The AFL Brand and Umpires’ Reputation through Media Commentaries

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Abstract

Australia has its own unique brand of football code, called Australian Rules. The code is played at a professional level, known as the Australian Football League (AFL), and has evolved from a localism culture to now be a ‘commodified sport’ that has generating revenue as a main objective. The commercial focus of the code has resulted in a stronger emphasis on brand and reputation. The controlling body, the AFL Commission, endeavours to protect and control all aspects of the brand through its media relations, public relations and marketing teams.

The game-day adjudicators for the game of AFL are called umpires. They are an integral part of the AFL brand and play a considerable role in the formation of the AFL’s reputation, as they are a visual representation for AFL officialdom to the spectators and viewing public at each game. Even though umpires have a low profile in the professional code compared to the AFL Board, professional teams and players, umpires make a sizable contribution to the AFL’s overall reputation.

The paper reviews literature on sport branding and draws links between brand performance and reputation. The new research identifies the current reputation for AFL umpires as portrayed through traditional and social media commentaries. A previous survey conducted with the AFL public demonstrated the umpires were held in reasonable regard, but does contemporary public commentaries through media reflect this opinion? The paper analyses public media commentaries on AFL umpires, and in light of the findings suggests strategies the AFL Commission can use to improve umpire reputation and AFL brand through media management.

Keywords: brand, reputation, AFL umpires, public commentaries
INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses traditional and social media commentaries on Australian Football League (AFL) umpires in order to determine their reputation through these commentaries. As demonstrated in the literature, media commentaries can have a significant effect on the management of reputation. A previous survey conducted with the AFL public indicated a strong regard for umpires, but the AFL through their own current practices indicate the umpires’ reputation to be adversely affecting the code's brand.

Australian Rules football is a football code unique to Australia. The AFL Commission is the governing body that regulates the vast majority of Australian Rules competitions across the nation. AFL is the most popular Australian spectator sport in terms of: attendance and television viewing audience, the highest annual revenue and has the greatest market-share of any sport within Australia (IbisWorld, 2014). Spectators, fans, participants, administrators and viewers of the game are collectively referred to as the AFL public.

The code at the professional level has evolved from a localism culture to a 'commodified sport', characterised by a high-level of sport professionalism and focus on generating revenue (East, 2012). Localism culture in sport refers to demographics dominating team loyalty. The commodification of sport is a term used to explain how sport transforms into a product that has a strong emphasis on league administration and commercialisation (East, 2012). The AFL brand generates considerable revenue through attendance at games, television and broadcast rights, and merchandising (IbisWorld, 2014; AFL 2014). Therefore, the AFL Commission endeavours to protect and enhance its brand and tries to control all aspects of brand-management (Scott & Walsham, 2005).

The game at the highest level has a distinct set of game-day officials that includes: three field umpires, four boundary umpires and two goal umpires (and a video umpire and reserve umpire for the professional league). Umpires have the responsibility of ensuring the rules of the game are upheld; much the same as referees do for other dynamic team sport. The AFL rule book is 93 pages long and includes rules and by-rules for the game, which makes for a complex adjudication process (AFL, 2015a). Many decisions made during a game are dependent on the umpires’ understandings of the rules and their interpretation of how the situation has been played out. Not unlike many other team sports, it is this decision-making process by the umpires that can create contentious decisions, and can result in the AFL public forming contrasting views on the ability of the umpire(s) to arbitrate the rules of the game effectively. Generally, it is the field (or central) umpires who implement the rules and make the most decisions during an AFL game. With three decision-makers on the field at once in the professional league inevitably means contrasts in interpretation of the rules will arise between umpires. Such inconsistencies may influence the umpires’ reputation as fair and just adjudicators of the game.

