

FROM CHAMPIONS TO CRISIS: COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN ROMANIAN FOOTBALL

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ABSTRACT. *Introduction:* Crisis communication has become a central element of contemporary sports, where reputation and stakeholder trust are as fragile as athletic performance. The study focuses on FC Farul Constanța, a Romanian football club that experienced a rapid shift from national champion in 2023 to play-out participant in 2024, followed by a leadership transition in 2025, when Gheorghe Hagi stepped down as head coach to assume an administrative role. *Objective:* The research aimed to examine how the performance crisis of Farul Constanța was communicated publicly and how Gheorghe Hagi's personal brand influenced the perception of institutional stability during this period. *Material and Methods:* A qualitative case study approach was used, applying thematic content and discourse analysis to 85 public materials, including official club releases, media interviews, and social media posts from May 2023 to June 2025. The analytical framework was based on Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and personal branding principles. *Results:* Findings indicate that Farul's communication strategy relied heavily on Hagi's symbolic capital, combining emotional cohesion with limited strategic diversification. Public messaging oscillated between defensive justification and reaffirmation of identity values. *Discussion:* The study highlights the vulnerability of sports institutions dependent on charismatic leaders, where the overlap between personal and organizational

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reputation can both stabilize and constrain crisis management. *Conclusions:* Sustainable resilience in sports communication requires balancing individual charisma with institutional transparency and structured communication strategies, ensuring long-term trust and brand coherence.

Keywords: Crisis communication; Situational Theory of Crisis Communication; Romanian football; Gheorghe Hagi; personal branding.

INTRODUCTION

Sport communication is deeply symbolic and relational, reflecting not only performance but also identity and legitimacy. As Gomboș (2012, p. 34) observes, modern sport is structured around the act of “naming a winner,” embedding competition within collective values. Hence, a crisis in sports communication signifies more than a loss — it becomes a challenge to institutional meaning and reputation.

In a broader perspective, Gherman, Monea, Gomboș and Pătrașcu (2021, p. 81) emphasize that leisure physical activity sustains a healthy lifestyle, a view aligned with Baci (2015) and Prodea (2008), who interpret sport as an educational and social process shaping identity, balance, and cohesion. Thus, communication and leadership in sport are not only tools of performance but also vehicles for cultural meaning and social health.

In recent decades, theories of crisis communication have evolved significantly, moving from descriptive models to strategic approaches, in which organizations become active actors in managing their own vulnerabilities. Among the most influential theoretical models is the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007), which provides an analytical framework based on the public perception of the organization's responsibility and the adequacy of response strategies to the type of crisis. The theory proposes a classification of crises according to the degree of responsibility attributed – from situations in which the organization is considered a victim, to preventable crises, where perceived responsibility is high.

In the sports context, crisis communication acquires specific valences, since the organizational reputation often overlaps with the personal image of leaders and coaches. Football organizations, in particular, are exposed to constant pressure from the media, supporters and sponsors, and fluctuations in sports performance can generate real image crises (Pegoraro & Frederick, 2021). Thus, sport offers a privileged framework for observing how communication becomes not only a management tool, but also one for reconfiguring public identity.

The case of Farul Constanța is relevant from this perspective, as it reflects a complex transition: from the success achieved in 2023, when the team became the Romanian champion, to the period of sporting decline the following season and, subsequently, to the retirement of Gheorghe Hagi as coach in 2025. This evolution provides a fertile framework for analyzing how communication strategies have been adapted, and the image of the leader – strengthened through storytelling and personal branding mechanisms, especially through the publication of his autobiography.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the crisis communication strategies used by the Farul Constanța and by Gheorghe Hagi, through the prism of the SCCT theory, complemented by the concept of personal branding. The research aims to identify the type of crisis, the degree of perceived responsibility, the response strategies used, and how the leader's personal narrative contributed to managing the transition and protecting organizational reputation.

General Context

Crisis is defined by Coombs (1998, cited in Upadhyay & Upadhyay, 2023) as “an unpredictable event, a major threat that can produce negative effects on the organization, industry, or stakeholders, if inadequately managed.” Hence the importance of communication as a tool for managing perceptions and protecting reputation.

Crisis communication is a strategic process through which organizations manage unexpected situations that can threaten reputation, public trust and institutional stability (Coombs, 2015). It involves not only the rapid and coherent transmission of information, but also the building of a relationship of trust with key audiences, by assuming responsibility, transparency and consistency in actions. Organizational crises are inevitable events, but the organization's reaction often determines the public perception of its degree of professionalism and credibility.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), formulated by W. Timothy Coombs (1995, 2023), represents one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in the field. It starts from the premise that the public's perception of the organization's degree of responsibility determines the choice of communication strategy. The greater the perceived responsibility, the stronger the negative effect on reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Coombs' situational model is based on the idea that the match between the type of crisis and the response strategy is decisive for the success of communication. Empirical studies show that the use of inappropriate strategies, such as denial in cases where responsibility is obvious, can aggravate the crisis and produce significant reputational losses (Coombs & Harker, 2021).

