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"Football is war" – FIFA's reactions to a real war and the response of football fans

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Abstract

Purpose – The commentary examines the possible rational for Federation Internationale de Football Association(FIFA) sending a series of tweets on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Design/methodology/approach – The commentary counts and analyses the number of tweets sent by FIFA media between 1 February and 1 March, 2020 and indicates that these concerning the war in Ukraine represent a radical departure from past topics. Stakeholder engagements with the tweets on the war were recorded and these far surpassed other regular topics.

Findings – FIFA's stance in condemning the war and taking direct action against Russia was effective in generating far greater stakeholder engagements in Twitter than other football-related posts. While the tweets were favourably received by many fans, not all of that response was positive, and in fact, some were extremely hostile.

Originality/value – An analysis of tweets and their responses provides a relatively new and powerful mechanism for gauging stakeholder engagements. The authors also contribute to the literature on communication strategies of sporting bodies by demonstrating how the integration of social issues into social media posts is likely to exhibit a strong response, albeit not always favourable. When sporting bodies (such as FIFA) depart from their core mission, they risk alienating some stakeholders when they delve into controversial social and/or political issues.

Keywords Russia, Ukraine, Twitter, War, FIFA, Voluntary disclosure

Paper type Commentary

The Federation Internationale de Football Association ("FIFA") has become one of the most recognisable international sports federations in the world because of the global popularity of football (soccer) across all continents (Winand *et al.*, 2019). FIFA aims to govern football and to develop the game around the world (FIFA, 2022a). In seeking to fulfil this objective, it is active in organising and marketing international tournaments such as the World Cup. Accordingly, FIFA's marketing is oriented towards promoting and adding value at events for sponsors, host nations and cities, member associations, sponsors and football fans (FIFA, 2022b).

The underlying premise for writing this commentary is that FIFA appears to have recently departed from these aims and its previous foci of social media as evidenced by some recent Twitter posts. In this commentary, we aim to examine why FIFA may have changed this approach and provide some preliminary empirical evidence as to its impact on its main stakeholders–the football fans. Much of the voluntary disclosure literature (see, for example, Farache *et al.*, 2018) is generally unable to *directly* observe the reaction of stakeholders to the new information other than examining potential stock price reactions. A contribution of this commentary is that we show how analysis of tweets and their responses provides a relatively

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new and powerful mechanism for gauging stakeholder engagements. We also contribute to the literature on communication strategies of sporting bodies (see, for example, Brown *et al.*, 2018) by demonstrating how integration of social issues into social media posts is likely to exhibit a strong response albeit not always favourable.

FIFA's posts on the war on the Ukraine

Historically, FIFA's use of Twitter [1] has been to provide information on specific events such as the World Cup and to generate a discussion from followers which ultimately could lead to an increase of interest for events and football in general (Winand *et al.*, 2019). The federation appears to have avoided commenting on broader social or geo-political issues. According to Josek (2022), this stance reflects FIFA's desire to be "realpolitikal", meaning that no national team could be excluded for fear of diminishing the standing of the sporting competition itself.

On February 25, 28 and March 1 of 2022, however, FIFA media posted three tweets regarding the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. On the first of these, FIFA expressed the hope for a rapid cessation of hostilities and condemned the use of force by Russia in Ukraine. The second tweet noted that no international competition will be played on the territory of Russia until the cessation of hostilities, any team or association representing Russia will not be permitted to use the term "Russia", and no flag or anthem of Russia will be allowed in matches. Finally on 1 March, FIFA stated that all Russian teams, whether national or club, shall be suspended from participation in both FIFA and UEFA competitions until further notice. Our analysis of FIFA's tweets from 1 February to 1 March 2022 indicates that these concerning the war in Ukraine represent a radical departure from past topics. During the above period, FIFA media sent out 33 tweets; of which, 12 were re-tweets [2]. The topics of the tweets varied from a discussion of computerised injury data; referee designations; executive programs in Sports Arbitration; availability and issue of World Cup tickets; the Beach Soccer World Cup and the African Schools Cup [3].

