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# Sports In The Time Of Coronavirus Crisis: Social Media Response Strategies Of Professional English Football Clubs

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## **Abstract**

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak at the beginning of 2020 led to a global pandemic that caused disruption of every sphere of life. This study examines the social media content of professional sports clubs and the communication and response strategies endorsed by them at the beginning of the crisis caused by the pandemic. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was performed on the official social media accounts of four professional English football clubs, Manchester United, Liverpool FC, Leeds United and Luton Town. The research covers a period of one month (March 2020) in which all the official competitions and training around the world were suspended. The paper uses Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in order to describe and explain the changes in the dynamic of communication and the response strategies applied by each club. Furthermore, it uses "10 Emerging Consumer Trends" theory to consider the content in a business context. The results showed that the dynamic changed considerably, making the numbers of posts per day much more stable. They also presented that the most popular response strategies expressed were concern, compassion, ingratiation and support. However, the latent content revealed that most of the time clubs were trying to diminish the crisis and show it as less serious or use ingratiation by showing the fans the best moments in clubs' history. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that virtual experience economy was the trend embraced by all the clubs in multiple ways. The paper concludes with several limits of the presented paper as well as the theoretical expansion into additional approaches and broader contexts that could be taken into account in a similar, future study.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, social media content strategy, content analysis, coronavirus, pandemic, sports clubs social media, football

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## Introduction

When thousands of Paris Saint Germain fans gathered outside of the Parc des Princes stadium to cheer for their team on March 11th 2020, they did not know that it would be one of the last games of football or any sport for several months to come. Their spirit and devotion to their beloved team seemed almost touching. They were not allowed at the stadium because all the games at that time were played behind closed doors - a phenomenon that was seen before only in cases of bans and the biggest punishments for incorrect behaviour. But not this time. This time it was a precaution taken for their own good and caused by a dangerous, fast-spreading virus that was relentlessly attacking the entire World. The pervasive lockdown and order to stay at home and stop most of the usual daily life activities affected every field of business and caused enormous confusion. This situation enforced a number of changes that everyone had to adapt to for several weeks in order to not endanger the life and health of themselves and their loved ones. Many specialists say that the coronavirus outbreak has been the biggest crisis that society had to go through since World War II (Ewing & Stevis-Gridneff, 2020).

In the world of sports, there have been several crisis situations that affected one or more disciplines in a significant way before. For example, after the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 the security management and contingency planning changed considerably (Smith et al., 2017). A number of new regulations and strategies had to be implemented in order to ensure that sports spectators are safe. Clubs and organisations had to adapt to this new reality. Similarly, after the terrorist attack in Paris in 2015, the preparations of Euro 2016 in France had to include specific training for organizers, employees and volunteers in order to prepare them for a potential attack (Bliss, 2010).

However, there has never been a crisis in sports that would entirely disrupt the whole sports industry and affect it in such a global and drastic way. Because of the coronavirus outbreak, the sports just stopped. In the whole world the games, the leagues, the championships, even all the training have been discontinued. For a long time, nobody was able to say when would they be allowed to resume (Bengel, 2020). This created the biggest crises that the sports industry have ever seen. For example in football, on March 17th as a precaution, UEFA officially postponed Euro2020 by 12 months. It's the first time in decades that this tournament will not be played and it puts in question the following year's events that now will have to clash and fight for

attention, venues and supporters with the postponed ones. Nevertheless, some clubs have more to lose than others. For example, Liverpool FC, once one of the most successful clubs in the United Kingdom or even the whole of Europe, after 10 years of struggle, gained the opinion of a club that rarely wins trophies. In the past few years, however, the new management and the team showed how things have changed for them. They started to participate in the highest competitions, they reached the final of the Champions League in the 2017/2018 season and they have won it a year after. But there was one trophy that they still struggled to reach - the domestic Premier League. In season 2019/2020 finally, it seemed like there was no stopping them. Leading by a huge 25 points over second-place Manchester City, needing only 3 more wins to secure the title and be able to lift the trophy again after 30 years, they encountered an unexpected obstacle, bigger than anyone could imagine. The uncertainty of the future, the potential possibility that this season might be cancelled and not resumed presents a tremendous threat to the reputation of the club. This is only one example of many similar cases that have been affected due to the COVID-19.

This study is focusing on the social media content of professional football clubs and communication strategies they have adopted during the time of the coronavirus outbreak, and notably the crisis that this global pandemic has caused. In order to do that, quantitative and qualitative content analysis are conducted on the official social media accounts of four carefully selected clubs from English Premier League and Championship - Manchester United, Liverpool, Leeds United and Luton Town.

Using Coombs' SCCT theory, this study is trying to describe how does the dynamic of the content change during the crisis and to define which response strategies are used and how do those strategies differ depending on the status of the club. Moreover, it is using the theory of "10 Emerging Consumer Trends" theory ([trendwatching.com](https://www.trendwatching.com), 2020) in order to look at the content strategies from a more business perspective and to find out how the sports organisations respond to the consumer's, i.e. fans, needs.

## **Literature review**

In order to demonstrate the theoretical background for this research, the section will present two main bodies of literature and concisely introduce the situational context. First, it will outline the existing literature on social media communication strategies and its significance for professional sports clubs. Second, it will briefly summarize the very scarce, newly emerged articles reflecting on the recent events in light of the coronavirus effects on socio-cultural situations. Finally, it will present the broad research on crisis and the communication techniques in such situations with special regard for sports organisations.

### **Social media content**

Social media is a phenomenon that in the past two decades entirely changed the ways of communicating amongst people and created different channels for marketing and business. They are widely adopted by the users especially thanks to the convenience. They do not require any special software and are available on almost all the devices (Wankel et al., 2010). Most social media platforms are also free of charge so the researchers repeatedly proved that there is a big advantage for doing business on such medium (Jusilla et al., 2011; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Sports organisations and clubs are nothing else but businesses themselves (Szymański, 2015). Therefore, their need for social media presence and reaping the benefits of it can be crucial for the PR of an organisation (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2011; Waters, 2015). The most prevalent and widely researched function of social media use for sports clubs is to bring awareness of the brand to their customers, in this case, fans (Moore, 2011; O'Shea & Alonso, 2011; Siguencia et al., 2017; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Wang and Zhou (2015) demonstrated in their research that the NBA clubs use their social media pages mainly to share important information and promote their merchandise and ticket sales. Therefore it shows how it became an influential marketing tool (Baena, 2016; Bickel, 2012; Pynnönen, 2018). Barreda et al. (2015) argued that the one-way activity that used to be the general model of online marketing i. e. advertising and informing, is far less effective than the latest model that has been popularized by social media. This one allows the customers to interact with the brand or a club and feel a part of the same, bigger community. This also presents the second most

important purpose of using social media by sports organisations which is to maintain a constant and close relationship with their fans, supporters and followers. Williams and Chinn (2010) distinguish two main types of such relationship: community relationship and personal relationship. Each one of them involves a different approach, strategy and kind of content posted but both are just as important. A better relationship, a more developed community, a wider reach and a more diverse and frequent content create more loyal fans that highly identify with the club (Wann & Branscombe, 2001; Nisar, 2018). They feel more responsible for the image of the club and therefore, are not only receiving the information but often involve in a discussion or a debate with other fans or with the club itself (Brown & Billings, 2013; Kuzma et al., 2014; Peate, 2012). The nature of the relationship with fans on social media allows the organisations to intentionally raise some topics that they wish received more attention. This way clubs are aware of the direct public opinion and success or failure of their reputational communication (Brown & Billings, 2013). According to Checchinato et al. (2015), fans are very likely to create their own content based on the club's or organisation's activity. However, regardless of the amount of the user-generated content, fans are always more prone to read, discuss and share the club's original posts as they are much more reliable and trustworthy.