In sport, crisis communication has a particular dimension, as the reputation of sports organizations is often closely linked to the identity and image of leaders or coaches. Performance crises, internal conflicts, controversial decisions or the relationship with supporters can trigger intense emotional reactions, and their management requires strategies adapted to the specific context of the field (Pegoraro & Frederick, 2021). In this sense, traditional communication models intersect with elements of leadership, storytelling and personal branding, which makes the theoretical approach complex and integrative.

In the field of sport, the application of the SCCT is particularly relevant, as athletes and sports organizations are exposed to intense public visibility, and public perceptions are quickly formed through the media and social networks. Sports crises differ from classic organizational crises in that the main actor – the athlete, the team or the coach – is directly in the public spotlight, and the impact on trust and reputation is immediate (Pöppel & Strauss, 2024).

Typologies Of Crises and Determinants of Public Perception

Within SCCT, Coombs (2007; 2023) proposes a tripartite classification of crises, based on the public's perception of the organization's degree of responsibility. This classification provides an essential analytical tool for choosing the appropriate communication strategies for each situation.

1. Crises in which the organization is perceived as a victim- Victim crises arise when organizations face external and uncontrollable events with minimal perceived responsibility, such as natural disasters, sabotage, or misinformation (Coombs, 2023). In sports, these may include refereeing errors, cyberattacks, suspended competitions, or unfounded media accusations. In such cases, communication focuses less on defending reputation and more on restoring solidarity and empathy. As Andersen, Moldenæs, and Ronglan (2022) argue, when a team is perceived as a “victim of context,” effective messaging emphasizes collective values, unity, and resilience, using bolstering strategies that turn vulnerability into identity reinforcement.

2. Accidental crises- These crises stem from unintended events with partial organizational responsibility, such as management or administrative errors, technical negligence, or internal miscommunication (Pöppel & Strauss, 2024). In sports, they often manifest through inappropriate statements, procedural failures, or coordination issues. The appropriate response is a diminish strategy, in which the organization acknowledges the incident while explaining mitigating factors (Coombs, 2007). As Bundy et al. (2017) note, the effectiveness of this approach depends largely on pre-existing credibility—organizations with a strong reputation are more likely to maintain public trust when such incidents occur.

3. *Preventable crises* - pose the highest reputational risk, as they imply clear managerial, moral, or ethical responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In sports, they result from intentional or negligent actions such as financial fraud, doping, match-fixing, or abuses of authority. Coombs (2023) recommends rebuild strategies, which emphasize accountability, apology, and corrective action. When organizations deny guilt, reputational damage intensifies and trust becomes difficult to restore (Bundy et al., 2017). Pöppel and Strauss (2024) highlight that such strategies are most effective when led by credible figures embodying organizational values—as illustrated by Gheorghe Hagi and Farul Constanța, where the leader's image is inseparable from that of the club.

Main Response Strategies

Coombs (2023) proposes four strategic postures: *Denial posture* – rejecting the existence of the crisis or identifying a scapegoat; *Diminishment posture* – reducing the perceived severity of the crisis through excuses or justifications; *Rebuilding posture* – assuming responsibility and offering an apology; *Bolstering posture* – reinforcing a positive image by recalling past achievements or portraying the organization as a victim.

According to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), responses must align with the perceived degree of responsibility. The denial strategy suits "victim" crises, aiming to refute false claims or correct misinformation, though excessive use amid clear fault can harm credibility (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In accidental crises, organizations employ diminishment strategies, providing contextual explanations and showing empathy and preventive intent (Bundy et al., 2017). When responsibility is clear, rebuilding strategies—centered on apology, accountability, and corrective action—are required, with their success depending on authenticity and consistency (Pöppel & Strauss, 2024). Beyond these, bolstering strategies (Coombs, 2023) reaffirm identity through values, legacy, and emotional bonds, proving particularly effective in sport, where fan loyalty and symbolism are central (Andersen, Moldenæs & Ronglan, 2022).

Personal Branding and Strategic Storytelling in Leadership Transition

In elite football, where visibility is constant and public scrutiny immediate, the personal brand of coaches and players shapes how organizational performance is perceived (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Pegoraro & Frederick, 2021). During crises, individual reputation can buffer institutional decline and sustain audience engagement around a coherent identity (Andersen, Moldenæs & Ronglan, 2022; Pöppel & Strauss, 2024).

Gheorghe Hagi exemplifies an organically built personal brand, grounded in performance, value consistency, and symbolic authenticity. Over a career spanning Europe's top clubs — Steaua București, Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, and Galatasaray — he has evolved from a player into a transgenerational brand combining excellence, modesty, and perseverance. His image avoids spectacle and controversy, relying instead on national symbolism and moral authority, embodying the principles of education through sport and professional integrity (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Aligned with Pöppel and Strauss (2024), Hagi's personal brand functions institutionally, merging with Farul Constanța's identity; the club's reputation reflects his values of discipline, meritocracy, and community engagement. His autobiography (*Hagi – My Road*, 2025) marks a moment of symbolic reinforcement, consistent with Smith and Watson's (2010) theory of autobiographical legitimation. The book reframes his career not as an ending but as a continuity of purpose — shifting from active coaching to a role as architect of a moral and educational sports philosophy.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Aims and Questions

The main purpose of the research is to analyze how crisis communication and personal branding strategies intersected during the leadership transition at Farul Constanța club, between 2023–2025. The study explores the way in which Gheorghe Hagi, as a leader and institutional symbol, discursively managed a period of sporting decline and identity reconfiguration through strategic communication tools, both at individual and organizational level.

