Lionel Messi's Dramatic Tearful Barcelona Exit: An Analysis of the Club Image Repair and Fans' Responses

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the image repair strategies used by Barcelona after the dramatic exit of its top player, Lionel Messi. Barcelona's image repair efforts included President Laporta's press conference, in which he attempted to repair the club's image by justifying and explaining the situation. The study also evaluated the fans' responses to Barcelona's strategies to determine how fans reacted to such discourse. Therefore, first, it uses Benoit's image repair theory to analyse Barcelona's rhetoric. Second, it conducts a thematic analysis of 2613 comments from active YouTube users. The results show 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*. The thematic analysis of fans' responses to Laporta's speech shows that Laporta failed to convince fans of his arguments. Over and above, he infuriated them with his speech. Therefore, it is right to say that his image repair strategies were ineffective and unimpressive. The findings suggest that when the audience is eager to see *corrective action*, it is difficult to accept other strategies that do not align with their desires. The results of this study have several important implications for future practice. First, organisations should consider audience orientations through audience analysis before employing image repair strategies. Second, sports organisations should use media framing before major decisions to avoid shocking fans.

Keywords: *Thematic analysis, Barcelona, Leo Messi, Joan Laporta, image repair.*

INTRODUCTION

When he was 13 years old, Lionel Messi joined Barcelona's famed La Masia academy in 2000 from Argentine side Newell's Old Boys and made his senior debut at 16 in 2004. Messi has made 778 appearances for the club, scoring 672 goals, including 120 Champions League goals and 474 La Liga goals (BBC, 2021). He won 10 La Liga titles, four Champions Leagues, and seven Copa del Reys. He collected the European Golden Shoe award for the continent's top scorer (the Ballon d'Or) on six occasions (BBC, 2021). Internationally, Messi is widely regarded as one of the greatest players in the world of all time and has fans all around the world. However, on August 5, 2021, he was ready to extend his 21-year association with Barcelona but failed to do so despite accepting a 50% salary cut (Aljazeera, 2021). As a result, sorrow, grief, and disbelief hung over Catalunya and Barcelona supporters worldwide. The infuriated and stunned Barcelona fans called Joan Laporta, President of the club, to explain the crisis (Sharma, 2021). On August 6, 2021, Laporta held a press conference to explain Messi's exit from Barcelona, redress fans' grievances, and contain the widespread disaffection.

This analysis examines image repair strategies and their reception by big sports clubs. The case study of Messi's Barcelona exit is a unique and timely debated issue that stands as a remarkable example of how big sports clubs communicate their image repair strategies to

reduce fans' discontent. This study examines Barcelona's efforts to repair its image and explores YouTube users' responses. Hence, this study is guided by the image repair theory.

Researchers have shown an increased interest in image repair in sports communication. However, most focus on athlete or sports organisation transgression (Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick, & Thompson, 2020; Brown, 2016; Brown, Murphy, & Maxwell, 2018; Compton & Compton, 2014; Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018; Glantz, 2010; Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015; Meng & Pan, 2013; Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2017; Sanderson, 2008; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Although scholars have conducted extensive research on image repair, no single study addresses how sports clubs employ image repair to justify the exit of their top players. This investigation provides a better understanding of how international sports clubs attempt to restore their images and manage their top players' exit crises. This case study seeks to examine the effectiveness of image repair strategies by analysing the fans' responses. The principal argument of this study is that when the audience is eager to see corrective action, it is hard to accept other strategies that do not align with their aspirations.

IMAGE REPAIR

Image repair theory focuses on saving the reputation of the accused. Image repair discourse is a response to actual or expected threats to face. Hence, this approach to image repair proposes two key assumptions: (a) Communication is a goal-oriented activity, and (b) a vital goal of communication is maintaining a positive reputation (Benoit, 1995, 2015). William Benoit proposed five discursive strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, mortification, and corrective action (Benoit, 1995, 2015). Some of the five primary strategies categorised sub-strategies of image repair, making 14 strategies in total (see Table 1). These strategies can be applied independently or collectively to improve public perception. Organisations and individuals frequently use image repair strategies in crisis to gain favourable responses from the public.

Table 1: Typology of image repair strategies

Strategy	Definition	Sports Example
Denial		
Simple denial	They did not perform the act; the act was not harmful.	The club management action was harmless to the team.
Shift the blame	Another committed the error.	La Liga's policies are the actual reason behind the player's exit.
Evading responsibility		
Provocation	The wrongful act is just a response to another wrongful act	The club management refused to sign with the player because of his inappropriate behaviour
Defeasibility	The act was the result of a lack of information or ability to act	Player exit was caused by not knowing his actual intentions
Accidents	The act was a mishap	The coach prescribed the wrong exercises
Good intentions	The wrongful act happened, but the actor meant well.	The club management believed the player's exit would be for his benefit.
Reducing offensiveness		
Bolstering	Stress actor's excellent traits	The club president previously signed with historical legends.
Minimization	The act is less severe as it appears.	The player's exit will not affect the club's popularity.