## **Effects of coronavirus**

While it is still too early to fully acknowledge and be certain of the long-lasting, socio-cultural or economical effects of the outbreak of COVID-19, there is already a number of experts speculating about such issues. Most of them, debate on the people's behaviour, attitude, anxiety and mental health (Robson, 2020). Mark Schaller, after conducting an experiment on his students from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, discovered that people tend to become more conservative due to the fear of the virus. There seemed to be no place for individualism and creativity. Breaking the generally accepted standards meant to pose a threat. ("Jak nas zmienia strach przed koronawirusem?", 2020). Others focused on the changes in the ways people will interact with each other. People who are alone and feel lonely will be more likely to value the other person and become less self-centred. Whereas couples spending quarantine together will have a chance to strengthen their bonds with the family which will

eventually lead to the decline in divorce and separations (Henderson, 2020). A popular Polish portal F5 prepared a short list of five future behaviours that people will internalize due to the coronavirus outbreak. They included work from home as a new normal, increase of use of technology for social bonding, new e-learning experiences, more mental health awareness and change in production processes to be more focused on nearshoring (“Jakich zmian w naszym życiu powinniśmy się spodziewać po pandemii?”, 2020). The United Nations in their statement declared that “... this is much more than a health crisis. It is a human, economic and social crisis.” (2020). Indeed several studies have proven that the current crisis is continuing to deepen the social disparities even further. While the average wealthy and moderately rich are complaining about losing their jobs and having less money, the low-income are on a verge of extreme poverty. Children from poor families without the possibility of going to school are hungry and do not have access to any education. People are also more exposed to domestic violence. (Vesoulis, 2020).

On the other hand, economic outcomes seem to be changing a lot of common practices in business and introducing new, creative solutions. Customers became more demanding and the entrepreneurs had to quickly adapt to their behaviour in order to be able to meet the requirements and sustain their companies. Generally, consumers tend to rely on online sources even when it comes to their health. Their knowledge and most importantly interest in the current events vary depending on their age but regardless, everyone expresses deep concern on the subject (Mander, 2020). A portal trendwatching.com (2020) prepared an expanded report in which they specify ‘10 Consumer Trends’ that are emerging during the coronavirus outbreak. Amongst others, those are - virtual experience economy, shopstreaming, open-source solutions, visual companion, burnout or assisted development. For example, there has been significant growth in sharing new ideas and solutions very openly, for free, on generally accessible portals. Business owners started to take into account not only their own income but most importantly the public safety and well-being.

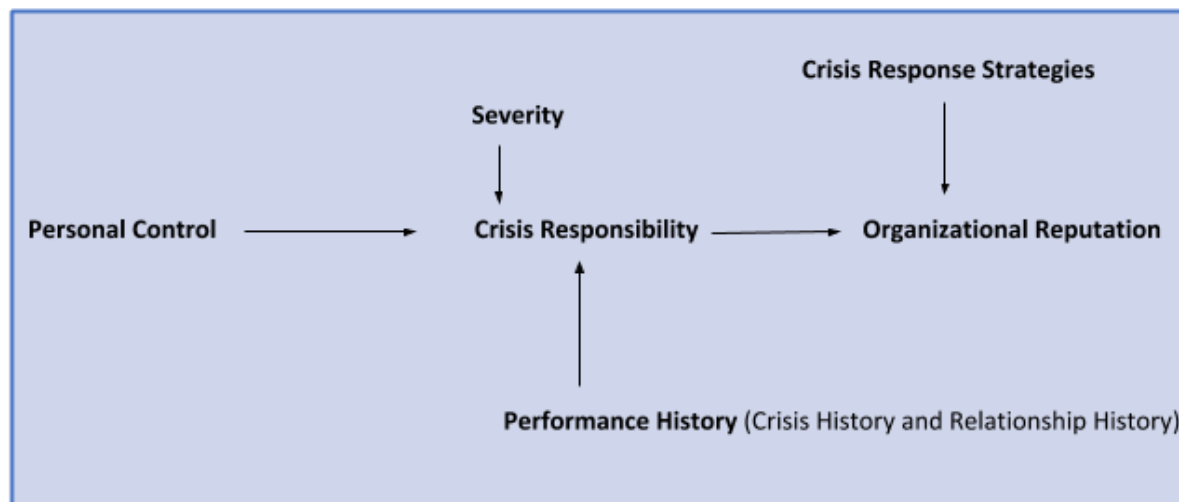


## Crisis management and communication

In order to separate the understanding of a crisis from other unpleasant events, scholars repeatedly try to define specific traits of such occurrence. Hermann (1963) identified three main characteristics of a crisis, that is a *threat*, *surprise* and *short response time*. Meaning that an occurrence has to come as a surprise, pose a serious threat and force a response to be given on very short notice, in order to reach the level of crisis (Ulmer et al., 2017). Acknowledging those is a foundation of crisis management. But why is correct crisis management so important? The first expressed reaction of the officials to a certain crisis situation might not always be what they were meaning to say or it can be a simple misjudge (Coombs, 2007b). This can create even bigger problems to the reputation of an organisation than the crisis itself. That is why PR specialists and researchers developed many theories and strategies to help organisations correctly identify the crisis' nature and respond adequately (Benoit, 1997; Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1999).

Professor Timothy Coombs from Texas A&M University, for over 20 years has been investigating the topic of crisis. He developed the theory that is constantly being used by almost every reputational specialist, the SCCT. It is very complex and is still being altered and adapted for different contexts.

The first step according to SCCT is to identify the structure and source of the crisis to then match a corresponding response strategy. In order to do that, it is necessary to "evaluate the *attributions of personal control*, or the organization's ability to control the event, and *crisis responsibility*, or how much the organization is to blame for the event" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 167). Factors that can intensify those views are the history of crisis and the prior negative reputation (Coombs, 2007a). The more any of those aspects are intense, the more the organisation is perceived as responsible for the crisis and therefore has to communicate more radically and carefully.



**Figure 1.** *Variables and Relationships in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.* Adapted from “Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory.” by Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002).

At early stages of SCCT, Coombs defined 13 most common types of crisis that can happen to an organisation. Those are: rumour, natural disaster, product tampering, workplace violence, challenge, technical breakdown - accident, technical breakdown - a product recall, megadamage, human breakdown - accident, human breakdown - a product recall, organizational misdeeds with no injuries (to external stakeholders), organizational misdeed management misconduct, organizational misdeeds with injuries (to external stakeholders). However, later together with professor Sherry Holladay (2002), they conducted an empirical study that aimed to identify bigger groups that could include those 13 types of crisis. Based on measured characteristics they were able to find three main clusters. The first one is called *victim* cluster and includes rumour, workplace violence, natural disaster and product tampering. Those types attribute close to none crisis responsibility to the organisation. In fact, it affects it almost as much as other stakeholders. The second cluster is called *accidental* because the organisation did not intend to create a crisis but at the same time had some responsibility in creating the situation that led to the crisis occurring. This one includes challenge, megadamage, technical breakdown - accident and technical breakdown - a product recall. The third cluster called *preventable* creates the most damage to the organisation. It includes human breakdown - accident, human breakdown - a product recall, organizational misdeeds with no injuries, organizational misdeed management misconduct, organizational misdeeds with injuries.

