



Group 10 Assignment

CSPR1070 - Reputation Management and Crisis Communication

Spanish Football Federation (The Kiss)

Crisis Case Study

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Introduction:

Luis Manuel Rubiales Bejar used to be a Spanish former football official and professional player who played as a defender. He was the president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) and one of UEFA's vice presidents.

Jorge Vilda Rodríguez is a Spanish football coach and UEFA Pro Licence holder, who is currently the new head coach of the Morocco women's national team. Previously, he was the head coach of the Spain women's national football team from 2015 to 2023.

Jennifer Hermoso Fuentes is a Spanish professional footballer who plays for Liga MX Femenil club Tigres UANL for the Spain women's national team. She is the all-time top scorer for Spain and was part of her country's championship side at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, where she was also awarded the Silver Ball.

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup was the ninth edition of the FIFA Women's World Cup, the quadrennial international women's football championship contested by women's national teams organised by FIFA. Spain were crowned champions after defeating reigning European champions England 1–0 in the final. It was the first time a European nation had won the Women's World Cup since 2007. It was also Spain's first title, although their victory was marred by the Rubiales Affair.

The reason for choosing this crisis is that, while analysing the apology received from Rubiales, it didn't seem to be enough, and the whole issue went on for 20 days. The controversy surrounding Rubiales's behaviour has brought to light significant issues such as misogyny, sexual assault, and the treatment of women in sports organizations. A small moment of excitement for Rubiales turned into a matter of sexual assault. The crisis can be classified as an ethical/social offence, further turning into a legal risk.

Background:

August 20, 2023 - During the awards ceremony following Spain's victory over England in the World Cup Final on August 20, 2023, in Sydney, Australia, the president of the Spanish Football Federation, Rubiales, was caught on camera kissing Spanish women's national team player Jenni Hermoso on the lips. After the game, Rubiales was one of many officials and leaders who congratulated the players. While doing so, he kissed various players on the cheeks, threw one over his shoulder, and kissed Hermoso on the lips while presenting her with a medal. On top of that, during the celebration, Rubiales grabbed his crotch in excitement while standing near Spain's Queen Letizia and 16-year-old Princess Sofia.

[“The Spanish soccer chief faces criticism after giving the World Cup winner a surprise kiss on the lips.”](#)

After the match, in the locker room, Hermoso answers questions, saying, “Hey, I didn't like it, eh”. Later in the video, one of her teammates asks her, “But what were you doing, sis?” to which she replies, “But what am I supposed to do?”

According to Rubiales, he describes the whole situation, quoting, “The kiss with Jenni? There are idiots all over. When two people have a moment of affection without any importance, we can’t listen to idiocy. We’re champions and I stay with that.”

August 21, 2023 - Rubiales issued an apology via social media, stating the kiss was without ill intention during a moment of exuberance. Further, he added that here we saw it as natural and normal but outside it has caused a commotion.

The news in CBS Soccer reads, [“Spain FA boss Luis Rubiales apologises for kissing Jennifer Hermoso during Women's World Cup celebrations”](#) (August 21, 2023 at 11:13 am ET).

August 22, 2023 - Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez calls the kiss an "unacceptable gesture" and says Rubiales' apology was "insufficient". The Spanish Footballers' Association, several coaches, clubs and star women players from Spain and beyond also criticise Rubiales.

[“Spain kiss scandal continues to escalate: Vice president demands resignation - “His excuses are worth nothing.”](#)

August 23-24, 2023 - Reports emerge disputing the mutual consent of the act, including claims that the RFEF released a misleading statement about Hermoso's view of the incident.

[“Spain’s Rubiales faces calls to be sacked after a ‘disgusting’ Hermoso kiss.”](#)

August 25, 2023 - Rubiales defies expectations and refuses to step down at an emergency RFEF meeting. Luis Rubiales defiantly told an emergency general assembly of the federation, “I won’t resign,” four times in quick succession, and claimed he was a victim of a witch hunt by “false feminists.”

She and 80 other Spain players, including the entire World Cup squad, say they will not play for the national team until there are changes in the RFEF's leadership.

[Spain team quits as federation boss refuses to resign in kiss scandal](#)

[“Spanish soccer president refuses to resign despite kissing a player on the lips at Women’s World Cup.”](#)

Hermoso releases a formal statement via official X handle how she has zero tolerance for this situation:

August 26, 2023 - FIFA suspends Rubiales for 90 days pending disciplinary proceedings while it decides on disciplinary measures over his behaviour. Its disciplinary committee also orders Rubiales and RFEF officials and employees alike to refrain from contacting Hermoso or those around her.

Spanish football federation threatens to take legal action against the football player's statement

[Spanish football federation threatens legal action against star player in kiss controversy](#)

August 28, 2023 - [Prosecutors investigating whether football chief’s kiss was sexual assault](#)

September 05, 2023 - [Spain women's team coach Jorge Vilda fired amid Rubiales kiss fallout](#)

September 08, 2023 - [Spanish public prosecutors file a lawsuit against Rubiales for sexual assault and coercion, after Hermoso made an official legal complaint over the kiss two days earlier.](#)

September 10, 2023 - Rubiales publicly announces his resignation during an interview with broadcaster and journalist Piers Morgan. It comes three weeks after the World Cup final and ends a five-year stint. "Yes, I have to do it because I cannot continue my work," he says. The full interview airs two days later -

[Luis Rubiales quits in wake of World Cup kiss scandal](#)

Throughout this timeline, Rubiales' responses shifted from attempts at apology and justification to a combative stance against his critics, culminating in his resignation amid legal and public pressure. The case spiralled into a significant scandal, invoking national debates on women's rights, consent, and leadership accountability within sports organisations.