The specific objectives pursued are:

1. Identification of the type of crisis (according to the SCCT framework) in which the Farul Constanța club found itself after the 2023–2024 season.
2. Analysis of the communication strategies used in the public space by the club and by Gheorghe Hagi.
3. Interpreting the transition process from the role of coach to that of administrative leader as a personal rebranding and reputational stabilization strategy.

Based on these objectives, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. How does the performance crisis of Farul Constanța (2023–2025) manifest itself and what is the degree of perceived responsibility according to the SCCT classification (Coombs, 2023)?

2. What crisis communication strategies can be identified in the public speeches of the club and of Gheorghe Hagi, during the period of sporting decline?

Research Design

The study begins on May 21, 2023, when Farul Constanța won the Romanian championship under Gheorghe Hagi's leadership — a moment representing both the peak of sporting achievement and symbolic credibility for the club and its leader. The following season (2023–2024) marked the onset of decline, as the team barely qualified for the play-offs and finished fourth. The downward trajectory continued in 2024–2025, with Farul competing in the play-outs and finishing third there, reinforcing the perception of a performance crisis.

In June 2025, Hagi announced his retirement as coach and transition to an administrative role, closing the analyzed period and symbolizing a shift from sporting glory to identity reconstruction.

The research employs qualitative content analysis applied to 85 public materials, including: (a) official club releases; (b) Hagi's post-match statements and interviews; and (c) fan reactions on the official Facebook page, which serve as indicators of public sentiment and perception. Facebook was chosen as the main platform given its dominance in Romanian digital culture and its centrality in sports communication, storytelling, and reputation management (Sanderson, 2022; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2023).

Data were analyzed through a thematic-comparative approach, correlating event chronology with Coombs' (2023) SCCT postures — denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering — to trace the evolution of crisis communication strategies across the two-year period.

Data analysis

The analytical approach focuses on tracing the coherence and evolution of crisis discourse, highlighting how tone, themes, and communicated values shifted alongside changes in sporting context. In the first stage (May 2023), both the club and Hagi employed a bolstering strategy, centered on celebrating success, reinforcing symbolic capital, and promoting educational values.

During the 2023–2024 season, when Farul barely secured a play-off spot and finished fourth, the discourse introduced elements of diminishment — rational explanations, emphasis on injuries, and calls for patience — signaling the early phase of the performance crisis, while maintaining a controlled and non-defensive tone.

Between March and June 2025, as Farul competed in the play-out and finished third, coinciding with Hagi's retirement as coach, communication shifted

toward rebuilding and bolstering. This stage articulated an identity-centered narrative grounded in loyalty, work, and modesty, reaffirming the club's symbolic role as an educational and community-driven project.

The findings, summarized in a comprehensive table, allow a comparative analysis of institutional (club) and personal (Hagi) communication, revealing how the two brand identities strategically interacted to sustain narrative coherence and preserve public trust throughout the crisis.

Table 1. Content Analysis of Posts and Public Statements
(Farul Constanța & Gheorghe Hagi, 2023–2025)

Date	Source / Context	SCCT Strategy	Observations / Interpretation
May 21, 2023	Official Facebook post – the announcement of the championship title	<i>Bolstering</i>	Euphoric and symbolic speech; emphasis on collective pride and identity. Record level of engagement (17K reactions).
May 21, 2023	Statement by Gheorghe Hagi (Digi Sport)	<i>Bolstering</i>	Motivational narrative based on moral values (work, faith, character).
May 22, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website	<i>Bolstering</i>	Institutional communication focused on unity and gratitude.
May 24, 2023	Facebook post – articles from the international press	<i>Bolstering</i>	External validation of success through international recognition.
May 24, 2023	Facebook post – comparative image Hagi 1982 / 2023	<i>Bolstering</i>	Narrative of continuity between past and present.
May 29, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website after the match against CFR Cluj	<i>Diminish</i>	Moderated speech, focused on consistency and responsibility.
May 29, 2023	Facebook post – GSP's awards of the month ("Farul takes it all!")	<i>Bolstering</i>	Reaffirmation of prestige through external recognition.
June 3, 2023	Facebook post – All Star Romania vs. Galatasaray Legends exhibition match	<i>Bolstering</i>	Consolidation of Hagi's personal prestige through nostalgia.
June 28, 2023	Facebook post – Hagi named "Coach of the 2022–2023 season"	<i>Bolstering</i>	Close the successful speech with a ceremonial tone.
July 8, 2023	Facebook post – defeat in the Romanian Super Cup	<i>Diminish</i>	The first signal of the decline in performance. Sober but positive tone.
July 9, 2023	Statement Gheorghe Hagi – after losing the Super Cup	<i>Diminish</i>	Rational tone, reinterpretation of failure as a learning process.
July 13, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website after the victory against Sheriff	<i>Diminish / Bolstering</i>	Balance between optimism and realism. Consolidation of core values.
July 18, 2023	Facebook post – "Our journey in Europe continues in the Conference League"	<i>Diminish</i>	Recontextualizing failure as a "continuation of the road".