It is called preventable because the situation occurred as an effect of organisations actions. That is to say, they do not necessarily mean for the crisis to happen but they did consciously make decisions that led to it. The responsibility attribution is very strong and the organisation's reputation is at high risk. All the clusters and the crisis types are presented below in Figure 2.

Cluster	Description	Example	Explanation
<b>Victim cluster</b>	<i>In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.</i>	Natural disaster	<i>Acts of nature that damage an organization such as an earthquake</i>
		Rumours	<i>False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated</i>
		Workplace violence	<i>Current or former employee attacks current employees on site</i>
		Product tampering/ Malevolence	<i>External agent causes damage to an organization</i>
<b>Accidental Cluster</b>	<i>In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional</i>	Challenges	<i>Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner</i>
		Megadamage	<i>A technical accident where the focus is on the environmental damage from the accident</i>
		Technical breakdown accidents	<i>A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident</i>
		Technical breakdown recalls	<i>A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled</i>
<b>Preventable Cluster</b>	<i>In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation</i>	Human breakdown accidents	<i>Human error causes an industrial accident</i>
		Human breakdown recalls	<i>Human error causes a product to be recalled</i>
		Organizational misdeed with no injuries	<i>Stakeholders are deceived without injury</i>
		Organizational misdeed management misconduct	<i>Laws or regulations are violated by management</i>
		Organizational misdeed with injuries	<i>Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur</i>

**Figure 2.** SCCT Crisis Types by Crisis Clusters. Adapted from "Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory" by Coombs, W. T. (2007c).

The next step in SCCT crisis management theory, after defining which crisis type is being dealt with, is to find the right way to answer it in order not to under- or overreact. Crisis most of the time comes unexpectedly and requires an immediate reaction. Therefore there is no time to develop an entire strategy for the specific situation. For this reason, Coombs (2006) based his research on Weiner's Attribution Theory (1985) to find out there are three general reactions to the crisis. The first one would be to deny the crisis exists. The second, to alter the way that some aspects of the organisation are perceived in order to present the crisis as less serious than it seemed. The third one, to compensate the stakeholders for the damage that has been done.

However, some researchers argue that the existence of a potential crisis is possible to foresee (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Coombs, 2007b; Ritchie, 2004). Frequently, due to the nature of some crisis situations, especially those in accidental and preventable clusters it is simply inevitable. Therefore there is a need for being proactive and fully prepared. Claeys and Cauberghe (2012) proved that it is important to not only have a response strategy and actually sharing the objective information about the state of a situation is far more helpful. It also increases the organisation's credibility in the eyes of its stakeholders.

Depending on how successful crisis management was, the organisation will have to then prepare an appropriate image restoration process. At that stage, it is important to separate different types of audience. Different stakeholders can be affected by the crisis in a different way and therefore one image restoration strategy might not be enough to help the organisation (Benoit, 1997). For example in sports arguably one of the most important stakeholders for an athlete's or a club's reputation are the fans. The way they want to and should be treated is very different from a sponsor, local government or a media institution. Fan's engagement and identification with their favourite club involve a deeper emotional connection that can affect their behaviour or cognitive actions (Dietz-Uhler & Lanter, 2008). Highly identifying fans feel personally offended when someone is negative towards their club. They are also often too biased to see the blame in clubs actions. Therefore they are easier to get hurt by a crisis but at the same time, they are much more likely to forgive and forget the negative impact of it (Bruce & Tini, 2008; Jordan & Smith, 2013; Koerber & Zabara, 2017). In fact, Shintaro Sato (2015) stated that a prior good relationship with the clients (fans) and a positive engagement in corporate social responsibility (CSR) can actually minimize the damage that would be made by a crisis in the same way that a correct crisis response strategy would.

Despite that, in the history of modern sports, there were many crisis situations where the good relationship with the supporters was not enough to minimize the offence of an athlete or an organisation (Hambrick et al., 2015). For example, famous crises like FIFA's corruption scandal, Lance Armstrong's doping scandal or Tiger Woods' affair generated so many negative emotions and destruction that the only way to repair the image to some extent was to present a professional and sincere apology (Hendricks, 2015). However, the apology done badly can reveal the hypocrisy and negligence which would affect the reputation in a very unfavourable way (Coombs, 2004; Frandsen, 2007).

## Theoretical framework

The previous section of this paper explained different approaches to the research in crisis management as well as the most common social media behaviours for sports clubs and the consumers' behaviours and the way those underwent considerable changes during the past couple of months. This study is going to use Coombs' Situational Crisis Response Theory and more precisely the Response Strategies adapted from his paper (2006).

There are three main groups of the strategies that represent different crisis response positioning that an organisation can adapt. The first group called *deny* implies that the organisation refuses to acknowledge or admit that they found themselves in a crisis situation. They may decide to attack the entity that accuses them of having an issue (attack the accuser), deny the existence of the crisis in general (denial) or blame someone else, who is not a part of the organisation for being responsible for the crisis (scapegoat). In other words, those strategies represent responses in situations when the organisation carries minimal or no responsibility for the occurrence of the crisis. If used correctly it can be a successful approach.

In the situation when the organisation is not in control of the events that contributed to or caused the crisis, a possible option is to *diminish* the perceived scale of it so that it appears less negative. One way to do it is to minimize the responsibility taken for the crisis, claiming it was an accident (excuse), another to minimize the perceived damage (justification).

Option	Strategy	Crisis manager's actions	Example
Deny	Attack the accuser	<i>Confronting the party claiming something is wrong with the organization</i>	The organization threatened to sue the people who claim a crisis occurred
	Denial	<i>Asserting that there is no crisis</i>	The organization said that no crisis event occurred
	Scapegoat	<i>Blaming an external party for the crisis</i>	The organization blamed the supplier for the crisis
Diminish	Excuse	<i>Minimizing the responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis</i>	The organization said it did not intend for the crisis to occur and that accidents happen as part of the operation of any organization
	Justification	<i>Minimizing the perceived damage caused by the crisis</i>	The organization said the damage and injuries from the crisis were very minor
Deal	Ingratiation	<i>Praising stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization</i>	The organization thanked stakeholders for their help and reminded them of the organization's past effort to help the community and the environment.
	Concern	<i>Expressing concern for the victims</i>	The organization expressed concern for the victims
	Compassion	<i>Offering money or other gifts to victims</i>	The organization offered money and products as compensation
	Regret	<i>Indicating the organization feels bad about the crisis</i>	The organization said it felt bad that the incident occurred
	Apology	<i>Indicating the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness</i>	The organization publicly accepted full responsibility for the crisis and asked stakeholders to forgive the mistake

**Figure 3.** Crisis Response Strategies by Response Option. Adapted from "The Protective Powers of Crisis Response Strategies" by Coombs, W. T. (2006).

The third option of positioning in the face of a crisis is associated with situations that imply an undeniable share of blame laying on the side of the organisation. In cases like that, they must admit that they are responsible for the crisis and *deal* with the consequences.