Differentiation	The offensive act is less offensive than other, similar acts	It is better for a player to leave than for the club to go bankrupt
Transcendence	The act is justified by more essential values.	One old player's exit led to more young players thriving.
Attacking accuser	Question the credibility of the source of the accusations	The Player lied to fans about his future, which is why they were shocked when he departed
Compensation	Redress the victims	A new star will strengthen the team after Messi's exit.
Corrective action	Fix the problem or prevent a recurrence	The club bought a new star after the departure of its player.
Mortification	Admit responsibility and apologise	The club management apologises for the player's departure.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on image repair in sports communication. We can categorise these studies into two main themes; the first focuses on athlete transgression image repair (Allison et al., 2020; Brown, 2016; Brown et al., 2018; Glantz, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2015; Meng & Pan, 2013; Sanderson, 2008; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). The second category studied sports organisation image repair (Compton & Compton, 2014; DiSanza, Legge, Allen, & Wilde, 2013; Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018; Frederick, Pegoraro, & Smith, 2019; Meyer & Cutbirth, 2013; Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2017).

1)   Athlete Transgression Image Repair

Sanderson (2008) examined star Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens's image-repair strategies during a press conference on January 7, 2008, to respond to allegations that he had used steroids and human-growth hormones earlier in his playing career. Clemen employed various image-repair strategies during his press conference, such as *minimisation*, *denial*, and *attacking the accuser*. However, Clemen's failure to enact these strategies appropriately further harmed his reputation and ultimately raised more questions than he answered. Similarly, Allison et al. (2020) examined 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. The findings showed that Wambach used *mortification* and *corrective action* strategies. Sharapova *avoided responsibility* and *reduced offensive* strategies. Similarly, Hambrick et al. (2015) studied how the road racing cyclist, Lance Armstrong, applied image repair strategies between 2012 and early 2013. These times represented a turbulent period in his career. He faced a doping investigation by the U.S. government and later admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs during a nationally televised interview with Oprah Winfrey. They analysed Armstrong's 859 tweets during this period and his comments during the Oprah Winfrey interview. Armstrong used *attacking the accuser, bolstering*, and *stonewalling* strategies through Twitter. During the interview, he utilised words such as *mortification, shifting blame, simple denial, provocation,* and *victimisation*.

Other studies investigated the effectiveness of image repair strategies. Glantz (2010) considered the case of the cyclist Floyd Landis following the scandal of illicit substance use during the 2006 Tour de France. Landis used *denial, differentiation, attacking the accuser*, and *evading responsibility* strategies, but they were ineffective because they were confusing and failed to counter the potency of evidence. Likewise, Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) looked at 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 results revealed that Phelps used *mortification, corrective action, bolstering*, and *defeasibility* strategies deemed successful. Brown et al. (2018) evaluated criminal transgressions by comparing the effectiveness of image repair attempts by athletes facing domestic violence charges compared to other crimes and looked at the point of the *mortification* strategy in combination with the different predominant strategies used by athletes. The results showed that athletes facing domestic violence charges are perceived more negatively regardless of their response to the transgression. In combination with corrective action, using mortification is the best response for athletes, irrespective of the crime. They suggested that using combination strategies to respond to offences may be better. Using a different approach, Brown (2016) conducted an experimental examination of the effectiveness of image repair strategies during criminal and noncriminal athlete transgressions. The findings of his experiment revealed that the *attacking the accuser* strategy was just as effective as the *mortification* strategy in the athlete's repair image overall and when the athlete faces a criminal transgression. He found that the *bolstering* strategy was also effective regardless of offence.