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July 19, 2023	Gheorghe Hagi Conference – after the match in Tiraspol	<i>Rebuild</i>	Explicit assumption of responsibility.
July 22, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website - Hagi's conclusions after the victory against Voluntari	<i>Rebuild</i>	Critical discourse, oriented towards discipline.
July 30, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Hagi conclusions after the failure against Iasi	<i>Rebuild</i>	Self-criticism and reaffirmation of the values of modesty and work.
August 6, 2023	Facebook post – “We lose in extra time in Ploiesti.”	<i>Diminish</i>	Minimal communication, aimed at reducing negative exposure.
August 16, 2023	ProSport article – reactions after controversial qualification	<i>Bolstering / Rebuild</i>	Media debates become a symbolic resource.
August 25, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Hagi's reactions after Helsinki	<i>Bolstering</i>	Return to positive discourse and cohesion.
August 30, 2023	Article OrangeSport – criticism after the elimination with HJK	<i>Rebuild</i>	External criticism highlights questionable choices; calm management.
September 3, 2023	Facebook post – after the defeat against Universitatea Craiova	<i>Diminish</i>	Short, impersonal message, strategy to reduce exposure.
September 11, 2023	Official press release – Rivaldo becomes a shareholder in Farul Constanța	<i>Rebuild / Bolstering</i>	Strategic movement to relaunch reputation.
September 18, 2023	Facebook post – Hagi, after the match against FCSB	<i>Diminish</i>	Redirecting attention to external factors (arbitration).
September 22, 2023	Facebook post – “Important victory in the Capital.”	<i>Bolstering</i>	Return to the triumphalist tone. Strengthening team morale.
September 26, 2023	Facebook post – “Defeat at Voluntari in the Romanian Cup.”	<i>Diminish</i>	Neutral communication, without justification. Strategy to avoid overcommunication in a negative context.
September 29, 2023	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Hagi's statements prior to the match against Sepsi	<i>Rebuild</i>	Anticipatory and balanced speech. It conveys control and trust, marking the return to a rational and preventive tone.
October 10, 2023	Facebook post – “Gheorghe Hagi, the coach of the 12th round”	<i>Bolstering</i>	Return to external validation and reaffirmation of personal prestige. The club capitalizes on the individual recognition of the leader.
October 26, 2023	Official press release – “Hagi Academy, offered as an example at the FIFA Congress”	<i>Bolstering/ Rebuild</i>	International recognition presented as a symbolic validation of the project. In a period of sporting instability, the club is redirecting the discourse towards values of sustainability and long-term vision.

Date	Source / Context	SCCT Strategy	Observations / Interpretation
October 30, 2023	Facebook post – “First failure in the last six games!”	<i>Diminish</i>	Neutral and short tone. The “first failure” formula minimizes the negative impact by emphasizing the previous positive series.
November 1, 2023	Facebook post – “Galata TV visited the Hagi Academy”	<i>Bolstering</i>	The post symbolically reactivates Hagi's connection with Galatasaray, strengthening international emotional capital. External recognition has the role of reputational validation and diversification of the public narrative at a time of fragile balance of sports performance.
November 5, 2023	Gheorghe Hagi Conference – after the match against Botoșani (1–1)	<i>Rebuild/ Diminish</i>	Reaffirmation of the collective effort, justification by lack of resources.
November 25, 2023	Facebook post – “Even in difficult times, Pharisees remain united!”	<i>Bolstering/ Diminish</i>	Emotional mobilization, call for unity.
December 16, 2023	Gheorghe Hagi Conference – after 0–0 against UTA	<i>Diminish</i>	Balanced assessment, moderate justifications.
December 20, 2023	Facebook post – “Equal with Rapid. Constanta, don't forget! 2023 was a historic year!”	<i>Bolstering</i>	Remembering successes as a strategy of symbolic consolidation.
December 21, 2023	Gheorghe Hagi Conference – after Farul–Rapid 0–0	<i>Rebuild/ Diminish</i>	Discourse on Transition and Reputational Reconfiguration.
December 27, 2023	Facebook post – annual review “2023 – a historic year”	<i>Bolstering (maximum)</i>	Narrative synthesis post: reconstructs the image of the club by accumulating merits (sporting, institutional, symbolic). It reorients the public's attention from recent results to vision and project.
January 27, 2024	Facebook post – “Gheorghe Hagi, happy after a new success”	<i>Bolstering</i>	Positive tone, reaffirmation of control and internal cohesion.
February 6, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gheorghe Hagi's conclusions after the 1–1 draw against FCSB	<i>Diminish/ Rebuild</i>	Balanced analysis, call for inspiration and confidence.
February 9, 2024	Facebook post – “Gheorghe Hagi, the best coach of the 2022–2023 season”	<i>Bolstering</i>	Strengthening reputation and professional authority.
February 13, 2024	Facebook post – “We remain united!”	<i>Bolstering/ Diminish</i>	Emphasis on unity and team spirit.
February 14, 2024	Facebook post – “Emotional meeting for Dumi”	<i>Bolstering (emotional)</i>	Humanizing and strengthening the relationship with fans.
March 8, 2024	Facebook post – “The result needed to qualify for the play-offs”	<i>Rebuild/ Bolstering</i>	Reinterpreting success as a strategic outcome.