One possible strategy is to remind the concerned stakeholders about the previous correct behaviours of the organisation (ingratiation). In this case, an important factor is a past reputation. If it was positive, it is much easier to shift the focus to that. Therefore many

companies actively engage with CSR in order to have a helpful and beneficial relationship with the stakeholders and be able to depend on the halo effect created by it. The second strategy in this option is a simple concern expressed for the victims of the crisis. It puts the organisation in a more human and honest light. Taking it a step further, the company can offer the victims some kind of compensation, like gifts, money, discounts etc. (compassion). It can also simply express deep regret for what happened. The last strategy, apology, is one that is probably the hardest to do correctly. It needs to recognise all the responsibility for the crisis, express deep regret, concern and compassion all at the same time. It is also very important for PR specialists to have control of who is saying the apology, how is it being said, in what circumstances and what is its timing. An incorrect apology can be much more damaging to the organisation's reputation than abstention.

In order to define and examine the type of crisis responses used by the English Premier League and Championship clubs via their social media channels referring to SCCT, it is indispensable to first establish the type of crisis that is being dealt with. Based on the previously presented indicators the coronavirus outbreak can be called a natural disaster, as it indeed is an act of nature (even if at some point the effects were enhanced by humans). The spread of COVID-19 could not be controlled by anyone nor could it be associated with one specific source. The football clubs, just like almost any industry are undeniably the victim of this occurrence. They were forced to forsake their main activity and therefore, be exposed to the financial and psychological damage of the organisations and their stakeholders. Following SCCT, the response strategy that should be implemented according to the theory's implications is the diminish option since the organisation's responsibility was minimal (or none in this situation) and the manager should seek to "highlight the unintentional nature" (Coombs, 2006, p. 256) of the crisis. Coombs claims that even though the deny option is the one who usually associates the least amount of responsibility, it should be restricted only for the situations requiring confrontation and accusations.

In referring to this theory, the following research questions (RQ) were posed:

**RQ1:** How did the dynamic of social media content of the football clubs change during the crisis vs before the crisis officially began?

**RQ2:** Which crisis response strategies were used by the sports clubs and how?

Furthermore, consumer behaviours theory developed by the portal trendwatching.com (2020) is going to be applied for the purpose of demonstrating and verifying whether the researched clubs are successfully satisfying the needs of their customers i. e. their fans and followers. It was explained in the review of literature how the socio-cultural as economic situations have changed in consequence of the recent coronavirus outbreak. The theory that is being used presents 10 most common trends in the behaviour of the customers.

Those practices are mostly caused by the fear of their safety and as an effect of the needs to protect their mental health and continuously develop themselves. There is a tendency for customers to seek solutions that would allow them to not only maintain their usual habits but to actually gain something extra from this peculiar situation. Therefore, various businesses endeavour to foresee what could be the latent needs of their clients as well as to answer the already existing and expressed ones.

The first trend presented in Figure 4 is called Virtual Experience Economy. It represents how virtual reality and the experience economy can work together in order to create new content for the customers. This is a solution lately used a lot by less competitive businesses in this kind of subject, like travel, retail or gatherings. Thanks to that customers may feel like they are still a part of the organisation even if they are not able to leave their house. They feel the need to be able to at least virtually continue their usual habits. And the businesses are able to continue spreading the image of the brand and their activity. The second trend, Shopstreaming connects livestreaming and shopping in order to create a new experience in e-commerce. This way consumers are able to experience the action of shopping, interact with the seller and do all that in real-time to make sure their purchase is satisfactory.



Trend	Explanation	Example
<b>Virtual experience economy</b>	<i>Digital experiences become a genuine status currency</i>	Ubisoft creates guided tours of the Assassin's Creed's world in a special Discovery Tour mode
<b>Shopstreaming</b>	<i>Livestreaming + shopping = a fundamental rewrite of the 'rules' of e-commerce</i>	Taobao, an online shopping site will allow farmers across the country to host their own live streams
<b>Open sources solution</b>	<i>Consumers embrace brands that solve the biggest problems, for everyone</i>	Ford, Uber and Lyft joining together Shared Streets, a platform designed to help reduce urban transportations issues
<b>Ambient wellness</b>	<i>Maximum health benefits with minimum effort</i>	The luxury Stella McCartney store includes an air filtration system which removes 95% of all airborne pollutants
<b>Virtual companions</b>	<i>Virtual entities make the leap from assistants to companions</i>	Samsung's Neon avatars that not only supply information but can demonstrate emotions and intelligence
<b>Mentor-to-protégé (M2P)</b>	<i>Consumers create a demand for peer-powered self-improvements</i>	Duolingo language app joining Twitch in order to host live-streamed lessons and discussions
<b>A-commerce</b>	<i>Demand for automated forms of commerce</i>	Domino's Pizza's robot car-powered pizza delivery
<b>The burnout</b>	<i>Brands rush to help those burnt by the pressures of modern life</i>	Moxy Hotels in NYC Chelsea offer ASMR videos in their rooms in order to help their guests relax
<b>Assisted development</b>	<i>Learning new skills and domestic tasks with the help of videos and instructions</i>	Equal Parts offers customers the ability to text a chef in order to receive ideas, tips and instructions for cooking
<b>Virtual status symbols</b>	<i>Combining virtual goods with real status</i>	Dreset game app provides users with styling challenges to execute on realistic looking photos. They can then purchase the products either in-game or from an online luxury retail platform

**Figure 4. 10** Emerging Consumer Trends that have been radically accelerated by the crisis. Adapted from <https://info.trendwatching.com/10-trends-for-a-post-coronavirus-world?hsCtaTracking=bee03185-263b-4fb2-b733-db804991e0e3%7C691bc8d7-874d-46e9-8fe7-0ce6e213dadb> (2020).

Open Source Solution, the third trend, is not necessarily a new occurrence but it certainly is new in the area of the competitive market. The idea is to consider the general good, like public safety or ecology over the company's profit. In times of global pandemic, health is the primary concern of most of the customers. The habits of frequently washing hands and using sanitizers

seem to become a part of the current daily lives. But many people already cannot imagine ever going back to chummy handshakes with strangers and sharing overcrowded spaces. They experience anxiety when realising how many potential risks they can encounter. That is why another trend developing more actively in the past couple of months is Ambient Wellness. It aims to ensure consumers' safety and well-being regardless of their current environment. The next trend presented in Figure 4 is called Virtual Companions. It implies that people are looking for more interaction and often seek it within the chatbots and avatars. They demand them to be as realistic as possible, making them feel like there is a person present behind. Sometimes they do however need a real-time, human mentor who could guide them through the process of their experience of self-improvement. The mentor-to-protégé trend emerged thanks to the teachers and experts making themselves available to share their knowledge and experience with those who are willing to learn. Another trend emerged from the need for contact-free deliveries and interactions. The so-called A-commerce means that the companies are looking for solutions to automate their actions and include robotics in the process. What before seemed like an excessive invention, now serves as a way to maintain some of the old habits. Global pandemic raised awareness of physical health but at the same time greatly influenced mental health issues. That is why the Burnout is a trend that popularized companies' actions that are meant to enhance the inner peace and decrease the anxiety of the customers. The quarantine made some people realise how much of the life skills are they missing. Assisted Development is a tendency that helps adults learn how to perform domestic tasks like cooking or proper cleaning. Finally, the last of the presented trends is Virtual Status Symbols, which essentially means that fans understand and interact with the brand online but drive the real-time status from those actions that they associate with the company.

