveness of the image repair approach. For example, Onwumechili and Bedeau (2017) analyzed the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) response after its top officials were arrested for corruption early in 2015. The results showed that the initial recation of President Blatter was to evade responsibility by using *defeasibility*. He also used *corrective action* but refused to accept responsibility and failed to show *mortification*. The results indicated that FIFA failed in its effort to repair its image following this crisis. The scholars suggested that FIFA's brand image was damaged because persistent corruption and indiscretions affected public confidence in FIFA's activities leading to increased cynicism and resentment. FIFA lost sponsors following the crisis in November 2014; Emirates Airlines dropped its sponsorship of FIFA but declined to link its decision to FIFA's corruption, even though the same company threatened to quit support of FIFA back in 2011 because of corruption allegations against

FIFA. This implies that the image of officials affects the whole institution. This, in turn, could be applied to Real Madrid as well, as its president's reputation could affect the entire club image, especially since president Pérez has been at the helm of power of the club for 18 years.

Inconsistent with these findings, Frederick et al. (2019) found that image repair strategies were ineffective in the associate professor and team physician at Michigan State University (MSU) Larry Nassar's abuse scandal. They examined how MSU utilized Facebook as a tool for image repair following Nassar's hearing and in its immediate aftermath and investigated users' responses via Facebook comments to determine reactions to MSU's image-repair strategies. The results showed that MSU primarily employed *corrective action*, *bolstering*, and *mortification*. However, individuals posting comments did not appear to buy into MSU's image repair. Users blamed MSU for mishandling the situation and discussed various aspects of Nassar and MSU mistreatment of the victims. Last but not least, Len-Ríos (2010) studied Duke University's strategic use of communication to defend its image during the scandal concerning its men's lacrosse team. Results revealed that Duke relied most on *simple denial* and *mortification* to protect its athletes and engaged in *bolstering*, *corrective action*, *separation*, and *attacking the accuser* to defend the university's reputation.

Similarly, Koa and Abu Hassan (2022) observed that image repair strategies were ineffective in the Barcelona club's efforts after the dramatic exit of its top player, Lionel Messi. Their results showed Barcelona's failure to repair its image following Messi's departure. The club employed the *denial* strategy by *shifting the blame*. It also used *reducing offensiveness* through *transcendence*, *differentiation* and *bolstering*. Finally, it deployed *evading responsibility* through *defeasibility*. Their thematic analysis of fans' responses revealed that the club failed to persuade fans of Barcelona's president's arguments. The scholars' findings advised that when the audience is eager to see *corrective action*, it is hard to accept other strategies that do not align with their desires. Therefore they suggested that organizations should consider audience orientations through audience analysis before employing image repair strategies, and sports organizations should use media framing before major decisions to avoid shocking fans.

It would seem that the majority of studies that examined an athlete's image repair attempts and sports organizational crisis communication mainly relied on the "appropriateness standard" to evaluate the effectiveness of the tactics based on Benoit's theory. These studies have also identified image repair theory as helpful in sports crisis communication, even though they have not reached a comprehensive agreement regarding the most effective strategy. This indicates that the evaluation of these strategies should continue to evolve based on case studies. The current research participates in this debate by analyzing the case of Real Madrid's president in the wake of the audio leak scandal.

Based on the literature review, the importance and originality of this study are that it investigates and examines Real Madrid President Florentino Pérez's image repair strategies after the audio leak scandal. The renown football club has heavily used public relations to meet the expectations of its global community (García, 2021, p. 449). Therefore, analyzing its president's image repair strategies adds to our understanding of how world's leading sports clubs attempt to repair their image through communicating particular strategies to avoid image threats that could have a heavy cost for them. Therefore, analyzing the image repair strategies of Real Madrid's president will help us understand how this valuable club maintains its image once it faces any threats. The club considers its image a precious asset that attracts sponsorships, top players, and fans worldwide.

Moreover, most image repair research in sports is U.S. based. However, this study focuses on one of the most recognized international football brands. Correspondingly, two key research questions are posed for this analysis:

RQ1: What are the predominant image repair strategies used in Pérez's statements?

RQ2: How effective were Pérez's image repair strategies in repairing his reputation?