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March 29, 2024	Official press release – Denial of rumors regarding Hagi's departure	<i>Deny</i>	Managing a reputational mini-crisis through transparency.
April 1, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Hagi's conclusions after the match against FCSB	<i>Diminish / Bolstering</i>	Balance between self-criticism and optimism.
April 6, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Hagi's conclusions after 1–1 against Sepsi	<i>Rebuild / Diminish</i>	Moderate assumption and call for balance.
April 15, 2024	Facebook post – “I am non-transferable to Romania”	<i>Bolstering (identitarian)</i>	Reaffirmation of loyalty and symbolic consolidation of the Hagi-Farul brand.
May 3, 2024	Facebook post – “Final result. Mandatory before!”	<i>Rebuild / Bolstering (defensive)</i>	Message of resilience and narrative control in the face of failure.
May 14, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gheorghe Hagi's conclusions after the match against Univ. Craiova	<i>Rebuild (explainer)</i>	Causal analysis and promise of reconstruction.
May 18, 2024	Facebook post – “The Mariners finish the season in 4th place”	<i>Diminish / Bolstering</i>	Normalization of the result, neutral tone.
May 21, 2024	Facebook post – “Images for history! A year ago...”	<i>Bolstering (nostalgic / symbolic)</i>	Reactivation of positive collective memory.
July 11, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gheorghe Hagi prefaced the first game of the new season	<i>Rebuild / Diminish (pre-crisis)</i>	Realistic anticipation of difficulties, preemptive speech.
July 12, 2024	Facebook post – “Final result” (0–1 defeat against Slobozia)	<i>Diminish / communicative minimalism</i>	Lack of contextualization, avoidance strategy.
August 18, 2024	Press conference – “I was the first to believe in Farul”	<i>Rebuild / Bolstering (Defensive Leadership)</i>	Self-justification and delimitation of responsibility, reaffirmation of the founding role.
September 4, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Inauguration of the new facilities of the Hagi Academy	<i>Bolstering (institutional)</i>	Change of focus: symbolic consolidation through structural development.
September 26, 2024	Facebook post – “The kick-off given by Petrică, an injured fan”	<i>Bolstering (Emotional / Community)</i>	Post with an emotional impact, which reactivates community solidarity and humanizes the brand.

Date	Source / Context	SCCT Strategy	Observations / Interpretation
September 30, 2024	Official press release – signing of the document for the new stadium	<i>Bolstering/Rebuild</i>	Major infrastructure announcement, used as a tool for reputational consolidation and repositioning of the club.
October 5, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gheorghe Hagi's statements after 1–1 against Dinamo	<i>Rebuild/Diminish</i>	Balanced speech between frustration and motivation.
October 22, 2024	Official press release – “Farul denies the Hagi-Popescu conflict”	<i>Deny</i>	Prompt reaction to rumors in the press about an internal conflict.
November 3, 2024	Facebook post – “We return with a point from the leader's field” (1–1 against U Cluj)	<i>Bolstering/Diminish</i>	Restrained, but positive tone: it stands out to get a point on the leader's court, to maintain the perception of stability and progress.
November 3, 2024	Facebook post – “We return with a point from the leader's field” (1–1 against U Cluj)	<i>Bolstering/Diminish</i>	Restrained, but positive tone: it stands out to get a point on the leader's court, to maintain the perception of stability and progress.
November 29, 2024	Facebook post – “We worked 90 minutes to return home with 1 point”	<i>Diminish/Bolstering (resilience)</i>	Concise post, with an emphasis on effort and solidarity. The lack of tactical or contextual comments indicates a minimalist communication strategy, aimed at protecting the internal image and diminishing the perception of a sports crisis.
December 16, 2024	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Conclusions of manager Gh. Hagi after the 1–1 draw against FCSB	<i>Rebuild/Diminish (realistic self-assessment)</i>	Hagi highlights the lack of consistency and offensive inefficiency, but maintains a constructive tone, with a focus on confidence in his own potential. The communication strategy is based on moderate transparency and the appeal to internal values (patience, faith, work).
January 1, 2025	Facebook post – “Happy birthday, Pharisees! Let's move forward together!”	<i>Bolstering (motivational / identity)</i>	Reaffirming the collective spirit and identity of the club.
January 20, 2025	Facebook post – Hagi and Rednic – “208 selections for the Romanian national team.”	<i>Bolstering (symbolic association)</i>	Consolidation by reference to the elites of Romanian football.
January 27, 2025	Facebook post – “Defeat in Gruia.”	<i>Diminish (minimization)</i>	Neutral tone, factual communication without dramatization.
February 3, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – The best scorers in the history of the national team.”	<i>Bolstering (historical)</i>	Historical legitimacy by association with national performance.
February 5, 2025 (I)	Facebook post – Hagi anniversary	<i>Bolstering (emotional)</i>	Reaffirmation of internal unity and the value of the leader.