Based on this theory of consumers behaviour the research question presents as follows:

**RQ3:** In what ways the football clubs responded to the emerging consumer trends?

## Methodology

### Sampling method

In order to precisely answer given research questions, the content of four very different clubs from English Premier League and Championship was analysed. All the data about clubs from both leagues, their positions and followers numbers were gathered in Annex 1. The clubs were selected based on two criteria. The first criterion referred to the number of Facebook followers. For some clubs, this is a number that is constantly, slowly rising. Generally, it changes according to the reputation, however, often due to financial capability or prioritization, not every club runs its social media accounts in the same, equally scrupulous way. This measurement helped to define and choose the most and the least famous clubs from both leagues, which were respectively Manchester United and Luton Town. The second criterion referred to the current position in the league, that is the position the clubs were on right before the official lockdown, in March 2020. In each league, the best club was chosen and for Premier League the outcome was very clear - Liverpool with 25 points of advantage. In Championships it was Leeds United with a lucky, one-point advantage over the second positioned club and no less than seven points over the third club.

Manchester United FC is a professional football club competing in the Premier League and in Champions League most of the seasons. Its common nickname is "Red Devils". It was founded in 1878 and has won over 66 major trophies in all competitions. According to [businessinsider.com](https://www.businessinsider.com) (2018), it is a club with the third-largest fanbase in the world (73.5 mln on Facebook), after Real Madrid (109.2 mln) and FC Barcelona (102.7 mln). Manchester United has a regular, constant activity on all of the main social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. They also created their own app where fans can get exclusive content much faster than others. Luton Town is a small professional club currently competing in the Championship. It was established in 1885 and has not been very successful in the past but the so-called "Hatters" have a very devoted local community fan base. Their social media reaches around 100 thousand Facebook followers. They as well recently created their private app. Liverpool FC, as already mentioned in one of the previous sections, is a club who is just waking up from a long period of their history that was full of disappointment and losses. The

club was created in 1892 and since then has won just under 70 major trophies. They are actively promoting their brand and club's mentality on different social media and their own app. Their fans call them "the Reds" and they have about 34 mln followers on Facebook. Leeds United, on the other hand, gathered just about 581 thousand. It is a club founded in 1919 with 12 major trophies won. They are known for being serious rivals of Manchester United in the past. Nowadays, fans of both clubs still consider each other big enemies. In addition, the rivalry between Red Devils and the Reds has been and still is an important part of both clubs' history. Those three clubs are all located in proximity to each other, unlike Luton Town that belongs to the area of Bedfordshire.

Facebook was chosen as the most suitable and adequate social media platform to be considered. It is still the most used platform and its content is the most diverse and comprehensive when it comes to the type of content and the response rate. All the clubs usually post the same content on Facebook as on Instagram, Twitter or LinkedIn or even YouTube but not the other way round, meaning that this platform can be far more generous in content. Furthermore, Facebook creates bigger visibility of the fans response. They can engage in direct discussions with the club or with each other and they are visible to everyone regardless of who they follow (Kuzma et al., 2014) For clubs, especially smaller ones, where the comments usually come from the devoted fan base only, this can be a great source of advice and suggestions which can be used for further improvements. Facebook also provides the largest percentage of the overall number of social media followers of any sports clubs. For example, in 2018 out of almost 115 million followers of Manchester United in general, more than 73.5 million were the users of Facebook, which equals almost 64% (Murray, 2018).

The data collection covered a period of one month, from March 1st to March 31st. It was the most recent time when the research was being conducted. It also covered a period of time right before the peak of the crisis occurred as well as the immediate time after the 13th of March. The data consist of every post of chosen football clubs. The total of 249 posts was gathered for Manchester United, 199 posts for Luton Town, 223 posts for Liverpool and 143 posts for Leeds United.

## **Content classification and processing**

In order to adequately address the aim of the research, a quantitative and qualitative approach of content analysis have been chosen. Those methods are complementary to each other and allow to not only observe an occurrence of a phenomenon but also to determine why and how it is developing. The quantitative analysis helps to grasp the voluminous data, while the qualitative analysis gives a specific significance and a detailed explanation of the findings, granting them a deeper meaning.

In reference to the dynamic analysis (RQ1), all the posts were marked by the day and the daily order so that it facilitates the quantitative count. Afterwards, they were gathered in one table and grouped by the club [Appendix 1]. The number of posts by day was counted for each day for each club. It was marked with a different colour, which day they played a match. Later, four line charts were created in order to illustrate the change of consistency in posting content on the examined social media platform that occurred after the crisis began, that is the 13th of March.

The next step was to divide the content to the one added during the crisis and the previous one added when the crisis situation was not official. It was made in order to separate those posts that were added during the crisis and can indeed be regarded as a response to the crisis. Thus, all the posts from the 13th of March onward were separated. This sample of 498 posts was then examined further. The process started with classifying the posts by the subject they referred to. In order to do that, five categories were established: crisis, when the posts mention the pandemic situation; memories, when the posts mention throwbacks, previous games (historical or recent), goals of the day/month etc.; fan engagement, when the posts directly referred to the fans, asking them for opinions, play games, quizzes; individual, when the posts described closer a particular person, whether a player, a member of staff or a person who used to be connected to club years before; promotion, when clubs were trying to sell merchandise or sponsor's products. The type of post was also defined for each entry. The photo meant that there are one or multiple photos, usually with a longer or shorter description. Similarly, video usually had a comment to it. The link meant that usually in addition to a photo there was a hyperlink, introduced by a small description. The article meant that the clubs shared an article posted on their official website and finally there also was a podcast and a poll option. If the posts were mentioning the crisis directly, they were looked at from the perspective of the crisis response

strategies in the first framework. In all the posts it was being identified which trend from the second theoretical framework is it representing. For both types the main indicators of found strategies were given, for example, a quote, a figure represented or an element of the subject. If the trend did not occur it was marked as “no”. The information was not always clearly manifested, therefore the latent content and messages were concluded according to the researcher. All the information was gathered in a comprehensive content analysis grid, divided by the club and presented in the appendices section [Appendix 2, 3, 4, 5]. Later, the quantitative count of each reaction and each trend used by each club was gathered in two tables before proceeding to analyse the results qualitatively.