Theoretical framework

Benoit's (2015) image repair theory adopts communication as a goal-directed activity to maintain a positive image as a fundamental goal of communication. However, an entity or a person does not usually initiate this type of communication without encountering an image attack. Benoit (1997b, 2015) stated that an image repair occurs when two conditions exist: (1) an entity or a person is held responsible for an act, and (2) the act is viewed as damaging or offensive. As a result, the two requirements existed for Real Madrid as its president's image was threatened. Image repair theory was used in this study because it does not specify the degree of an entity or a person's responsibility that may determine a specific image repair strategy as situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) does. Coombs (2007), in his SCCT, defined crisis responsibility as the extent to which the public blame the entity or person for a particular crisis. In Real Madrid's case, the degree to which the public assign responsibility for the situation to the club is unknown. However, the two conditions mentioned earlier for applying image repair theory as a theoretical framework are achieved.

The approach comprises five broad image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The first category of image repair strategies, denial, comprises two forms: simple denial and shifting the blame. Those who cannot deny performing the act in question may employ the second strategy, evasion of responsibility, which has four forms: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions (Benoit, 2015, p. 23). The third strategy, reducing the offensiveness of the event, has six versions: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation. The fourth strategy, corrective action, is not imparted into subcategories. The fifth and final strategy is mortification, in which the individual or the organization confesses and begs forgiveness. This paper used these strategies as a theoretical framework to better understand how Pérez attempted to fix what was spoiled by the leaks. Benoit (2015) stresses that individuals and organizations may use a combination of the five strategies mentioned above to repair a tarnished image when confronted with an embarrassing or damaging situation. Thus, this article applies these strategies as a critical lens for analyzing Pérez's discourse.

The case study

On July 16, 2000, Florentino Pérez Rodríguez was first elected as president of Real Madrid after defeating Lorenzo Sanz, the then club's president. Despite Sanz's achievement in UEFA Champions Leagues in 1998 and 2000, Pérez's campaign underlined the club's financial difficulties and claimed mismanagement by the Sanz board. Pérez promised to bring in Luís Figo from arch-rival Barcelona in his campaign. This tactic performed a decisive role in the

elections. He claimed if he failed to do so, he would pay the membership fees of all the club's season-ticket holders the following season (Balague, 2021).

Pérez was elected again in 2004 with 94.2% of the total votes, despite Real Madrid's failure to win a major trophy for the three seasons after winning the league in 2003 (Balague, 2021). However, on February 27, 2006, Pérez resigned voluntarily after six years at the helm of the Spanish giants admitting that Real Madrid needed a new direction. His resignation came after criticism for focusing too much on the club's worldwide brand appeal instead of success on the pitch (Dailymail, 2021). On May 14, 2009, Pérez announced his candidacy for president of Real Madrid under the slogan "the dream is back" (BBC, 2009). On June 1, 2009, as several challengers pulled out or could not lodge a bank guarantee and since he was the only candidate able to provide the €57,389,000 guarantee necessary to run for the presidency, Pérez was sworn in as the new president of Real Madrid (BBC, 2009). Now aged 75, Pérez has been in the position of Real Madrid president for 19 years (Balague, 2021).

During his two periods in charge of the club, he has won 47 titles across two disciplines, including four European Cups in football and one in basketball. He also followed Galactico policy by signing with stars such as Portugal's Luís Figo, French star Zinedine Zidane, Brazilian Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima, commonly known as Ronaldo, and England captain David Beckham (RealMadrid, n.d).

On April 18, 2021, Pérez announced the formation of the European Super League, officially known as the Super League. Pérez, who was named as the European Super League's chairperson, justified this contentious step by claiming that the competition was set up "to save football" because young people are "no longer interested" in the game because of "a lot of poor quality matches" (BBC, 2021). The European Super League is a yearly-projected club football competition hatched by 12 of most influential soccer clubs that would be contested by twenty European football clubs and systematized by the European Super League Company, a commercial enterprise formed to rival the UEFA Champions League. Just 48 hours after European Super League's controversial launch drew widespread backlash from the sport's ruling bodies, its global fan base, and even heads of state (Goff, 2021). It collapsed as all the big six Premier League clubs withdrew from the project; Manchester City was the first in England to backtrack, followed by Liverpool, Arsenal, Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur, and Chelsea (BBC, 2021; Goff, 2021). On April 21, 2021, three more clubs, Atlético Madrid, AC Milan, and Inter Milan, withdrew their support, leaving just Juventus, Real Madrid, and Barcelona of the original 12 signatories (Goff, 2021).