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February 5, 2025 (II)	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Launch of the autobiography “My Road”	<i>Bolstering & Rebuilding (storytelling)</i>	Authenticity and narrative reconstruction of the personal brand.
8 March 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gh. Hagi's conclusions after the match against U Cluj.	<i>Rebuilding</i>	Adaptation to the play-out context, lucid and pedagogical tone.
March 12, 2025 (I)	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – “Our program in play-out.”	<i>Bolstering (normalization)</i>	The natural continuation of the sporting path.
March 12, 2025 (II)	Official press release – website Farul Constanța – Hagi Decorated with the National Order “Star of Romania”	<i>Bolstering (institutional legitimization)</i>	Symbolic reconfirmation of the leader's value and prestige.
March 19, 2025	Facebook post – The autobiographical book Hagi – My Road available for pre-order	<i>Bolstering (storytelling)</i>	Strengthening narrative and emotional capital.
March 24, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Farul – Miniso Partnership.	<i>Bolstering (reputational partnership)</i>	Association with an international brand for stability image.
March 26, 2025	Facebook post – Launch of the autobiography Hagi – My Road to ASE Bucharest.”	<i>Bolstering & Rebuilding</i>	Reconnecting with the national public through education and values.
April 12, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gh. Hagi's conclusions after the victory against Sepsi.	<i>Rebuilding (recovery and optimism)</i>	Return to the tone of confidence and performance.
April 19, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gh. Hagi's conclusions after the match against Hermannstadt.	<i>Rebuilding</i>	Analytical message, oriented towards improving the game.
April 24, 2025	Facebook post – “End of the road.” (elimination from the Romanian Cup)	<i>Diminish / Transition</i>	A succinct, symbolic message – the closing of a chapter.
May 3, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gh. Hagi's conclusions after the victory against Gloria Buzău.	<i>Rebuilding (constructive criticism)</i>	Self-criticism, awareness of limits and requirement of discipline.
May 4, 2025	Facebook post – Legendary meeting between Gheorghe Hagi and Cafu.	<i>Bolstering (global identification)</i>	International recognition, personal brand validation.
May 10, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gh. Hagi's conclusions after the match against UTA.	<i>Rebuilding Repositioning (reflexive)</i>	Transition discourse – orientation towards structural reform.

Date	Source / Context	SCCT Strategy	Observations / Interpretation
May 17, 2025	Official press release – Farul Constanța website – Gh. Hagi's conclusions after the 0-0 draw against Oțelul.	<i>Rebuilding (strategic closure)</i>	Calm season closing, call for analysis and new energy.
May 21, 2025	Facebook post – The day we became the champions of Romania.”	<i>Bolstering (nostalgic/symbolic)</i>	Re-anchoring in the glorious past to regain cohesion.
May 23, 2025	Facebook post – Launch of the autobiography <i>Hagi – My Road to Constanța</i> .”	<i>Bolstering (community storytelling)</i>	Cultural and affective event, reaffirmation of the connection with the city.
June 2, 2025 (I)	Facebook post – The autobiographical album <i>Hagi – My Road</i> available in Farul stores and online.	<i>Bolstering (institutionalization of the brand)</i>	Strategic continuity between the personal image and that of the club.
June 2, 2025 (II)	Official press release – Gheorghe Hagi announces the termination of the mandate of technical manager of the Farul team.	<i>Rebuild Repositioning (transition and continuity strategy)</i>	The statement marks the end of his technical role, but also the redefinition of the position in the club, from coach to mentor / strategist. Calm, dignified, future-oriented tone. Key moment to close the 2023–2025 cycle and protect the image.

RESULTS

2023 – From the peak to the first signs of the crisis

The year 2023 marks the peak of sporting and symbolic performance for Farul Constanța, a team that wins the national championship under the leadership of Gheorghe Hagi. The public communication during this period reflects a “bolstering” strategy, in which the focus is on strengthening the reputation, celebrating success and associating the club's brand with the values of work, modesty and unity. The posts from May 2023 highlight a record fan interaction (thousands of reactions and shares), confirming that the image of the club and Hagi is in a period of public glory.

After this climax, the first signs of instability begin to appear. The defeat in the Romanian Super Cup (July 2023), followed by elimination from European competitions, triggers a change of tone: official messages remain optimistic, but increasingly include justifications and appeals for patience (“we are at the beginning of the road”, “we have many injured players”). This discourse is part of the “diminish” strategy, specific to the early stages of a performance crisis, in which actors try to minimize the severity of the situation and invoke contextual factors.

As the results become more and more oscillating, and the team loses the consistency of performance, Hagi resorts to a “rebuilding” type of communication, acknowledging mistakes (“we made a fool of ourselves”, “we have to become modest again”) and implicitly assuming responsibility. Towards the end of 2023, the discourse stabilizes on a reflective and moral register, in which the appeal to “modesty”, “work” and “faith” becomes central. The club is trying, through a retrospective message (post of December 27, 2023), to symbolically reconfigure the year as “historic”, transforming the sporting decline into a narrative of perseverance.