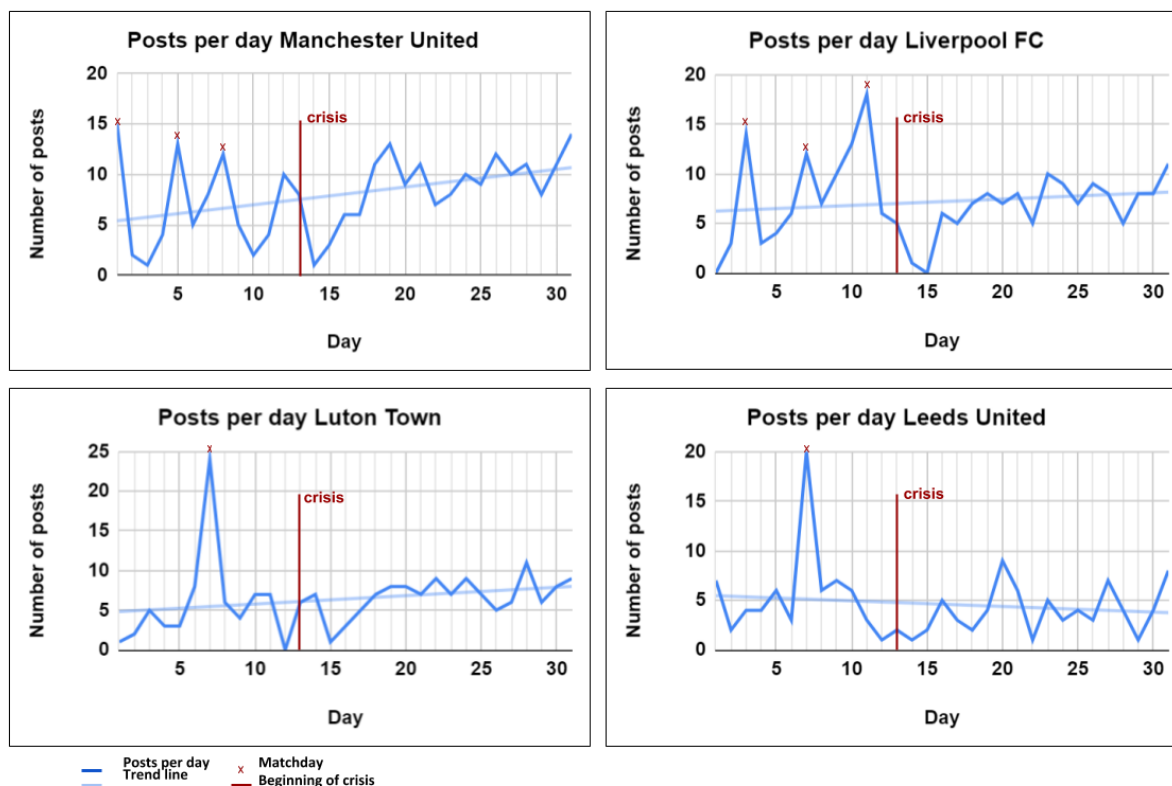
## **Findings and analysis**

This section provides the results and their analysis according to the research questions stated in the theoretical framework.

### **Dynamic analysis**

The first research question (RQ1) refers to the analysis of the change in the dynamic of added content, notably the frequency of posts per day. As mentioned in the previous section, the activity from March was being analysed. In that period every club played at least one but no more than three games in the first two weeks. Those days were marked in green in the table [Annex 1] and by red x in the graphs. The consistency of the posts (number of posts per day) were pictured in separate graphs for each club presented below [Figure 5].

The results clearly show how the matchdays generated much more content in comparison with other days. They in a way outline the dynamic of the content. Once the games were officially suspended, starting the 13th of March, the number of posts per day became lower than on match days but much more persistent. In three out of four clubs this number was also higher on average than on the non-match days during a normal period of the competition.



**Figure 5.** Line charts of posts per day for each club. (March 2020)

Matches are primarily the reason why people follow football clubs, therefore they are the most engaged with the clubs on those days. On social media, it is especially applicable since most of the people are not able to attend the event at the venue in person. During the match suspension, those days were taken out of the process. In order to maintain the previous contact with fans, the clubs had to create more content, make it more interactive and meaningful. Lack of follower's reactions can result in losing some of them. Even when the engagement in each post is not very high, the more post added, the more possibility of interaction there is. Another reason for that might be the uncertainty of the circumstances at that time. The situation was changing every day, every hour. Regular contact with the club might have been important for the fans. Highly identifying with their team supporters might want to verify if everyone at the club is healthy and stays safe as they feel personally involved in the life of the club and their main players.

## Response strategies

The second researched topic (RQ2) refers to the crisis response strategies defined in the SCCT and the positioning of the chosen football clubs during the first weeks of the global crisis induced by the pandemic. The quantitative count allowed to present the number of times the different strategies were used by the clubs in the posts directly manifesting the connection to the crisis.

Response	Manchester United	Luton Town	Liverpool FC	Leeds United
Denial	0	2	0	0
Scapegoat	1	3	3	3
Justification	0	1	0	0
Ingratiation	0	11	5	2
Concern	7	7	15	6
Compassion	1	8	2	6
Regret	0	3	2	0
Support	0	0	7	0

**Figure 6.** Quantitative count of the crisis response strategies used by each club. [March 2020]

In the beginning, the clubs' initial reaction was to shift the responsibility for the crisis to other organizations (scapegoat) [Annex 2, 3, 4, 5]. This could be seen as a natural response since the clubs simply supported their messages by the authority of higher instances like the Premier League and English Football League. However, for the recipients, i. e. social media followers, these reactions in a way established the blame for the crisis. It placed the clubs as victims of a decision of higher power that they had to oblige. Therefore, the first important factor that can put the club's reputation at high risk is minimized.

Farther, the clubs proceed to express their broad concerns for their communities, fans all over the world and their families (concern). Most of the messages and photos include global hashtags like #StayAtHome or #StayHomeSaveLives for a broader reach [Annex 6, 7]. Especially involved in this strategy seemed to be Liverpool FC. Almost half of their post used this strategy whether to tell them to look after themselves or to ask them to help others by raising various funds [Annex 8, 9].

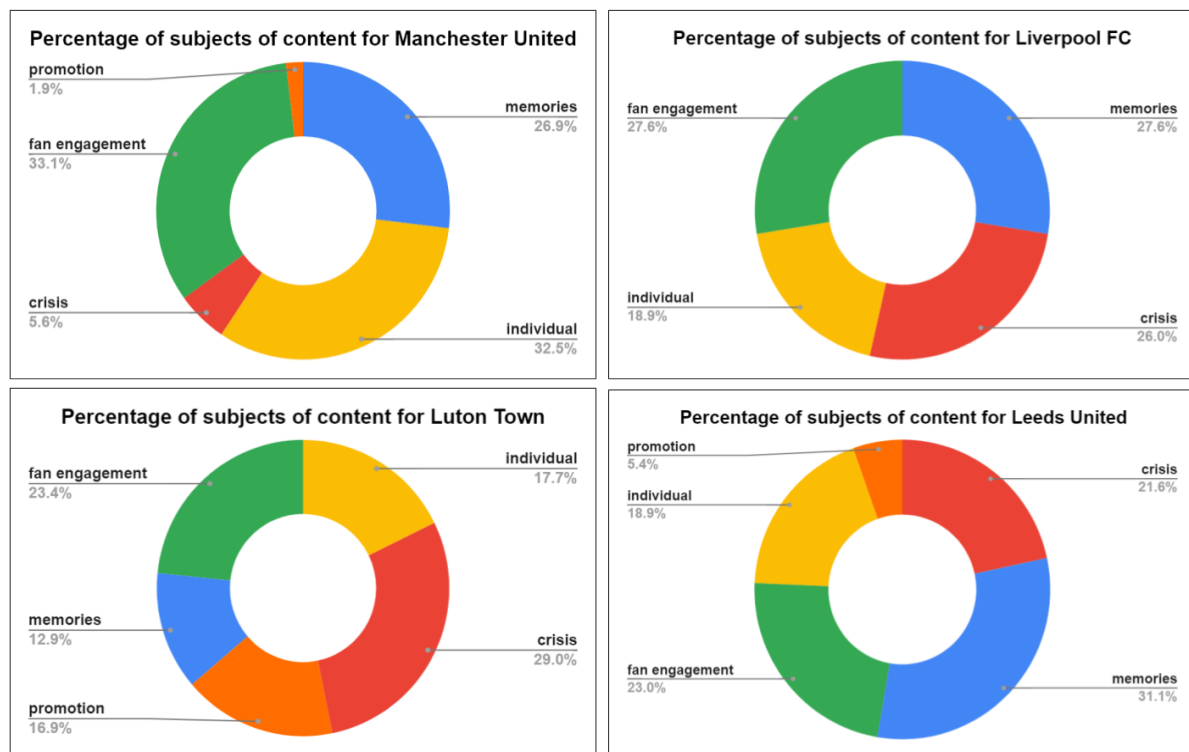


A step further from that was to include some sort of recompensation for the victims (compassion). Luton Town and Leeds United openly assured fans that the purchased season tickets will be still valid whenever the season restarts [Annex 10, 11]. The Hatters also supported building a shelter for homeless people who might need one during the quarantine more than ever [Annex 12]. Leeds United, on the other hand, donated to food banks and personally delivered food parcels to the most vulnerable citizens [Annex 13].