2) Sports Organisations' Image Repair

On the other side, Compton and Compton (2014) measured how club administrations can use open letters to repair images, especially during losing seasons. Their rhetorical analysis uncovered three primary strategies employed during losing seasons; *evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness*, and *corrective action*. Their findings highlighted the importance of audience analysis, the value of *corrective action*, the ineffectiveness of *attacking accusers*, and the unique value of *transcendence* in sports communication image repair. Along similar lines, Frederick and Pegoraro (2018) examined the University of Louisville's (UofL) image repair via Facebook following the release of the Federal Bureau of Investigation report that multiple universities (including UofL) and college coaches took bribes to steer high-profile recruits to specific agents. The results proved that UofL employed *transcendence, bolstering*, and *stonewalling*. Users expressed support for the university despite its emergent crisis. In like manner, DiSanza et al. (2013) analysed the National Hockey League's (NHL) image-repair tactics during the 2004–2005 lockout. The results showed that the NHL used *mortification, transcendence*, and *bolstering* as they apologised to the fans, justified the lockout as the "right thing to do," and stressed that they were willing to negotiate with the players on the collective bargaining agreement. Using the same methodology, Frederick et al. (2019) assessed how Michigan State University (MSU) used Facebook as a tool for image repair regarding the Larry Nassar abuse scandal, who served as associate professor and team physician at MSU. The results showed that MSU primarily employed *corrective action, bolstering*, and *mortification* deemed ineffective. Onwumechili and Bedeau (2017) evaluated the image repair by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) after its top officials were arrested for corruption early in 2015. In his initial response, the results showed that President Blatter evaded responsibility by using *defeasibility*. He also used *corrective action* but refused to accept responsibility and failed to show *mortification*. Each case is unique based on the results of strategies it finds. Meyer and Cutbirth (2013) analysed image repair among Major League Baseball (MLB) and the Major League Baseball Players Association following labour negotiations in 2002. The results demonstrated that both bodies engaged in *differentiation, denial*, and *corrective action*, while the MLB used *bolstering* and *transcendence*.

Similarly, this study employs these strategies in the current analysis. However, none of the previously discussed studies has reviewed giants' football top clubs' image repair. Football giants have social media clout, so it is crucial to investigate such clubs' image repair during crises. Barcelona is one of the most widely supported teams globally, and the club has one of the most prominent social media followers in the world among sports teams. It has surpassed the number of 400 million followers on its different social networks. Barcelona's leading football club has 12 million followers on YouTube (FcBarcelona, 2021).

Previous studies in sports communication remain narrow in focus, dealing only with transgressions of image repair; no single study exists addressing how sports clubs employ image repair to justify the shocking exit of their top players. This study adds to image repair literature by exploring the image repair strategies of Barcelona after Messi's controversial departure and how YouTube users responded to Barcelona's image repair. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions:

RQ1: What image repair strategies did Barcelona employ through its president press conference addressing Messi's departure?

RQ2: How did Barcelona's ardent fans respond to the club's image repair strategies?

METHODOLOGY

On August 6, 2021, Laporta held a press conference to explain Messi's exit and contain the widespread disaffection. The press conference lasted around 80 minutes, including Laporta's speech and his responses to 33 questions raised by journalists. The press conference was broadcast live on Barcelona's YouTube channel with simultaneous audio translation to English. The researcher transcribed the entire speech and the 33 questions and responses. The final transcript contained 7350 words, a document of 18 single-spaced pages. Next, the transcript was uploaded onto MAXQDA, a software package for qualitative and mixed methods research equivalent to NVivo.

I conducted a deductive content analysis of each statement to address **RQ1** and identify Barcelona's image repair strategies at Laporta's press conference. Usually, the theory drives the reasoned approach (Anandarajan, Hill, & Nolan, 2019, p. 16). If the research aims to test a theory in a new context, content analysis for deductive inference is appropriate. The deductive approach is the most traditional form of content analysis in which observed or manifest content is analysed using existing theory. The theory tells the researcher the information to expect from the collected data (Anandarajan et al., 2019, p. 16). Hence, I employed Benoit's (1995) image repair typology to categorise Laporta's speech and responses to the journalists' questions. First, I independently coded each sentence. Once this coding round was complete, an independent scholar processed the inter-rater reliability. He individually coded the whole press conference transcript after I trained him in using the coding scheme. Then, Cohen's kappa for the agreement was calculated; .96. According to Landis and Koch (1977), this agreement between coders is considered almost perfect.

To address **RQ2**, about two weeks after Laporta's conference, all comments on the YouTube broadcast of the press conference were extracted using the MAXQDA software and exported into two EXCEL files, and then converted into PDF for analysis. I excluded all comments that only included emojis and words written in a language other than English. The final dataset comprised 2613 comments. I uploaded the PDF files onto Leximancer, computer software that uses blocks of text to identify concepts and themes through an iterative process

of seeding word definitions from frequencies and co-occurrences (Wilk, Soutar, & Harrigan, 2019).

Leximancer is valuable for analysts exploring big, text-based, online data. It also helps researchers avoid constraints, and personal biases when an a priori and imposed coding scheme is employed (Gallois, Cretchley, & Watson, 2012, p. 39). It automatically generates a concept list that is statistically reliable and reproducible and does not require inter-coder reliability. It uses word occurrence and co-occurrence counts to extract primary thematic and conceptual content directly from an input text (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013, p. 262). Leximancer works in two stages; first, it creates a set of primary concepts from the dataset to establish the most dominant themes. Second, the software's algorithm operates relational extraction that involves mapping relationships of the themes against each other (Allison et al., 2020). The conceptual map generated by Leximancer identifies the dominant themes within the 2613 comments analysed. Finally, the researcher's readings for verification and contextualisation complemented the software coding (Allison et al., 2020).