On July 13, 2021, Pérez came under fire as old audio recordings of him privately criticizing some of the club's former players were publicly released by the Spanish newspaper *El Confidencial*. The conversations occurred at the end of Pérez's first stint as president, which ended in 2006. (AP, 2021). The leakage crisis built enough pressure for Pérez after his team's failures in the La Liga season of 2020-21 and the Champions League, besides the exit of the team's manager Zinedine Zidane on May 31, 2021, the team's captain and veteran defender Sergio Ramos on June 17, 2021, and the tension of the European Super League saga.

The first audio was leaked on Tuesday, July 13, 2021, by *El Confidencial*, a Spanish-language general information digital newspaper. Pérez says several damaging sentences about Los Blancos legends' past in the audio clips, including describing long-time number one goalkeeper Iker Casillas and star-striker Raúl González as two of the "biggest frauds" in the club's entire history (O'Brien, 2021). He said that "the two great Real Madrid scams are Raúl first and Casillas second" (Dailymail, 2021). Raúl is the current manager of Real Madrid Castil-

la, the club's reserve team. However, the conversation that came to light occurred in September 2006, after Ramon Calderon had succeeded Pérez as president (Dailymail, 2021). Pérez criticized Raúl when he played for Real Madrid and was the club's top scorer before Cristiano Ronaldo joined the team on July 6, 2009. Pérez said:

Raúl is evil; he believes that Madrid is his and uses everything that is in Madrid for his benefit. He is a negative figure; he is destroying Madrid and the players' morale so that they say: 'It is Madrid that is bad, not Raul'. It is terrible how bad the boy is.

About Casillas, the Spanish goalkeeper who played 725 matches for the club in his journey with Real Madrid and had won two La Liga titles and two Champions Leagues by the time of the recording in September 2006, whose mother had previously claimed Pérez forced him out of the club, Pérez said:

He is not a goalkeeper for Real Madrid. He is not, and he has never been. It has been a significant failure we have had. What happens is that they [the fans] adore him, love him, and talk to him. I don't know why they defend him so much.

In another leaked audio that dates back to 2009, Pérez also can be heard blaming José Miguel González Martín del Campo, known as Michel, for the Castilla side's failings and accusing the coach of forcing Juan Mata out of Madrid to play his son, Adrian. Perez can be heard saying:

I think Michel is the one who made the hole for Mata [to leave]; he is the one who threw him out of Real Madrid Castilla to put his son in the team. He is a fraud!

Mata is a former Chelsea and current Manchester United midfielder. The latter worked his way through the academy at Madrid to play 39 times for the Castilla side before eventually being sold to Valencia in 2007 and then to Chelsea, where he would win the Premier League, Champions League, Europa League, and one of his two FA Cups and colossal success at international level (O'Brien, 2021).

A tape from 2006 also reveals Pérez's thoughts on Michel as a coach where he can be heard arguing, "he is a terrible coach, a guy who has done nothing. He is not a coach" (O'Brien, 2021).

In another leaked audio by *El Confidencial*, from conversations in 2006, Pérez mocked Vicente del Bosque, who was Real Madrid's first-team head coach between 1999 and 2003, for his lack of ability and laughed at the idea of him one day coaching the Spanish national team (MARCA, 2021c). As Pérez put it:

He doesn't know how to coach or know about tactics. He's a fool. No one offers Vicente del Bosque work because they all know he's not a coach. The Del Bosque stuff is the biggest lie I've seen in my life. Ask the Besiktas president [Yildirim Demiroren] what he felt. [Del Bosque] isn't a coach, [Jose Antonio] Camacho is.