Three out of four clubs, at least twice expressed their gratitude to their stakeholders, whether those were fans, employees, citizens or the key workers from National Health Service (ingratiating). Most invested in this strategy was Luton Town. As a small club, they found themselves in a difficult financial situation, therefore, asked fans for their support, if possible [Annex 14] and offered numerous discounts. This prompted them, even more, to openly express their appreciation of the overall support they receive from the fans. In other posts, strategies like denial [Annex 15], justification [Annex 16] and regret [Annex 17] were used rarely.

A different, new strategy was used by Liverpool in 7 out of overall 34 crisis-related posts. Instead of playing the victim or simply acknowledging the concerns, they decided to send positive, encouraging messages to their followers, saying that normal times will come back and “let’s stick together” [Annex 18, 19]. This strategy was called support and should be added to the *diminish* option of response, as it is trying to minimize the negative impact of the consequences of the crisis but not on the organisation, but rather on the other victims.

The charts below, present the percentage of all the subjects of the posts according to the earlier defined categories. For three out of four clubs the percentage of the posts directly, openly related to the crisis subject varied between 20 and 30%. One club, however, Manchester United, posted only a little over 5.5% of entries manifesting the crisis. Other common themes were fan engagement (between 23 and 33%), memories (between 13 and 30%) and individual (between 18 and 33%). One club, Luton Town, presented a noticeable percentage of posts related to commercial promotion (17%), the second on this subject was Leeds United with little under 5.5%, followed by Red Devils with only 2%.



**Figure 7.** Percentage of subjects of content for each club. (March 2020)

Overall, from 498 posts, 95 clearly manifested the crisis situation and each one represented a different strategy and approach. However, when looking more generally at the other subjects of content, other strategies might be noticed and defined from the latent content. One of them can be deduced from the big percentage of fan engagement posts. All of them intended to remind fans what is the primary role of a football club i. e. the entertainment. Posts about daily quiz [Annex 20] or asking fans for their favourite shirts, players or goals [Annex 21] aimed to preserve the joyful character of the content and at least for a moment forget the terrifying reality, almost denying the existence of the crisis.

However, the most prevalent latent strategy that appears to be used by every club is seen in the frequent 'memories' content. Most of those posts consist of beautiful goals, legendary matches, incredible wins and historical events. [Annex 22, 23, 24] It aims to remind fans of the previous good performance of the club, relive those happy, thrilling memories. Those are the indications of the ingratiation. Instead of focusing on the bad side of the crisis, they shifted it to the positive work done by the club in the past. Similarly, this latent strategy was present in the posts referring to the individuals. Majority of this content uses figures like athletes, coaches, staff

members or former players [Annex 25, 26, 27]. The articles and videos made for and about them express the club's gratitude and recognition that is not always being expressed on a daily basis. Those strategies were especially frequently used by Manchester United, who is the club with an exceptionally small number of posts with manifested strategies however with over 50% of posts from memories and individual categories.

What is interesting to see is that according to Coombs, for a crisis like a natural disaster the strategies diminishing the seriousness of the crisis should have been applied (Coombs, 2006). In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, only one club once posted a statement that could have been regarded as justification. The clubs, in general, did not try to withdraw from the situation. They considered the fans' feelings. They acknowledged the crisis and did not try to make anyone think they did not. Instead, most of the time they dealt with the eventual consequences of the pandemic while still trying to entertain their supporters.

### Emerging consumer trends

The third important aspect (RQ3) that was being looked at when analysing the social media content were the ways clubs responded, if they did, to the emerging consumer trends. The results clearly show that one trend, in particular, was endorsed by the clubs, that is the virtual experience economy, like including digital events [Figure 8]. Other visible trends were assisted development, mentor-to-protégé or virtual status symbols. A new trend noticed during the analysis were discounts, used at least once by three out of four clubs.

Trend	Manchester United	Luton Town	Liverpool FC	Leeds United
Virtual experience economy	20	21	13	6
Open sources solution	0	3	0	0
Ambient wellness	0	1	0	0
Mentor-to-protégé (M2P)	0	4	0	1
The burnout	0	3	2	0
Assisted development	4	2	5	0
Virtual status symbols	0	3	0	0
Discounts	1	8	0	1

**Figure 8.** Count of the use of "10 Emerging Consumer Trends" by the club. (March 2020)

Due to the situation around March 2020 and the suspension of the games, the core activity of any sports club was removed. This was not only a financial loss for clubs but most importantly it meant losing the systematic engagement with their fans. That is why the virtual experience became an important, almost fundamental part of the club's online communication. Manchester United, Liverpool FC and Luton Town organised match replays. Essentially they were streaming old matches on their apps and social media platforms [Annex 28] But they decided to turn this, common, widely available product into a whole experience that the fans could have been a part of without leaving their homes. They first let the fans pick the game they want to relive [Annex 29]. On the "matchday" they would start with match line-ups, statistics and comments just like before any normal game [Annex 30]. Fans were then invited to comment, connect with each other and add reactions. Leeds United and Luton Town also used another way to engage their fans into a virtual experience. A FIFA video game tournament was supposed to place fans not only as the virtual spectators but also as the players [Annex 31].

Assisted development, on the other hand, presented a different kind of trend adaptations. Most of the posts were addressed to fans who struggle with staying indoors and can not find their new version of daily routine. Clubs addressed them with short, entertaining videos with plenty of advice on how to stay healthy, exercise and develop new skills [Annex 32, 33].

An interesting and maybe surprising trend noticed especially in the activity of Luton Town was the use of price reduction in almost every promotional entry. [Annex 34] That is why this trend was called discounts. While visibly struggling with money and openly communicating on it, the Hatters decided to persistently promote their brand and offer promotional packages to ensure that at least some income will fund their account. Luton Town, despite being the smallest, least popular and least successful of the clubs in this study, presented the most diverse content. They adapted the mentor-to-protégé (M2P) by presenting a series of stories of their fans addressed to their other fans. [Annex 35]. They described their fellow supporter who they became inseparable with and taught others about compassion, understanding and tolerance. They also addressed burnout and mental health issues that were so prevalent in the society during the pandemic [Annex 36].

In this phase of the crisis, the trends were addressed much less than it was expected. The primary reason for it is the early stage of the coronavirus induced crisis. The trends are in recent months becoming more prevalent, popular or simply useful but they existed before and other companies might have already been prepared for it. For football clubs, it was a new experience, a new reality in which they had to find their own path to follow.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to take into account which could have affected this study in terms of data collected, the quality of such data and consequently the accuracy of the conclusions drawn. The first and maybe the most significant factor influencing this research is the situation of COVID-19 outbreak and global sports suspension that was being analyzed itself. In the time period of writing this paper (March/April 2020), this is still an ongoing crisis that has not yet seen a breakthrough or even an initial resolution or adaptability plan (state for April 2020). The reason for that could be the unexpectedness of the coronavirus outbreak. As it usually happens with crises, this situation very rapidly became almost impossible to control. Due to this, for the time being, it is impossible to foresee or assume the real outcome and the consequences of this crisis. Therefore, it is not feasible to fully, accurately assess the sports clubs actions beyond the sampled timeframe. Thanks to the numerous empirical experiments of Timothy Coombs and other researchers as well as the vast idea of crisis management planning it is possible to assume the reactions to clubs' crisis communication. However, the paths of crisis reactions could shift during the escalation of the crisis and influence the outcome in a significant, positive or negative way. This eventually could change the initial attitude towards the way this crisis situation has been managed.