RESULTS

a. Barcelona's Image Repair Strategies

Laporta's speech and responses to the journalists' questions relied heavily on five image repair strategies: *shifting blame, defeasibility, transcendence, bolstering*, and *differentiation*. *Shift the blame*. Laporta started his press conference by blaming the "lies" of his predecessor, Josep Maria Bartomeu, for the club's "very worrying" and "dramatic" situation. He said:

Before anything, I want to explain that we have received a terrible inheritance from the previous board, which means that salaries at the club represent 110% of our income; financial fair play legalises the rules and regulations of the Spanish La Liga. We do not have any margin.
He also shifted the blame to the previous administration regarding the current salary policy, as he said:

> The salary policy that we stumbled upon from the previous board is wrong. The experts call the inverted pyramid, where veterans have long contracts and young players have short ones, making it difficult to renegotiate contracts.

Once again blamed his predecessor's board, claiming that they escaped from the team's miserable situation; "The previous board left the Camp Nou open when there were dangers. And they knew it."

(i) Defeasibility.

After shifting the blame to his predecessor's management, Laporta alleged a lack of control over essential elements of the situation, claiming the numbers presented to his board after the first conclusions of the audit were a lot worse than they expected. In addition, he contended that there is no room to manoeuver, and the La Liga fair play financial rules mark the limits. Through these over-control reasons, Laporta justified why Barcelona could not fit into the first contract that Barcelona agreed to with Messi.

> When we arrived at the club, the figures seemed better after the first audit and the end of the season. However, they are worse than predicted. That means high anticipated losses, and the expected debt is much higher. That is why we have those salaries way above income. There is no wriggle room with

wages. To comply with the league's fair play regulations, we had to accept an agreement that mortgaged the Club's TV rights for half a century. Leo's registration was tied to taking this La Liga operation, which is not in Barcelona's interests. We understand that we should not accept this mortgaging of Barcelona's TV rights for half a century.

(ii) Transcendence.

Laporta also attempted to place Messi's departure in a different context: the fair play policy.

I want it to be clear that Leo wanted to stay, and the club wished for him to stay. There comes a moment in the negotiations when you have to make a stand and analyse the figures rigorously. The La Liga rules could be more flexible, but that is no excuse because we were aware of them. Leo Messi deserves everything, and he has shown his love for Barcelona and his willingness to stay in Barcelona. I am sad but convinced we have done the best for FC Barcelona's interests.

(iii) Differentiation.

To minimise the offensiveness of Leo's exit, Laporta also engaged in *differentiation* as he attempted to distinguish the departure of Messi from other less desirable actions, which put the club at risk. He said he was not equipped "to put the club at risk" by renewing Messi's contract, with the club facing substantial financial problems ahead of the start of La Liga.

(iv) Bolstering.

Laporta related positive attributes his board possesses; despite the club's wealth of problems, Laporta insisted he was braced for such a situation and believes that "in a couple of years, the club's economy will be healthy." He added, "we are not scared; we are highly motivated. It's a big challenge, but we are capable of overcoming it."

b.   YouTube User's Responses

Note: All fans' comments in this research are provided as-is with no language changes, editing, or correction.

Figure 1 presents the Leximancer-generated concept map of YouTube user comments on Laporta's press conference. Five themes emerged from the data: Thank you, La Liga, Barcelona, best player, Laporta, and Shame. An explanation of each theme is presented under the subsections below.
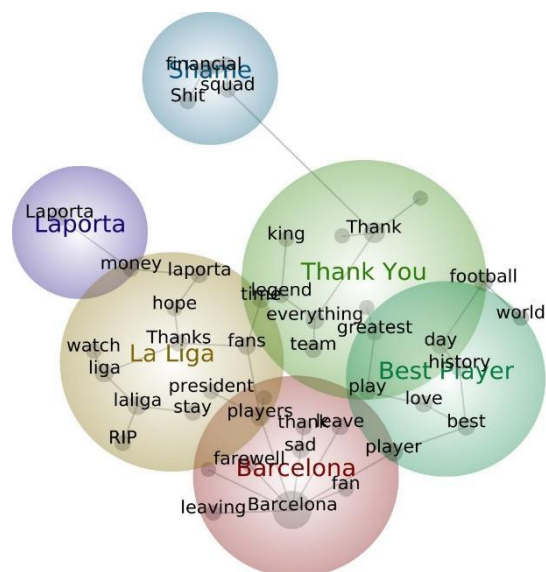
Figure 1: Leximancer concept map, Barcelona fans on YouTube comments on Laporta's press conference.