In a conversation recorded in 2012, Pérez called José Mourinho, the club's manager, and Cristiano Ronaldo, who was three years into his nine-year spell at Real Madrid, idiots. Ronaldo, a five-time Ballon d'Or winner, spent nine seasons at Madrid between 2009 and 2018, during which time he scored 450 goals in 438 appearances and guided the club to four Champions League titles (Lane, 2021). Pérez was quoted by *El Confidencial* saying about Ronaldo:

This guy is an idiot, a sick man. You think this guy is average, but he's not normal. Otherwise, he wouldn't do all the things he does. The last nonsense he did, the whole world saw it. Why do you think he does that stupid thing?

Pérez also criticized Ronaldo's agent Jorge Mendes, Madrid manager at the time Jose Mourinho, and full-back Fabio Coentrao (Lane, 2021).

Mendes doesn't control [Cristiano], just like he doesn't handle Mourinho. Zero weight. These guys with a severe ego are spoiled and don't see reality because they could earn much more money if they were otherwise inclined.

In the context of this crisis that threatened Florentino Pérez's reputation, this paper will examine his image repair strategies employing Benoit's image repair theory. This analysis adds to our understanding of image repair discourse by examining how Pérez addressed the leaked audio clips, endangering his reputation.

Method

This study seeks to provide a rhetorical analysis of the image repair theory options used by the Real Madrid president by applying Benoit's (1995, 1997). Using the case study approach and primary data to study strategic responses to a crisis is helpful for the analysis of real public relations techniques (Cutler, 2004). Businesses can learn specific public relations strategies from case studies using clarifying typology (Compton, 2014, p. 123). Single-case research provides new insights and tremendous detail and allows for discovering contemporary theoretical connections (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p. 144).

Text selection

This article examines Pérez's discourse in two approaches. First, this paper applies Benoit's image repair theory to determine what image repair strategies Pérez used after *El Confidencial* publicly released old audio recordings. Pérez's statement published on July 13, 2021 on the official website of Real Madrid was analyzed. It is the only statement issued about the event. For this purpose, a qualitative content analysis was operated. Qualitative content analysis is functional when dealing with less obvious meaning (Schreier, 2012, p. 2). This study used a concept-driven, deductive strategy for building the coding frame, relying on image repair theory strategies outlined by William Benoit (Schreier, 2012, p. 48). Therefore, the study devised a coding checklist of all image repair theory strategies and used the sentence as a coding unit. The size of the unit of coding depends on the coding frame and what the researcher is looking for in the material (Schreier, 2012, p. 128). Coding the material sentence by sentence helped the researcher focus on the study's objectives.

Coding categories

The strategies that formed the index of the checklist and were coded deductively are described below by category:

1. *Simple denial*: Pérez may deny that the act occurred (Benoit, 2015, p. 22).
2. *Shift the blame (scapegoating)*: Pérez shifts the blame to another person (Benoit, 2015, p. 22).
3. *Provocation*: Pérez may claim that his words in the leaked audios responded to another wrongful act that provoked him to say what he had said (Benoit, 2015, p. 23).

4. *Defeasibility*: Pérez pleads a lack of knowledge or control about essential factors related to the situation (Benoit, 2015, p. 23).
5. *Make an excuse based on an accident*: Pérez may make an excuse for factors beyond their control (Benoit, 2015, p. 23).
6. *Suggest the action was justified based on good intentions*: Pérez asks not to be held fully responsible based on his excellent rather than evil motives in committing the act (Benoit, 2015, p. 23).
7. *Bolstering*: Pérez may mitigate the adverse effects by strengthening the audience's positive idea of him. He may remind the audience of previous good acts or positive attributes. Using this strategy, he may attempt to add new beliefs or remind the audience of forgotten thoughts associated with positive values (Benoit, 2015, p. 24).
8. *Minimization*: Pérez may attempt to convince the audience that the act in question is less severe than it appears. In this strategy, he may try to convince the audience that the adverse action isn't as bad as it might appear to reduce the amount of ill-feeling associated with leaked audio clips (Benoit, 2015, p. 24).
9. *Differentiation*: Pérez may attempt to distinguish his act from other more offensive actions to lessen the audience's negative feelings by comparison (Benoit, 2015, p. 24).
10. *Transcendence*: Pérez may attempt to place his action in a broad context in a different, less offensive frame of reference (Benoit, 2015, p. 25).
11. *Attacking accuser*: Pérez may attack *El Confidencial* or Antonio Abellán to question their credibility (Benoit, 2015, p. 25).
12. *Compensation*: Pérez may offer to remunerate or redress the victims of his action to help offset negative feelings towards him (Benoit, 2015, p. 25).
13. *Corrective Action*: Pérez may claim or vow that he will correct the problem by promising to make changes to prevent its reoccurrence (Benoit, 2015, p. 26).
14. *Mortification*: Pérez may admit responsibility and ask for forgiveness (Benoit, 2015, p. 26).