Thus, 2023 can be considered the transition stage from consolidation to decline, in which the crisis is not yet assumed as such, but manifests itself through tensions between the image of success and the sporting reality.

2024 – Organizational crisis and image test

In 2024, Farul is going through a period of accumulated performance crisis, with unstable results and a decrease in public trust. Communication becomes a tool for symbolic management of organizational fragility. The first part of the year is dominated by Hagi's messages that maintain a balanced tone: emphasis on “inspiration”, “unity” and “hard road”. Communication is mainly part of the “rebuilding” strategy, which tries to regain trust through transparency and appeal to values.

However, the key moment of the year is represented by the press release of March 29, 2024, in which Hagi denies the information regarding a possible departure from the club. Through this intervention, he explicitly applies a “deny” strategy, designed to protect the perceived stability of the organization and reassert control over the public narrative. Subsequently, through the statements of April-May 2024, the tone becomes more and more critical of the internal conditions (“incredible injuries”, “I can't make a team”), and Hagi openly assumes the position of leader under pressure. A crisis of resources and authority is thus taking shape, doubled by a visible organizational fatigue.

A moment of rupture is represented by the statement in August 2024, in which Hagi announces that he will reduce his financial and majority shareholder involvement. This episode marks the transition from a sports performance crisis to an institutional and identity one, in which the continuity of the Hagi management model is raised. The official communication, however, maintains a moderate and encouraging tone, appealing to the image of the Hagi Academy and investments in infrastructure (post of September 4, 2024). Thus, the discourse is strategically repositioned towards symbolic bolstering, by emphasizing sustainable values (youth training, educational performance), which attenuates the perception of immediate decline.

2025 – Transition and symbolic reconfiguration

The year 2025 brings a radical change of narrative: communication focuses on rehumanizing the image of Gheorghe Hagi and consolidating his legacy as a symbol of Romanian football. Although the team is in the play-out and the sports performance is modest, the focus shifts to the identity and emotional dimension.

The publication of the autobiography “Hagi – My Road” (March 2025) works as a strategic personal storytelling tool, which transforms a period of crisis into a process of symbolic reconnection with the public. The launch of the book is widely reflected on the club's official channels and produces a wave of empathy, repositioning Hagi not as a coach in difficulty, but as a figure-legend, with a mission accomplished. This is part of the “bolstering” strategy, with an emphasis on moral values, personal example and institutional recognition (decoration with the Order of the “Star of Romania”).

In June 2025, with the announcement of his retirement from the technical leadership, Hagi completes a coherent communicative transition, from justification to resignification. The crisis is not over at the organizational level, but the leader's image is already positively reconfigured. The club's official discourse maintains the tone of symbolic continuity, invoking the values of work and loyalty. Thus, the year 2025 marks the stage of transforming an image crisis into a process of personal rebranding, in which storytelling becomes the main mechanism of reputational protection.

Anticipatory analysis of fan reactions online (2023–2025)

In 2023, fan discourse was dominated by euphoria and belonging. Posts celebrating the championship title and Hagi's leadership attracted hundreds of affirmative comments such as “*You made history for Constanța!*” or “*Farul is family, Hagi is our symbol!*”, signaling maximum cohesion between supporters and the club.

During 2024, the tone shifted as inconsistent results and repeated injuries led to a mix of encouragement (“*Head up, Mister, let's move forward!*”) and criticism (“*Enough excuses, where's last year's team?*”). The community divided between loyalists and skeptics, though posts emphasizing long-term projects — especially those related to the academy — continued to elicit positive engagement, indicating trust in developmental narratives.

By 2025, following Hagi's autobiography launch and national distinction, the online environment regained harmony. The discourse became warm and reverential, with comments such as “*Respect, King of Romania!*” reaffirming collective admiration. The shift from crisis to homage demonstrates how personal storytelling and authenticity can neutralize tension and restore symbolic capital.

Overall, the digital discourse evolved from identity-based euphoria (2023) to emotional polarization (2024) and, finally, to re-legitimation and empathy (2025). Through coherent and emotionally intelligent communication, Farul Constanța and Gheorghe Hagi preserved community trust, proving that in modern sport, reputation depends less on immediate success and more on the ability to transform collective emotion into enduring symbolic value.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research showing that crisis communication in elite sport is strongly shaped by the symbolic authority of charismatic leaders. Schei et al. (2023) demonstrate that national team coaches often rely on identity-based and value-driven narratives during periods of instability, emphasizing unity, continuity, and moral legitimacy rather than technical explanations. A similar pattern is evident in the Farul Constanța case, where Gheorghe Hagi's discourse privileged collective values and long-term vision over short-term performance justifications, particularly in the later stages of the crisis.

The evolution of Gheorghe Hagi's communication throughout the analyzed period demonstrates the consolidation of a personal brand defined by authenticity, perseverance, and symbolic stability, anchored in a dual identity: sports leader and moral model.

In 2023, his image was inseparable from Farul Constanța's championship success, and his discourse projected charisma, discipline, and inspiration. The Hagi brand merged with the club's, creating a unified narrative of excellence and professionalism that strengthened both personal and institutional reputation.