(i) Thank You

As it is clear from the map, the primary theme is "thank you." YouTube users whose comments fell within this theme thanked Messi for his efforts in Barcelona and ignored Laporta's justifications. Most of these comments are accompanied by a pleasant heart emoji to express their love for Messi, such as, for example; one user wrote, "Thank you for everything that you did ❤." Another commented, "The most beautiful story in the world of football has ended. Thank you, Messi. Thank you for everything. You are the best forever. ❤ ❤GOAT❤❤. THIS IS VERY STRANGE.". "Leo will always be the best player for me. ❤GIVE HIM A GRAND TRIBUTE ✦GIVE HIM A GRAND TRIBUTE. Thank you". Some commenters in this category also expressed their displeasure by stopping to watch the League while thanking Messi and some other legends. For example, one fan wrote, "I love Barca because there were Xavi, Iniesta, and Messi. Then Ronaldo Cr7 came for a few years. I saw the greatest football rivalry shown. Each El Classico match is better to watch than a final competitive match. Thanks to those shit regulators, BYE BYE LaLiga". Some fans, while thanking Messi, they expressed their Sadness. For an instant, a fan commented, "Thank you, Leo, this is so biggest heartbreak for Barcelona fans⋯." Some fans, while thanking Messi, threatened that they would stop following the team, "I am unsubscribing FC Barcelona. Thanks for everything, Messi". Some fans promised they would continue to follow him where he goes, "Leo, What is left to say is thank you very much. Thank you for the exciting and impossible moments to create and prepare for them. Thank you for being Messi. You were and always will be in our hearts Messi and forever Messi. And I say it with chills, good luck on your way. We are with you wherever you go ⋯ Wow". Many fans described Messi as a king, "The king of football ⚽thank you, Messi. Love from⋯ INDIA". Some of them said they could not believe what happened. For example, "Still feels like a shitty dream, thank you, Leo, ▢⋯." Lots of fans blamed the management for Messi's exit. As an instant, "Leo didn't want to leave Barca, he had no other choice. Thank you for the countless moments you've given the world, Leo. That free-kick against Liverpool, precision. You are the ⋯".

In contrast, only one fan thanked Laporta as he said, "Thank you, Joan Laporta, for speaking to us, and he is a great president, and thank you, Leo, and good luck anywhere else." Thus, it can be concluded from the fans' focus on thanking Messi for his achievement and

performance, expressing their feelings, and blaming the management for his exit, that they did not buy Laporta's justifications, even though they ignored discussing his words.

(ii) Best Player

This theme extends to the previous one, where fans describe Messi as the best player and continue praising and thanking him. A notable example, one of the fans wrote, "The best player in history leaving my favorite club on my birthday. My life end with that news. Football is going to be different without Leo in Barcelona. Forever King of Football Leo ❤··". Several fans in this category blame the Barcelona administration for giving up the "best player." As an example, a fan wrote, "Thank you, Bartomeu, you successfully made the best player in our history leave, and those clubs out there will get the best free lunch...". Note that Josep Maria Bartomeu used shifting the blame image repair strategy to absolve himself from blame for the club's situation, as he has culminated in the loss of Messi. He wrote an open letter to his successor Laporta in which he attempts to absolve himself from blame for the club's situation while also hitting out at Laporta's role in it (Aldunate, 2021).
In this theme, fans also attempted to express their sadness for the "best player's" departure. As one fan said:

> Leo Messi is my BEST PLAYER. I don't know about you guys, but I think I feel what Barcelona Is going through and that my club and yesterday I have been crying as he died. I wasn't ready to say goodbye it all happened in a blink. From renewing the contract to thank you, Leo, like who the fuck is making these rules. I hate that my happiness turned into sadness so fast. Even flash can't beat that. I don't, but I'm not the one talking. I'm sure it is my feelings because your feelings can't just switch like that. It's so painful. THIS IS HOW I FEEL ······▭

Along with describing Messi as the "best player in the world," some fans told him as loyal and condemned how the club president treated him. A notable example of this is what one fan wrote in the following quote:

> ▢▢Leo Messi is not only the best footballer in the world, but he is a loyal and dedicated person to his club until now. ▢▢

> ··But sadly, the president of Barcelona is extraordinary; knowing that Barcelona's finances are running out and the rules of the Spanish League, he has to stop buying a lot of new players. Laporta is desperate to get Messi out of Barcelona in a subtle and unsportsmanlike way. ··

However, while describing Messi as the "best player," only one fan described him as "greedy." "Best player.. no doubt. But has become only greedy for money. The club that made him big is not important enough for him to minimise his salary... sorry to tell the truth." Note that Messi, in his press conference, said that he agreed to take the 50% wage cut.