Coding reliability

The coding frame is considered valid in concept-driven categories to ensure that the types adequately capture the concepts. It should use content validity to evaluate the validity of concept-driven coding frames (Schreier, 2012, p. 189). To assess content validity, this study used expert evaluation. The coding frame was sent to an associated professor familiar with the structure's concepts. The expert decided the categories adequately represent the concepts. Hence, the coding frame was considered sufficiently valid.

In assessing the reliability of the coding frame, the study looked at the consistency of the coding by comparing coding between two coders (Koa, 2021, p. 91; Schreier, 2012, p. 167). For this purpose, Pérez's statement was also coded separately by an independent scholar trained to use the coding scheme. He coded the materials based on the coding unit decided earlier, which was the sentence. The average percentage of agreement for the coded sentences was around 90%. After discussing discrepancies, the researcher and the independent scholar achieved a 100% agreement.

Measuring effectiveness

After determining what strategies Pérez employed, this analysis evaluated whether his efforts have been successful. This study did this in two ways (1) by analyzing how the people mentioned in the leaked audios were satisfied with his responses through their statements to the media, and (2) by discussing the effectiveness of Pérez's employed strategies with the literature on image repair. This study defines effectiveness as to how Pérez has used well-selected strategies based on the "appropriateness standard". An appropriateness analysis helps the researcher understand the discourse context (Burns & Bruner, 2000, p. 35). According to Benoit (1995), the researcher who seeks "to assess the apparent effectiveness of rhetorical choices must identify the factors that seem to contribute to the success or failure of a discourse" (p. 160). In this paper, these factors are satisfaction and appropriateness.

Findings and discussion

The Predominant image repair strategies used in Pérez's statement

Pérez's statement, issued and published on July 13, 2021, on the official Real Madrid website after the first round of leaked audio clips, was relatively brief and relied heavily on *reducing offensiveness*. Pérez employed three image repair strategies from the category of *reducing offensiveness*: *minimization*, *transcendence*, and *attacking the accuser*. Pérez attempted to convince the audience that the leaked audio clips were less severe as they appeared to reduce the amount of resentment associated with the issue. This action, according to the image repair theory, is called *minimization*. This was clear in the statement of Pérez, as he claimed that his comments were deliberately removed from their broader context.

They are isolated quotes that were part of conversations and have been taken from the broader context in which they were made.

This statement suggests that so many details were ignored in Pérez's conversation, implying that the newspaper manipulated the audience's perception by emphasizing one idea and ignoring others. By this, Pérez tried to portray the event as nonsense.

Pérez also deployed the transcendence strategy to reduce the offensiveness of the event as he attempted to place the issue in a broad context to place it in a different, more petite offensive frame of reference. He claimed his role in the European Super League was the motivating factor behind the quotes resurfacing. He believes the quotes from the leaked audio clips are part of a smear campaign against him and his European Super League project.

I understand that they have been published now, so many years since the conversations took place, owes to my involvement as one of the driving forces behind the Super League.

The above statement shows that the leaked audio clips attempt to distract Pérez's attention and the audience's interest from the critical issue, which is the European Super League. Pérez places the issue in a broader context: the Super League frame of reference.

Pérez also used the *attacking the accuser* strategy by intimidating the force behind the leaked audio clips by taking legal actions against them. He said:

I have placed the matter in the hands of my lawyers, who are examining the course of action to be taken.

In the same statement, he attacked the accuser again by pointing out José Antonio Abellán's flaws and questioning his credibility and honesty.

The published quotes were part of conversations secretly recorded by Mr. José Antonio Abellán, who has been trying to sell the recordings for many years without success. I find it surprising that they have been published today by El Confidencial, despite the time that has elapsed.