This paper reviews public commentaries through traditional media and the social media sites with regards to umpires and their decision-making in the national professional league. Literature included in this paper demonstrates such commentaries can influence the AFL public’s perceptions of AFL field umpires (Gill, 2015). Currently there is an acknowledged deficiency in umpire recruitment and retention in non-professional AFL leagues (Wilson, 2010; Burgen, 2010). The concern is this may be influenced by a poor reputation for AFL umpires and motivational conflict; particularly approach-avoidance conflict where potential officials will avoid the risk and negativity associated with AFL umpiring and be “turned off” from becoming or remaining as an umpire (Lantos, 2011). This paper aims to determine if a poor reputation for umpires is evidenced in media commentaries.

To help understand the importance of reputation and how it applies to AFL, its brand and umpires a literature review on defining terms for sport branding and reputation
is included. The review references a recent survey investigating the AFL public’s opinion on umpires. The paper then analyses recent traditional and social media to establish the current AFL public’s commentaries on umpires. Finally, conclusions are drawn from these commentaries for the contemporary reputation of AFL umpires and recommendations made on how the AFL could improve management of this reputation through using their media resources more effectively.

**BRAND and REPUTATION**

**Branding in Sport**

A corporate brand is considered to be the assurances an organisation promises to deliver (Beder, 2002; Scott & Walsham, 2005). Sport branding is the name, design and symbolism, or any combination, that a sport organisation, team or athlete uses to differentiate its product promises from the competition (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Powerful sport brands are immediately associated with the product and service they represent (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick & Funk, 2009).

A powerful sports brand is a valuable organisational asset because it has the power to represent multiple consumer perceptions (Shilbury et al. 2009). This is important for the AFL, as it has many stakeholders who make up the AFL public and consume AFL for a multitude of different reasons, including the fans, professional and amateur clubs, athletes, commission staff, officials, media and the viewing public. According to Shilbury et al. (2009) a sport brand is a potentially powerful tool as: it allows stakeholders to identify directly with that sport; the logo can invoke excitement, energy and emotion linked with the sport; it bridges cross-cultural and demographical divides; and, sport variety makes it possible to create distinct market segments. The AFL has many market segments, including: sport and club fans who support their team and attend live games; sport enthusiasts who view sport events; players and participants who use AFL for recreation and belonging; professionals who make a living out of the sport; the government and community looking for leadership and guidance with social agendas; and, the sport media. All these segments are influenced by the strength of the brand.

Brand loyalty refers to the brand’s ability to attract and keep consumers, thus creating equity in the brand. Building brand equity is an important strategy for the AFL in order to retain its repeat-purchase loyal fans who will continue to follow AFL over other competing “footy” sport brands in an increasingly competitive market, particularly other national sports like rugby league, rugby union and soccer (Apostolopoulou & Gladden in Beech & Chadwick, 2007; Somers, 2015; CSIRO, 2013). Spectator, fan and participant enjoyment are influenced by these publics perceptions of the holistic experience with the game, including their perceptions for the quality of the umpiring.

A strong sport brand can also create brand extension opportunities for major sports leagues like the AFL, as it enables the brand owner to extend to a wider range of products and services beyond the core promise of the brand (Apostolopoulou & Gladden in Beech & Chadwick, 2007). The AFL utilises its brand not only for financial gain through commodities (such as merchandise, training programs, sports nutrition products etc.), but also through social value (such as education programs, cultural beliefs, social agendas etc.) that forms a strong part of the AFL brand’s perceived quality (AFL Policies, 2015).

So the strength of the AFL brand has implications for the different segments of the AFL market, with unique stakeholders making up the AFL public, each identifying with the brand for different purposes (e.g. the sports fan). Keeping all elements of the brand strong through a good reputation is key to a successful code. The AFL umpires’ reputation is part of this brand.
Reputation

Reputation can have a profound effect on an organisation’s brand, as when there is a gap between the two the impression of the brand may change. Reputation is defined as the estimation in which a person or thing is held by the community or the public generally (Macquarie, 1991). More specifically, reputation is the value afforded to an individual or organisation based on the general beliefs (Dowling, 2006; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). What the key publics and stakeholders think of the organisation will shape the public reputation for that organisation.