(iii) Barcelona

Under this theme, some of Messi's fans tried to poke fun at the team because his management could not save money to keep him. One user wrote, "Should we all fan PayPal you or something to help you guys keep MESSI with the club because we will not support FC BARCELONA without MESSI?". Some fans have claimed that Barcelona will end after Messi's departure.; "No Messi: no Barca, no la Liga." Under this theme, some fans also alleged that people from around the world are watching La Liga see Messi playing. For example, a fan wrote, "FC Barcelona's management and the Spanish league didn't realise that people watching the Spanish league worldwide are because of Lionel Messi. It's a sad day for Barcelona's fans...". In addition, many fans pretended that they would stop following the team because of Messi's exit. "Messi leaving Barca...we are leaving Barca." Many fans professed they would stop watching Barcelona games. One of them put it: "I will not watch a Barcelona match in my lifetime." Moreover, the feelings of the fans have reached the stage of describing Barcelona as having no value without Messi:

> 25k, and I love Barcelona because of Messi. Suppose Messi leaves Barcelona will be nothing, and we will hate Barcelona because Barcelona without Messi is nothing. In that case, there will be no Barcelona, and all your players will leave because when Messi goes to Manchester City or Paris Saint Germain, no one will love Barcelona. All will love PSG instead of Barcelona, and your channel will be 0 subscribers. Please don't let Messi leave.

Through this theme, some fans claimed that Barcelona's management does not appreciate or respect the players' feelings and does not value them. For one example, among others, one fan wrote:

> From now on, no Messi, no Barcelona anymore. I feel sorry for him for how the club treats a world-class player like him. He loves Barcelona more than his own country. He creates many histories for his club, but in the end, no one counts or respects his feelings·

As it turns out, Laporta's image repair strategies failed to contain the anger of Barcelona fans.

(iv) Laporta

A prominent sub-theme under "Laporta" is that he breaks his promises: "LaPorta. You did not keep your word. Your first promise was to keep LIONEL MESSI in Barcelona. I still can't believe it and am unable to sleep. I don't want to see Messi in another shirt. God · please do something". Some fans alleged he exploited Messi to win the club's election; "Joan Laporta used Messi to win the election ·····." Many commentators have accused Laporta of seeking only money and trying to maximise his fortune through the Super League. For example, one fan put it:

> He only cared about the super league... it was early decided Messi would leave.. he tricked fans so he could win the election & make money in the super league... this is all greed·...Barca will not be the same anymore.. nor the football we know ···

Moreover, some Barcelona fans stigmatised Laporta to be a "stooge" of Florentino Pérez, Real Madrid's President, and that he is a twister who used Messi for his benefit.

> Laporta is a stooge of Perez.... He just used Messi to win the elections; that's it. He could have signed Messi, but he did not, just to choose his papa Perez's European Super League over Messi's renewal... Since day 1, he has been saying everything is alright and then suddenly comes and says La Liga is not allowing it..... La Liga never gave false hope... They were always transparent with their stand. Why did he expect La Liga to be flexible when they had already said they wouldn't be..... He didn't sign Messi so that super league could become a possibility....and guess what that's not going to happen... How can it happen when all other clubs have pulled out of that crap? And anyway, the super league is destructive for smaller clubs...there is a genuine concern about employment..... All Laporta has done is blame the earlier administration and blame la Liga..... He must put super league over Messi...

Many Barcelona fans accused Laporta of corruption and that he was turning the sport into business.

> ⚽Football is no longer a sport but a business. This is why corruption is very high quality. Diego Maradona ⚽football legend was right about the corruption and distraction of ⚽football and all ·sports □·. Mr. John Laporta, you must be in prison and entire FIFA employees, including President. Mr. Joan Laporta, football is not gasoline or electricity Football is a Sport, but unfortunately, people like you do sport like a business. Shame on you.

Lots of the fans also accused Laporta of mismanagement. For example, one user wrote, "Laporta, you should be ashamed of yourself. Complete mismanagement. You call yourself both and lawyer and a businessman; you're a goddamn joke. Messi, you will be tremendously missed." In addition, many fans asked Laporta to resign, such as "Bold shame & unforgivable mistake. Laporta Out." Only nine fans defended his position compared to the intensive attack against Laporta. For example, one of them wrote, "To the people blaming Laporta, it's not his fault. He has done as good as any could do under the circumstances, and the truth is, he made the right decision because if he went through with the signing, he would've hurt Messi's career and the club as well,". Another one wrote "Laporta is a great President. He will build a new team".