Another limitation that is important to mention is the choice of the social media platform. Facebook, while still the most popular and inclusive portal, it is slowly becoming less attractive for the youngest audience. Additionally, all the clubs have their own apps that post far more exclusive content. Therefore, although Facebook's feed is what is being seen by the general public, most dedicated fans receive more content via the apps and can, therefore, perceive clubs positioning in a different way. Nevertheless, clubs should always consider reaching to all

the stakeholders while planning their crisis response, thus Facebook's advantages outweigh these limitations. Third, a possibly limiting aspect is the qualitative research method. The nature of qualitative analysis bears a threat of human error. The examination of the visual content must include both, the manifest as well the latent content (Graneheim et al., 2017). The latter especially leaves a lot of room for interpretation and can be read of different sentiments by various researchers. Therefore it should be acknowledged that the margin of error exists and can, to some extent, bias the results of this research.

## **Further research**

As it was already discussed, this paper is being written in the course of the coronavirus crisis. This implements the immediacy of the research. While its aim was to present that prompt reaction of the clubs, a possible idea for a further, more expanded research would be to analyse the social media content of professional sports clubs over the whole time period of the COVID-19 outbreak and see its change over time. The current uncertainty of the duration of the crisis makes it harder for the clubs to fully prepare the strategy and plan their every action and response. Therefore, it is possible that their positioning would change, perhaps even drastically. Once the situation is over it will leave the researchers some space to revisit organisations' behaviour and correctly presume the intended strategies used. It will also allow for an assessment of the said strategies.

This relates to the second further direction idea, which is to measure the success of the use of the SCCT strategies by the clubs. This can be achieved by evaluating the impact of the crisis on the clubs' reputation. The bigger the negative impact, the less successful club's crisis management was. In order to identify more factors that could affect this outcome, it could be beneficial to conduct the research on all of the Premier League or Championship clubs. According to SCCT concepts, two main intensifying factors are crisis history and relationship history (Coombs, 2006). However, with a thorough examination, it would be possible to identify more factors, whether it is the popularity of the club, its financial capability or level of the impact the crisis had on the particular area of the club's location, i. e. the severity of the crisis.

Additionally, the more clubs evaluated the more possible it is to generalise the results and notice a broad phenomenon.

Sports fans, during this pandemic, are not only the spectators or stakeholders for the clubs. They are primarily the devoted supporters who miss watching their team play every week. The frustrations over the lack of this emotional experience can easily rush people to the internet in order to discharge their indignations. Brown and Billings (2013) in their research about sports fans as crisis communicators stated that “it is possible that fans have also adopted and implemented many of these same strategies in hopes of repairing the reputation of the team with which they identify” (p. 75). They proceeded to discover that indeed fans in their online communication very commonly used all reputation repair strategies, starting from *ingratiation* and *reminder* together in over 50% of the tweets, down to *excuse* and *apology* used about 10 times during the researched period. Therefore, an intriguing angle to look at for future scholars is the social media communication of sports fans during the coronavirus outbreak. Research questions like:

**RQ4:** How do sports fans use social media to communicate different reputation repair strategies?

and

**RQ5:** Is the general ambience of fans’ comments aligned with the crisis communication strategies intended by the clubs?

could be of great support in order to evaluate the success of clubs’ crisis management and help better understand fans’ perceptions for the future.

These suggestions are offered as propositions for conducting future studies that would increase the amount of research on crisis communication in order to make various theories more accurate in the future but certainly are not intended to be exhaustive. Many other variables could be considered and eventually inspected in this area of inquiry.

## Conclusions

This paper was looking at the communication and response strategies of the professional English football clubs on social media in the beginnings of the crisis caused by the coronavirus disease outbreak.

After a detailed content analysis, it was established that first of all the communication on social media became more constant and informative. Second of all, the clubs used multiple response strategies in their manifested content, like concern, compassion or support. However, those contributed to only 5 to 30% of the messages. Most of the positioning was hidden in the latent content like ingratiation in memories of the club's previous great performance or in the individual subject, where clubs were showing their support and pride of the players, staff and legends who have once been a part of the club. The paper also found that the most commonly used popular trend is to adopt the virtual experience economy in different ways. Each club decided to create a stadium-like experience by either playing the game live on their websites and apps where fans could connect with each other in real-time or to organise FIFA tournaments and play the previously scheduled games.

This research encountered several limitations. The possibly most significant one is that the research is being held while the crisis is happening and therefore lacks the perspective of time. However, this and all the presented limitations should rather be regarded as opportunities for further research directions on this topic.

Both the response strategies and the trends adaptations clearly show that clubs could not simply rely on their previous communication models and had to acknowledge the crisis and the sometimes tragic positions in which their fans found themselves and communicated on it. They decided to primarily consider the customers' comfort and show them compassion. Simultaneously, they found many ways in which they tried to engage with the fans and involve them in different kinds of games and contests. After all the football clubs' principal service is to bring joy and entertainment to those who support them.



## Author's Note

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*Anna Pacak is a recent graduate of the M.B.A. in Administration and Management of Professional Sports Clubs (AMPSC) at the University of Bordeaux, France and a graduate of the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis, where she completed a B.A. in English and Media Communication (AMC). Ms. Pacak spent her senior Bachelor's Degree year at the Northumbria University in Newcastle, UK participating in an international student exchange program. At that University she produced a paper "They have theme parks... and we have theme parks. Only we call them arenas" - how, with reference to Disneyization, has the media affected sports' (2018), which was recognized during the conference 'Power of media - the impact of globalization on modern sports'. At the University of Bordeaux, she participated in a student exchange project with the University of Baltimore, USA aimed at learning about international and cross-cultural business cooperation. Later she also participated in the 13th EFDN "CSR in European Football" Conference in Barcelona, Spain. She was granted a scholarship after the first year of the Master's Degree. Her first year's thesis "Basking in the glory while it lasts and giving space to grief - social media content of professional sports clubs after a defeat and after a win" was presented at the 4th Qualitative Research in Communication International Conference and was enthusiastically received by the editor of a PR & Communication journal. Her final Master's thesis "Sports In The Time Of Coronavirus Crisis: Social Media Response Strategies Of Professional English Football Clubs" received the highest mark which allowed her to graduate summa cum laude.*

*Ms. Pacak's professional experience started at Euro 2016 Cup in France where she was a volunteer in the media sector. This inspired her to pursue a career in sports and later intern for a professional football club KS SKRA Częstochowa as a Junior Manager and Spokesperson. In 2020 she worked for International Sports Convention (ISC) as an Operations and Marketing Coordinator. Later that year she decided to develop her technical skills and found a job in an international company as an IT customer service advisor.*

*Besides her passion for sports, Ms. Pacak is an active human rights supporter. Since 2013, as a member of Amnesty International, she's been organizing local letter-writing events, 'Write for Rights' that every year gather over 400 letters contributing to releasing falsely accused prisoners from all over the world.*

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