Why did FIFA decide to tweet about the war on the Ukraine?

Twitter [4] is a powerful communication instrument as, compared to traditional media, it enables direct and instant access to, and interaction with, large networks of stakeholders (Amin *et al.*, 2021).

From a disclosure perspective, Twitter can be used as an instrument to enhance stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation, its actions and ethics (Nekhili *et al.*, 2017). Thus, it is considered a tool to safeguard the organisation's reputation by influencing the lens through which it is viewed by the public (Milne, 2002; Lyon and Montgomery, 2013). It is also a beneficial public relations vehicle used to establish a good image. Not surprisingly then, international sporting bodies like FIFA have embraced Twitter as it represents an effective and cost-efficient way to target and influence their sizeable worldwide audiences (Winand *et al.*, 2019). It should also be highlighted that FIFA has been subject to several major scandals in recent years. Most notably, in 2015 where allegations of corruption by officials and associates connected with FIFA were made by law enforcement agencies. Arrests centred on the alleged use of bribery, fraud and money laundering to corrupt the issuing of media and marketing rights for major FIFA games and events (Ruiz and Panja, 2021). Further, it is noted that representatives working for Russia and Qatar had bribed FIFA officials to secure hosting rights for the World Cup (Panja and Draper, 2021).

While some researchers such as Josek (2022) have argued that FIFA has historically desired that sports should not be political, in the wake of scandals such as these, it is not surprising that FIFA has sort avenues to restore its reputation with stakeholders and enhance its image. Making posts on Twitter that denounce a war that is also largely condemned by much of the world (Archard *et al.*, 2022; Steinbock, 2022) and to take action against Russia is likely to resonate favourably with many football fans. The FIFA stance to condemn Russia's actions was quickly endorsed through press releases by many other football associations/leagues including

those in England, the USA, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Scotland and Wales [5]. Moreover, it should be highlighted that many of the teams that have qualified for the upcoming World Cup in Qatar (together with those that dominate world football rankings) are European countries that may feel somewhat threatened by Russia's aggression towards the Ukraine. These factors have combined to over-ride past precedents of FIFA choosing not to punish national teams for the actions of the country's government. Prior research (see Cooper and Lapsley, 2021) has highlighted the importance of authorities being prepared to disclose relevant information and take accountability for social issues or tragedies in sports. FIFA clearly possesses no blame for the Ukraine War, however by showing empathy for victims and taking direct action against the perceived aggressors, this potentially assists restoration of its own reputation.

From a voluntary disclosure perspective, FIFA's tweets represent an opportunity to re-legitimise itself with its stakeholders. This tactic could also be viewed through the lens of legitimacy theory (Deegan, 2002, 2019), impression management (Molecke and Pinkse, 2020; McFarland *et al.*, 2022) or voluntary disclosures (Laswad *et al.*, 2005; Amin *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, FIFA's legitimacy is potentially enhanced when there is congruence between what the community expects of it and whether stakeholders believe the organisation is complying with these. Whenever an organisation's social contract is under threat (which could be argued to be the case with the recent FIFA scandals), then that organisation can respond in a number of ways, one of which is to strategically disclose actions to stakeholders that demonstrate regard for its wider social obligations (Deegan, 2002). Furthermore, FIFA's tweets and actions signal to its stakeholders what organisational norms and values are important and that these disclosures demonstrate that the organisation is conforming with societal expectations (Laswad *et al.*, 2005; Patten, 2019).

Moving away from FIFA's motivation, how did fans react to the tweets about the war?