(v) La Liga

Under this theme, also fans expressed their anger at Messi's leave. The departure of Messi would hurt not only Barcelona but the league. For example, one fan wrote, "RIP BARCA! RIP LA LIGA! I am a big Barca fan, but I won't watch any game in the new season!". It is arguably true that La Liga benefits from Messi's presence and participation in matches between Barcelona and Real Madrid, the sport's most famous rivalry. From 2009 to 2018, with Messi facing Cristiano Ronaldo, those clashes generated enormous worldwide interest. Fans also focused on this issue as one fan, for example, wrote, "RIP LALIGA. RIP EL CLASICO. Even RIP Barcelona because its history is only left now." Fans argued that the la Liga would lose its

publicity after Messi's departure. For example, a fan wrote, "Without Messi, Barca and la Liga will never be the same. Barca & la Liga will lose their popularity and sponsors." Even more, some fans encouraged each other to stop watching la Liga; "GUYS PLEASE UNFOLLOW BARCELONA AND LA LIGA FROM ALL PLATFORMS......THIS IS WHAT THEY GET FOR DOING THIS TO MESSI........ RIP BARCA...RIP LALIGA...RIP LAPORTA·····".

Some fans questioned the reason behind watching La Liga after Messi's exit. For instance, one wrote, "Remind me why to watch la Liga now?" Many fans claimed they would move to watch other competitions such as England's Premier League, Germany's Bundesliga, Italy's Serie A, and France's Ligue 1. For example, some fans alleged they would watch the competition where Messi plays, "Bye la Liga. Thanks for the memories. Where Leo goes, we go." Some fans claimed the departure of its stars would destroy la Liga. For example, one user typed, "La Liga is dead now... Leo Messi ·, Kylian Mbappé, Neymar da Silva, Ángel di María, Marco Verratti, Sergio Ramos, Gianluigi Donnarumma... the dream team."

(vi) Shame

This is one of the Leximancer-generated themes of YouTube user comments on Laporta's press conference. Under this theme, YouTube users used profanity against Laporta and Barcelona team management. For example, below is one word among many that came under this theme in which the fan insulted some players and staff in Barcelona while expressing his anger for Messi's exit.

> Let me tell you this, mister Laporta you say that Bârca is above all players, but Messi is not any player. He is the one who put you on the map of the elite clubs. Without him, you would struggle to qualify for the champions' league. The fact that we get to see the likes of Pique, Busquets, Lenglet, Alba, and Roberto stay in the club, and your greatest player gets to leave against his will it's a great shame. Still, you know what, how about you give it to us straight because we are adults, not fools. You never wanted to keep Messi. You didn't put up a fight to save him. You probably are happy he is gone. He will be gone; you will be stuck with your finished players. Messi will have success wherever he goes, but you club mate, I don't think that we will hear about you in the next few years fuck you, fuck Ronald Koeman, fuck Pique, fuck Martin Braithwaite, fuck Umtiti, fuck Barcelona, fuck Catalunya. I'm quitting supporting you because I don't want to be a fan of a club that doesn't respect his legends; first Suarez, now Messi. To you, mister Laporta if the time proved something, you are no better than Bartolomeo matter of fact, I think you are worse than him. At least he had the opportunity to sell him, but he refused you; on the other hand, you kept lying to everybody from your first day till now. Ok, Messi will go but remember, he is better off without your shitty club, but there are plenty of hard times ahead of your club. Now, you should be thankful to Messi because, without him, you won't make it to the presidency ·· adios Messi, you are, and you will be the best I have ever seen, no doubt.

In addition, under this theme, fans blamed other players for refusing to take a wage cut. For example, one fan wrote: "Thank you, Leo, □·. Ones who were reluctant to pay (a) cut should be ashamed." Ardent fans also described Laporta's speech as shameful and asked him to sell other players, but not Messi, as he is their idol and all family members love him because of his talent. For example, a fan wrote:

We don't care about your tribute, speech, explanation, etc... It's a shame.
He is the child of the club. The genius of football. The greatest player I have ever seen. Magical. Unbelievable. He is in our hearts. We love him. Grandfathers love him; fathers love him, brothers adore him, sons adore him... We all love him like a member of our families.
You can't retire him from us.
SELL GRIEZMANN AND DEMBELE... WE DON'T CARE
SELL TER STEGEN, PEDRI, AND DE JONG; WE DON'T CARE...
SELL YOUR HOUSE, YOUR JEWELS, OR WHATEVER... WE DON'T CARE
FIND THE MONEY, AND SIGN LEO !!! ·