Finally, Pérez employed *mortification* in his phone call with Luís Figo in the wake of the controversy over the leaked audio clips. Figo revealed that Pérez had apologized to him and commented on the situation at the end of the "El Clasico Legends' match" held on July 20, 2021. He told the press, "[A]s I said, it was a private conversation, and [Pérez] apologized, so for me, the matter is closed" (MARCA, 2021b).

Image repair theory provides a valuable framework for describing elites' responses to sports scandals based on the current findings. Previous research on sports communication has indicated different strategies based on this theory. For example, Glantz (2010) suggested that the cyclist Floyd Landis' image repair employed *denial*, *differentiation*, *attacking the accuser*, and *evading responsibility* strategies. Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) found that the Swimmer Michael Phelps used *mortification* and *corrective action* strategies. Hambrick et al. (2015) showed that the road racing cyclist Lance Armstrong applied *attacking the accuser*, *bolstering*, and *stonewalling* strategies via Twitter. He demonstrated contrition by employing *mortification*, *shifting blame*, *simple denial*, *provocation*, and *victimization*. Onwumehili and Bedeau (2017) found that FIFA's President Blatter *evaded responsibility* using *defeasibility* and *corrective action*. Frederick et al. (2019) found the MSU employed *corrective action*, *bolstering*, and *mortification*. Allison et al. (2020) showed that the soccer player Wambach used mortification and corrective action. The tennis player Sharapova avoided responsibility and reduced offensiveness. However, this study believes that Pérez *reduced offensiveness* by *minimization*, *transcendence*, and *attacking the accuser*. This suggests that the image repair right approach in sports scandal varies according to time, place, context, the availability of information, and evidence about the act.

Effectiveness of Pérez's image repair strategies

According to Benoit (2015), *minimization*, *attacking the accuser*, and *transcendence* help reduce offensiveness (p. 77). Pérez's employment of *minimization* through claiming that the quotes were part of conversations isolated from the broader context seems to be effective in *reducing the offensiveness* of the event. This was clear that no one mentioned in the leaked audio clips had attacked Pérez back. The only one who talked to the media, Luís Figo, even adopted Pérez's view, saying "I believe that, in a private conversation, there can be expressions out of context" (MARCA, 2021b). In addition, the media that reported Pérez's statement has not argued his point of view. They just published his statement without any deep analysis or questioning. Using *minimization* in Pérez's account effectively reduced the magnitude of the negative feelings attributed to the leaked audio clips and lessened the ill feelings directed to him. It worked by changing the beliefs about the importance of the offensive act, which was clear from Figo's statement. Benoit (2015) argues that guilty but those who do not want to confess that guilt can try strategies such as *minimization* or *attacking accusers* (p. 127). Pérez used both methods in his statement, proving that his choice was adequate according to Benoit's argument. Pérez was cautious in admitting that the cause of this crisis was his conversation as he started his statement by:

Given the news broadcast in *El Confidencial*, in which phrases attributed to me are reported, I think it is necessary to clarify. The reproduced words are pronounced in conversations clandestinely recorded by Mr. José Antonio Abellán, who has been trying to sell them for many years without success.

“In which phrases attributed to me” means that he did not want to confess that guilt, so he moved to attack the journalist José Antonio Abellán and then endeavored *minimization*. Benoit (2015) also argues that if someone attempts *minimization*, they should have believable statistics showing exaggerated problems (p. 128). Pérez argued that his comments were “single phrases of conversations taken from the broad context in which they occur”. He used the term “single phrases” to show that *El Confidencial* picked off his comments from more extended conversations without the broader context.

Pérez’s statement also attacked the accuser by questioning the credibility and honesty of José Antonio Abellán, the source of the leaked audio clips, and *El Confidencial* newspaper. He claimed they “reproduced phrases” from “conversations clandestinely recorded”. This suggests that their accusers manipulated part of his conversation and violated his privacy. In the same statement, he attempted to portray Abellán as a greedy opportunist “who has been trying to sell the recordings for many years without any success”. Carlos Bustillo, a Spanish journalist, confirmed the idea as he alleged during “night’s El Transistor program on Onda Cero” that Abellán demanded 10 million euros from the club for deleting the files. According to Bustillo, the blackmail offer was made in the Combarro Restaurant in Madrid with Eduardo Fernandez de Blas, Real Madrid’s vice-president, but Real Madrid did not accept it (MARCA, 2021a). According to Benoit (2015), “if the credibility of the source of accusations can be reduced, the damage to one’s image from those accusations may be diminished” (p. 25).