During 2024, amid inconsistent results and growing pressure, Hagi's communication adopted a tone of realism and composure. He maintained public trust through honesty, restraint, and emphasis on values such as work, modesty, and loyalty. Rather than damaging his image, this phase humanized his brand, revealing a leader capable of navigating adversity without theatricality or blame.

Moreover, the strong overlap between Hagi's personal brand and the club's institutional identity confirms observations by Pegoraro and Frederick (2021), who argue that sport organizations frequently personalize crises through highly visible leaders, transforming organizational issues into reputational tests of individual credibility. While this personalization can stabilize public trust in the short term, it also increases vulnerability, as institutional legitimacy becomes dependent on the leader's symbolic capital. The Farul case illustrates this dual effect: Hagi's reputation buffered the crisis but simultaneously limited the development of an autonomous institutional voice.

In 2025, the publication of his autobiography *My Road* and the conferment of the National Order “Star of Romania” marked a strategic repositioning of his brand — from an active coach to a symbolic figure of national heritage. His autobiographical narrative functioned as a tool of storytelling and re-legitimation, reinforcing moral authority and preserving legacy beyond sporting performance.

The study also supports Coombs’ (2023) assertion that diminishment strategies are most effective in performance-related crises when responsibility is framed as contextual rather than intentional. By emphasizing injuries, financial constraints, and structural limitations, Farul’s communication aligned with what Bundy et al. (2017) identify as credibility-preserving explanations, particularly effective when the organization benefits from a strong pre-crisis reputation. Hagi’s consistent emphasis on work, patience, and education reinforced this credibility, preventing escalation into a preventable-crisis perception.

Finally, the strategic use of autobiographical storytelling as a reputational buffer resonates with Smith and Watson’s (2010) theory of autobiographical narratives as tools of identity legitimation. Similar to findings reported by Pöppel and Strauss (2024), the leader’s symbolic repositioning—from operational actor to moral reference—allowed the crisis to be reframed as a transitional moment rather than a failure. In this sense, the Farul case confirms that, in sport, crisis communication effectiveness depends not only on message-content alignment with SCCT postures, but also on the leader’s ability to mobilize narrative continuity and emotional resonance.

Overall, Hagi’s brand remains authentic, coherent, and value-driven, blending sporting credibility, moral integrity, and emotional resonance. Despite fluctuations in results, his consistent focus on work, passion, and humility transformed a period of crisis into a moment of identity reaffirmation and enduring symbolic strength.

The comparative analysis of Gheorghe Hagi’s personal brand and Farul Constanța’s institutional brand reveals an initial phase of symbiosis, followed by a gradual differentiation in public perception.

Between 2023 and 2024, the two identities were fully aligned — performance, discourse, and values (work, modesty, perseverance, faith) converged into a single narrative. Farul’s legitimacy largely stemmed from Hagi’s personal credibility, as he embodied the club’s leadership and symbolic authority.

In 2024–2025, amid declining results and Hagi’s retirement from coaching, the relationship evolved toward strategic separation. The club adopted a more institutional tone, seeking autonomy, while Hagi repositioned himself as a national and moral figure, reinforced by his autobiography. The crisis thus acted as a moment of redefinition, transforming Hagi into a cultural symbol and Farul into his enduring sporting legacy.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the 85 materials published between May 2023 and June 2025 confirms that Farul Constanța's performance decline was accompanied by a gradual, coherent evolution of public discourse, consistent with Coombs' (2023) Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Initially, after the 2023 championship, communication was bolstering, centered on collective pride, symbolic capital, and educational values. As results declined, the discourse shifted toward diminishment, framing setbacks through contextual explanations — injuries, refereeing, or limited financial resources — while maintaining optimism and perseverance. In the final phase, surrounding Hagi's retirement as coach, communication turned toward rebuilding, emphasizing moral values, gratitude, and the long-term legacy of the "Farul–Academia Hagi" project.

In response to the first research question, the crisis was managed through shared responsibility, with Hagi contextualizing difficulties rather than personalizing failure — an approach aligned with the diminishment posture. Regarding the second question, both Hagi and the club used a hybrid strategy, combining rational explanation with emotional appeal. The club's communication remained visually consistent — blue-and-white imagery and slogans like "Mandatory Forward!" — reinforcing identity and stability.

Overall, the findings show that Farul Constanța and Gheorghe Hagi maintained public trust through emotional authenticity and symbolic coherence, reframing sporting decline as an opportunity for identity reaffirmation. While the club's tone remained cautious, the Hagi brand acted as the core stabilizing and legitimizing force throughout the leadership transition.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The article is the result of a collaborative effort in which each author contributed according to their specific expertise. The research was conducted under the scientific coordination of the second author, who supervised the conceptual framework and ensured the methodological rigor of the study. The first author was responsible for designing the research, collecting and analyzing the data, and drafting the manuscript. The third author contributed to the section dedicated to personal branding and strategic storytelling, offering interpretative insights into Gheorghe Hagi's public discourse and autobiography. The fourth author assisted in synthesizing the findings and refining the structure and language of the final version. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or personal interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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