Charges faced

Luis Rubiales, the former president of the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF), was banned from all football-related activities for three years by FIFA. This decision came after Rubiales kissed player Jenni Hermoso without her consent during the trophy presentation of the Women's World Cup final. The incident and Rubiales' subsequent actions, including denying wrongdoing and initially refusing to resign, led to widespread condemnation and a criminal investigation in Spain.

The ban, effective until 2026, prevents Rubiales from participating in any football-related activities at both national and international levels.

This includes being removed from his position within FIFA and also affects his role with the European football body UEFA, where he served as a vice president. Rubiales resigned from his positions in September, citing his suspension by FIFA and additional cases against him as reasons that made it clear he could not return to his post.

This resignation came after increasing pressure from the Spanish government, national-team players, and the broader public over his conduct.

Rubiales also faces a criminal investigation in Spain, where a Madrid judge issued a restraining order preventing him from contacting Hermoso.

His actions at the final, including inappropriate gestures and carrying a Spanish player over his shoulder during post-match celebrations, further compounded the controversy and led FIFA to justify his provisional suspension, which is now a formal three-year ban.

Audiences: soccer fans, players, coaches, officials, media outlets, government officials, sponsors, and other stakeholders.

Victims: Jennifer Hermoso and others who may have faced similar incidents or pressures.

Influencers: FIFA, Spanish government officials, media personalities like the Guardian, The New York Times, etc., advocacy groups, and sponsors.

The RFEF, the governing body of soccer in Spain, faces both internal and external risks/issues.

- Internal risks/issues include a lack of accountability and a leadership crisis within the RFEF, which may damage the organisational culture and reputation.
- External risks/issues include public backlash, legal implications, damage to Spain's reputation in the international sports community, and impact on sponsorship deals and financial stability.

Initially, the RFEF and Rubiales denied the severity of the crisis, which led to ineffective responses and further escalation. However, as the situation continued to unfold, external pressures and consequences forced Rubiales to resign, indicating a shift towards recovery and accountability. The crisis can be attributed to a series of events that began with Rubiales's inappropriate behaviour and subsequent mishandling of the situation. This was not an accidental crisis. It can also be self-inflicted because he did not control his own emotions and, furthermore, gave a very lukewarm response.

The impact of the crisis on the reputation and finances of those involved is significant. Rubiales is facing suspension and legal scrutiny, and the RFEF is undergoing leadership changes and reputational damage.

Analysing the Response

Objectives of the Response: The initial responses from Luis Rubiales and the RFEF seemed aimed at downplaying the incident and protecting the organisation's and Rubiales' reputation. However, these responses clashed with the values of respect, integrity, and equality that sports organisations publicly endorse. Rubiales' apology appeared to reflect a misunderstanding of the gravity of his actions and the public's expectations for accountability.

Effectiveness and Timing: The responses from Rubiales and the RFEF were widely criticised for being insufficient and lacking sincerity. The timing was also problematic; it was delayed and reactive rather than proactive, which amplified the public outrage. These responses did not seem to align with an understanding of the impact of the incident on victims of similar behaviours or with the broader societal call for change in attitudes towards consent and gender equality.

Apology Analysis: Rubiales' apology, in which he stated the kiss was "without ill intention" and a "moment of exuberance," failed to meet the criteria for an effective apology. It did not fully acknowledge the harm caused, take responsibility, or commit to specific actions to prevent recurrence. The apology was not well-received, as it seemed to minimise the incident and lacked a genuine understanding or acknowledgment of the consent issue.

Reflection and Recommendations

Initial Response Evaluation: The RFEF's and Rubiales' initial responses did not "ACE" the situation—Acceptance, Commitment, and Emotions were lacking in depth and sincerity. The RFEF's attempt to issue a statement purporting to represent Hermoso's view was particularly criticised, illustrating a misalignment with ethical crisis management principles.

Reaction to the Response: Media and public reactions were predominantly negative, with many viewing the responses as inadequate. The widespread condemnation and calls for Rubiales' resignation underscored the disconnect between the RFEF's handling of the crisis and public expectations.

Learning and Application: This case underscores the importance of genuine, timely, and transparent responses in crisis management. It highlights the need for organisations to have clear policies and training on consent and professional conduct, to respond to crises with sincerity and accountability, and to align actions with stated values. In professional practice, these lessons emphasise the need for ethical leadership, proactive crisis management planning, and the importance of listening to and addressing the concerns of all stakeholders, especially the victims.

Advising for a Better Outcome

Recommended Actions: If advising the RFEF or Rubiales, it would have been recommended:

- Immediate, sincere apology from Rubiales, acknowledging the harm and lack of consent without attempts to justify the action.
- Transparent investigation into the incident, with commitments to respect Hermoso's perspective and ensure her voice is heard and considered in the process.
- Public commitment to tangible actions, such as training on consent and professional conduct for all federation members, and policy reviews to prevent similar incidents.
- Engaging an independent entity to review and recommend changes in the federation's culture and practices, demonstrating a commitment to change.

Information Sources

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