As part of *attacking the accuser* strategy, Pérez stressed that he is preparing to sue José Antonio Abellán and the newspaper to turn the audience’s considerations away from the original issue. Benoit (2015) argued that it is “possible that attacking one’s accuser may divert the audience’s attention away from the original accusation, reducing damage to the actor’s image” (p. 25).

Pérez also utilized the *transcendence* strategy to reduce offensiveness. He attempted to place the leaked audio clips issue in a broad context to place it in a different frame of reference. He maintained that the reason behind this crisis was his “involvement as one of the driving forces behind the Super League.” Pérez was one of the ringleaders of the breakaway European Super League project, as he remains its most vocal sponsor and still has not backed away from the idea. His statement suggests that the leaked audio clips are part of a campaign against the European Super League. Pérez’s statement functions by placing the action in a different context: the Super League. This strategy attempt to reduce the negative effect associated with the act and give it a new value (Benoit, 2015; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). By placing the leakage crisis in the reference frame of the European Super League, Pérez successfully reduced the magnitude of the negative feelings attributed to the situation and lessened the ill feelings directed to him. Following Pérez’s statement, without argumentation, many news platforms focused in its news on his argument that the leaked audio files were a part of a conspiracy and a strategy to harm the Super League project (AP, 2021; Goal, 2021; MARCA, 2021d; News-Block, 2021; USAToday, 2021). Compton and Compton (2014) confirmed the unique value of *transcendence* in sports communication image repair discourse.

However, Pérez was right when he did not use any denial strategies. Benoit (2015) argued when someone realizes he is guilty; he should not employ denial. Instead, he should consider *mortification* and *corrective action* (Benoit, 2015, p. 127). By this, Pérez prevented a

controversial debate from occurring as Benoit (2015) pointed out that when someone uses denial, others may question, “Well, if you didn’t do it, who did?” (p. 22). The *mortification* in Pérez’s phone call was only a pseudo-apology as it was in a private call. However, Luís Figo’s statement to the media that he accepted his apology reinforced his defense: “As I said, it was a private conversation, and [Pérez] apologized, so for me, the matter is closed” (Marca, 2021a). Brown (2016) argues that *attacking the accuser* strategy is as effective as the *mortification* strategy in repairing the image overall. Phelps’s use of the *mortification* strategy is supported by Benoit (1997a) who showed that Hugh Grant, an English actor, used the same method to repair his image along with *bolstering*. Consistent with Allison et al. (2020), this study argues that mortification can help the accused be perceived as sincere.

Based on the current findings and discussion, reducing offensiveness strategies appears necessary in sports scandals.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding how leaders at the helm of power of top sports clubs might communicate during a crisis. This article underscores the potential importance of image repair in sports organizations. It confirms the significance of image repair theory as a unique theoretical framework to examine and assess image repair discourse. In agreement with Benoit (1997b), the idea of image repair discourse is a workable method for generating and analyzing messages that respond to image crises.

Limitations

An issue that was not addressed in this study was whether Pérez’s image repair found a friendly ear or a deaf ear among Real Madrid fans. Therefore, this study could not determine the effectiveness of Pérez’s image repair strategies among fans through the current approach. However, this analysis further supports that image repair strategies can be helpful for individuals and sports organizations facing a scandal crisis, even if the strategies were only successful for specific audiences. This argument is supported by Smith and Keeven (2019), whose study examined NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell’s image repair strategies throughout the Ray Rice domestic violence crisis. Their results showed that the strategies used by the NFL were successful even if they were only effective for specific audiences. In addition, this study investigated only one statement, which was the only one that addressed the issue. However, Rukwaru (2015) argues that the number of units of analysis the researcher uses in his study is dictated by the research problem he is examining (p. 100). Therefore, analyzing the only statement issued by Real Madrid regarding the leaked audio clips has not impacted the findings and conclusion of this study. Even when Pérez was interviewed recently, on June 15, 2022, by *El Chiringuito*, nothing was mentioned regarding the issue.