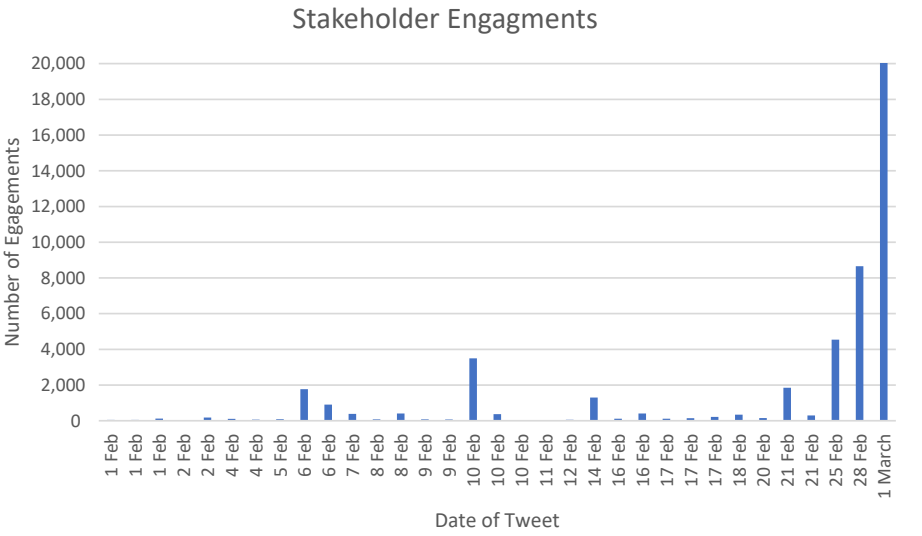

Figure 1.
Tweets sent by FIFA media and stakeholder engagements, 1 February–1 March, 2022

Table 1.
Replies, re-tweets, likes and total stakeholder engagements of FIFA's tweets on the war on the Ukraine

Date	Replies	Re-tweets	Likes	Total stakeholder engagements
Feb 25	3,663	202	376	4,241
Feb 28	2,497	1,701	4,393	8,591
Mar 1	5,381	6,203	8,838	20,442

Football fans' reactions to FIFA's tweets on the war on the Ukraine

Figure 1 shows the stakeholder reactions to tweets by FIFA Media, by way of replies, re-tweets and likes (called "Stakeholder engagements"). The reactions from those regarding the war (February 25, 28 and March 1), far and above surpassed others for the time period. Specifically, they generated between 4,000 and 20,000 stakeholder engagements, compared to most other posts that generated less than 1,000 reactions [6].

A breakdown of the stakeholder engagements is provided in Table 1 and shows the three tweets generated a large number of "likes" and re-tweets with the most popular being the third that announced suspension of the Russian team on March 1 [7].