In conclusion, as it is clear from the generated themes by Leximancer and the examples that illustrated them above, perhaps Laporta failed to convince fans of his arguments. Over and above, he infuriated them with his speech. Therefore, it is right to say that his image repair strategies were ineffective and unimpressive.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the image repair strategies employed by Barcelona at the Laporta press conference following Messi's exit. The fans' responses to the press conference were also reviewed to determine how they were reacting to the different strategies used by Laporta. He employed three fundamental techniques: *denial* through *shifting the blame*; *reducing offensiveness* through *transcendence, differentiation*, and *bolstering*; and *evading responsibility* through *defeasibility*. However, his words fell on deaf ears as fans' responses showed negative attitudes towards his speech. Laporta failed to employ corrective action, which would be more effective in the situation discussed. Meng and Pan (2013) argued that corrective action is effective when combined with declaring responsibility and mortification. However, in the current case, Laporta used *evading responsibility* through *defeasibility* rather than admitting fault, which disappointed the audience and made them attack him forcefully. Worse still, Barcelona used denial by *shifting the blame*. Smith and Keeven (2019) argued that sports organisations rely on *shifting the blame* and separation strategies to detach the organisation from the accused group, which has an extensive history of organisational crisis communication. In addition, Compton and Compton (2014) highlighted the value of *corrective action* as a successful image repair strategy in several analyses of image repair situations in sports communication. Nevertheless, this strategy was ineffective in the current study as winds blew counter to what Laporta's ships desired. He blamed his predecessor, Bartomeu, for the club's "dramatic" situation. Despite his claim, fans pointed accusatory fingers at Laporta's management.

Laporta also attempted to *reduce offensiveness* by focusing on the fair play policy. Although Compton and Compton (2014) argued that t*ranscendence* particularly applies to the context of sports and has a unique value in the rhetoric of sports communication image repair, fans refused all Laporta's justifications of Messi's departure, claiming that Barcelona knew in advance of La Liga policies and regulations. According to fans' responses, shifting the focus to the fair play policy created a smokescreen of the club's management intentions in Messi's exclusion.

To diminish the offensiveness of the event, Laporta also attempted to contrast Messi's exit with putting the club at risk. Consistent with Glantz's (2010) findings, *differentiation* was an ineffective strategy. Fans claimed Barcelona could sell other less talented players rather than Messi to avoid putting the club in danger and the club's global following at risk of shrinking. Even worse, fans think Messi's departure may affect the club's future sponsorship income, merchandise sales, and match-day revenue. In the same manoeuver, Laporta employed the *bolstering* strategy, claiming that despite the club's wealth of problems, he was braced for such a situation and trusted that the club's economy would be more robust. He also claimed that his team was highly motivated to overcome this enormous challenge. In response, users portrayed him as a liar, a con person, a stooge of Florentino Pérez, corrupted, a loser, and other bad portrayals. Therefore, this strategy was ineffective in contrast to Allison et al. (2020) with Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011). According to Allison et al. (2020), users constructed Wambach and Sharapova as role models for girls and women and emphasised their athletic talent and contributions to their sports. However, users framed Laporta as the one who is destroying Barcelona and highlighted his negative attributes in the current case. Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) argued that the swimmer Phelps' image repair campaign was a success, and his sponsors and governing organisations supported him and bolstered his image.

Finally, to evade responsibility, Laporta used the *defeasibility* strategy. His use of *defeasibility* was evident in his justification of why Barcelona unfulfilled the first contract it agreed to with Messi. He claimed that the numbers submitted to his board after the first conclusions of the audit were a lot worse than they expected and that Messi's registration was tied to accepting an agreement that mortgaged the Club's TV right for half a century. Consistent with Onwumechili and Bedeau (2017) and in contrast with Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011), this strategy was deemed unsuccessful as Barcelona fans refused the club's management argument.

CONCLUSION

The present research aimed to examine the image repair strategies used by Barcelona following Messi's exit and the fans' responses to these strategies to determine how fans reacted to the different strategies. Results show that Barcelona used ineffective methods, leading to adverse reactions. An implication of this is the possibility that when the audience is eager to see corrective action, it is difficult to accept other strategies that do not align with their aspirations.

A limitation of this study is that people who comment on YouTube videos may not represent all fans. This group is probably reasonably representative of the most ardent fans, but even there, some passionate fans may not watch or post comments on a YouTube video. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work offers valuable insights into the ineffectiveness of Barcelona's image repair rhetoric through its president's press conference.

More broadly, research is also needed to determine the international media's themes in framing their coverage of Barcelona and its president following their image repair attempts. Scholars could also conduct further research to assess the effectiveness of Real Madrid's image repair efforts and their reception after Cristiano Ronaldo 2018's dramatic exit to Juventus. They may compare results with the current study to evaluate the argument that audiences refuse other strategies when they are eager to see corrective actions.

The findings of this study also have several important implications for future practice. First, organisations should consider audience orientations through audience analysis before employing image repair strategies. Second, sports organisations should use media framing well before major decisions to avoid shocking fans.

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