Directions for future research

Image repair theory would be a fruitful area for further work. More broadly, research is also needed to determine the effectiveness of Pérez’s image repair discourse among fans through mining and analyzing their comments, tweets, and posts on social media. In addition, further research should be undertaken to investigate how major media framed the crisis to evaluate the role such press has played in shrinking or disseminating it.

Conclusion

Real Madrid's case offers an enlightening topic of image attack and image defense in public relations and crisis communication management. The purpose of the current study was to determine and evaluate the predominant image repair strategies used in the Real Madrid president's statement in the wake of the controversy over the leaked audio clips in which he slammed some historical legends of Real Madrid, such as Iker Casillas, Raúl González, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Luís Figo. This study has shown that Pérez successfully employed some reducing offensiveness strategies. Pérez primarily engaged in *minimization*, *transcendence*, and *attacking the accuser*, which some previous image-repair studies deemed a practical approach. In his statement published on the Real Madrid official website, Pérez first *attacked the accuser*. He attempted to create new beliefs about the accuser to undermine the attack and divert the audience's attention from the original accusation (Benoit, 2015, p. 29).

Pérez questioned the credibility of the accusers. He portrayed Abellán as a greedy person "trying to sell the recordings for many years without success". This has confirmed the findings of Benoit (2015) that reducing the credibility of the source of accusations can diminish the damage to one's image and turn the audience's considerations away from the original issue. Prior studies that have noted the effectiveness of *attacking the accuser* in sports communication include Brown (2016). However, the ineffectiveness of *attacking the accuser* in sports communication was claimed by Brazeal (2008); Compton and Compton (2014); Glantz (2010).

Pérez also succeeded in employing *transcendence*. He maintained that the leakage crisis owes to his "involvement as one of the driving forces behind the Super League", which comes as a part of a campaign against the European Super League. Compton and Compton (2014) argued that *transcendence* is particularly applicable to the context of sports and asserted the unique value of this strategy. Using *transcendence* and *attacking the accuser* helped Real Madrid frame the crisis favorably for the club. Caldiero et al. (2009) argue that organizations that "do not respond to a crisis with image repair strategies could lose all possibility of framing the crisis" (p. 226). This implies that public relations practitioners should take the lead in guiding the public's perception through deliberate tactics of image repair strategies that may help them frame the crisis in a way that allows the public to interpret the situation from the organization's point of view.

Pérez also partially used *mortification*, a successful tactic as Figo accepted his apology. Many scholars in sports communication suggested the possible effectiveness of *mortification* in repairing a damaged image (Allison et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2012; Meng & Pan, 2013; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). However, Frederick et al. (2019) argued that *mortification* was ineffective in Larry Nassar's abuse scandal case study. Similarly, it was in Owens image repair attempts (Brazeal, 2008). Other scholars suggested that mortification could be effective when combined with corrective action (Allison et al., 2020; Compton, 2014). Consequently, public relations practitioners should learn specific crisis communication strategies from case studies that use an explicative typology as certain concerns require certain responses.

These strategies helped him get through the bottleneck. He maintained his position and will remain at the club's top until 2025. Hence, one can argue that Pérez succeeded in implementing image repair strategies based on the context of the crisis. Consistent with the case study of Meng and Pan (2013), it can be argued that Pérez was strategic in his communication management. These results contrast with Onwumechili and Bedeau's (2017) results,

which indicated that FIFA failed to repair its image following the corruption crisis after its top officials were arrested for corruption early in 2015.

This study adds to the growing body of literature that debated the effectiveness of image repair strategies by claiming the usefulness of this approach. However, the inconsistency in the results between the scholars on the efficacy of each method shows that the strategy used in image repair varies according to time, place, context, the availability of information, and evidence about the act. This confirms the argument of Benoit (1995): the researcher who seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of image repair strategies should identify the factors that appear to contribute to the success or failure of communication. Thus, Benoit's typology offers a compatible method of analyzing image repair in sports public relations.

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