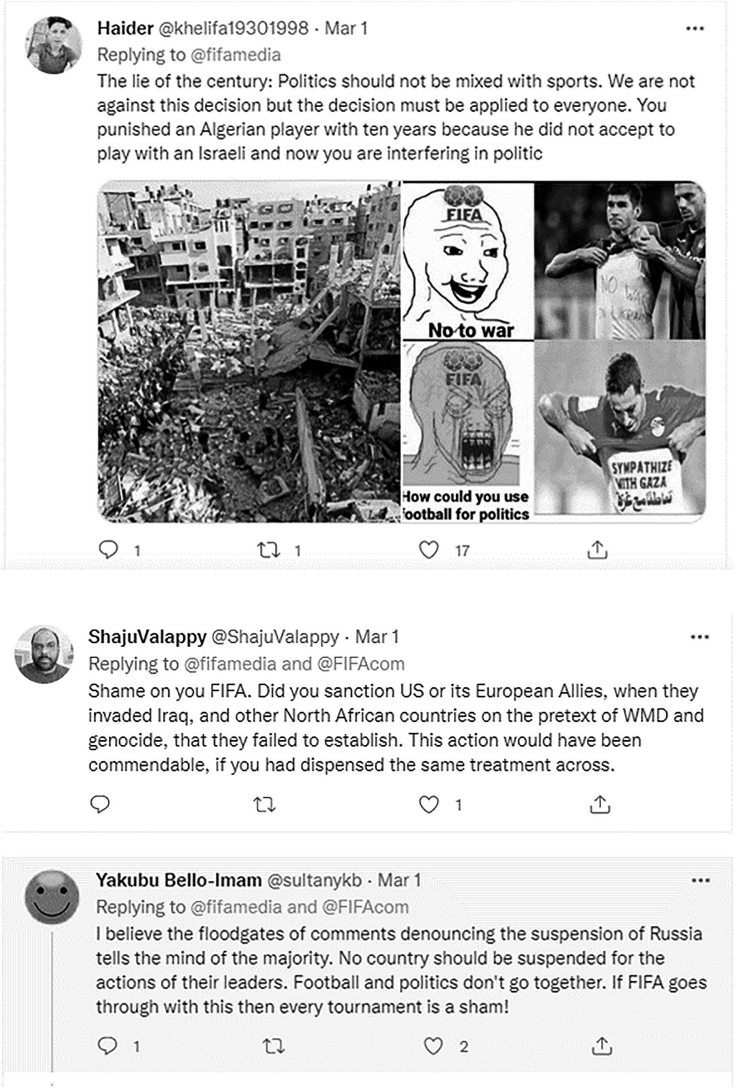

Figure 2.
Examples of individual tweets in response to FIFA banning Russia on 1 March 2022

While most of the engagements appeared to support FIFA's stance, our additional analysis of the first 100 replies to the March 1 tweet [8] (perhaps being the most controversial as it announced FIFA's suspension of the Russian team) found that 83% of these comments were critical of FIFA's disclosure on this topic [9]. Common themes were that FIFA should not get involved in politics and that FIFA had previously not tweeted when other soccer playing countries had declared war and invaded others. Three examples of these tweets are provided in Figure 2.

The replies to the March 1 tweet also received engagements, for example, *"aren't you guys anti-politics"* (9 replies, 82 likes); *"This is unfair"* (57 replies, 203 likes); *"Don't bring politics into sport"* (7 replies, 48 likes) and *"What about Israel and USA?"* (26 replies, 1,057 likes).

Conclusion

FIFA's stance in condemning the war and taking direct action against Russia was effective in generating far greater stakeholder engagements in Twitter than other football-related posts. While the tweets were favourably received by many fans, not all of that response from stakeholders was positive, and in fact, some were extremely hostile. Further research could be done to determine the location of the twitter user and the country origin of the tweet.

Based on our evidence, we can conclude that FIFA's strategy of tweeting about the war has yielded mixed results as a tool of voluntary disclosure to improve the organisation's social standing in the wake of prior scandals and to legitimise itself to its stakeholders (Deegan, 2019; Molecke and Pinkse, 2020). The lesson to be learned is that when sporting bodies depart from their core mission of promoting and enhancing their sport, they risk alienating some stakeholders when they delve into controversial social and/or political issues.

Notes

1. The FIFA Media department, which is based at the FIFA headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland, is responsible for handling media communication and operations for FIFA. Our analysis focuses on its account, @fifamedia, which joined Twitter in April 2011 and has more than 335,000 followers as at May 2022.
2. The re-tweets were from FIFA itself (as opposed to FIFA media) and the FIFA World Cup (Men's) and FIFA Women's world cup.
3. In order to assess whether February was a "typical" month for FIFA in terms of its Tweet, we also examined January 2022 and found that all tweets during that month were of a football nature.
4. We analyse Twitter because it is the most widely used social media platform, surpassing Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and other social media sites (Jung *et al.*, 2018).
5. These releases were issued between February 25 and March 1, 2022.
6. The tweet on February 14 drew over 1,000 engagements and concerned the FIFA Disciplinary Committee decision to fine the Brazilian and Argentinian Football Associations and some players, in relation to the abandoned match in the preliminary competition for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ on 5 September 2021.
7. Note that the number of replies is to the initial FIFA tweet and do not include replies of replies.
8. At this point clear themes were present, and it was felt that saturation had been reached (see Alam, 2021).
9. These tweets were the ones in English language. Analysis found that 9% were supportive of the tweet's contents, and 7% really had no opinion.

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Further reading

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