The AFL works hard on upholding a premium brand, in light of the strong competition that exists nationally from other sport codes, and the increasing risk of global electronic and mobile streaming networks that are opening up access to international sport competitions (CSIRO, 2013). The AFL as a code spectacle promises a brand of sport at the professional level that is athletic, skilful and highly entertaining (AFL, 2015b). The AFL as a code promises to be a brand rich in social and community engagement, as evidenced through it community development programs and social policy (AFL, 2015c). Therefore, it is paramount that the AFL upholds a strong reputation in order to decrease the risk of its stakeholders perceiving the AFL is not delivering on its promises, or brand (L’Etang, 2006).

Scott and Walsham (2005) consider the gap between what is promised (brand) and what it is delivered (reputation) to be the risk. The risk to reputation is when the gap becomes significant, and can lead to an organisation’s reputation being damaged (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). Public relations and media relations are often charged with managing an organisation’s reputation (Harrison, 2011; L’Etang, 2008). Sport branding strategy is to position the brand in the minds of the consumers so that it is symbolic of what they hope to gain from experiencing the sport, and reputation management aims to ensure that these experiences are somewhat fulfilled (Shilbury et al. 2009).

There is a direct correlation between success and public reputation, according to Doorley and Garcia (2011). The AFL brand equity, by virtue of the AFL being the largest supported sport within Australia, holds significant importance from a financial, social and ethical perspective. AFL games currently have an attendance of almost 7 million per season, with an average game attendance of around 33,000 (AFL, 2014; Footywire, 2014). The AFL generates annual revenue of more than $215 million, has a current television deal worth $1.25 billion over five years and propagates more than 300,000 media stories per year (IbisWorld, 2014; AFL, 2014; Convictcreations, 2012). Another expanding element to the impact of AFL is gambling, with millions of dollars wagered each week on AFL affiliated chance (Munro, 2010). The AFL also significantly influences social and ethical issues for Australian society through its support for community and regional football development, and the AFL’s very public policies on equality, tolerance and racism (AFL, 2015c; Munro, 2010).

However, for the AFL the many diverse stakeholders making up the AFL public can result in diverse expectations, and the fulfilment of these expectations is often out of the control of the AFL Commission. For example, a sport fan may want to experience a sporting spectacle that highlights exceptional athletic prowess, yet the team fan may simply want their team to win regardless of the spectacle. How the AFL game presents can be at the fate of the weather, the coaching tactics and the team preparation – all variables external to the control of the AFL Commission.

But umpiring is under the direct control of the AFL, and therefore any negative experiences involving umpires can be a risk to the AFL brand. A strong media influence is a typical strategy to influencing the representation of a brand and, as mentioned (and discussed further below), the AFL devotes considerable resources to influencing the media content in order to minimise risk to the brand through media commentaries.
Key AFL Stakeholders

A stakeholder is a person or identifiable group of people who have a stake in an entity. A stake is an interest or an undertaking in an entity (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). The AFL Commission is a large organisation and its operations may be considered corporate as it is a united body working towards a business enterprise (Macquarie, 1991). Stakeholders in the AFL include corporate staff, players (including participants), team administration, spectators, sponsors, game administration, suppliers, and the media. The paying public, both as game-day spectators and viewers, are identified as the key external stakeholder for the AFL (AFL, 2015b), particularly as the AFL is not a listed company and does not have shareholders. Other stakeholders making up the more general reference to AFL public include participants, players and administrators for the code.

The AFL is considered to be a stakeholder corporation because it is dependent upon considerably external stakeholder input for its success (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). The AFL generates double the revenue of any other rival football code in Australia, but without the public support of spectators, viewers (free-to-air and pay-to-view), and merchandise consumers such a significant revenue stream would not exist (IbisWorld, 2014). The key to a successful stakeholder corporation is being inclusive and transparent and allows stakeholders to continuously contribute to the production of values that underpin the brand (Vernuccio, 2014; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). As the AFL has such public interest, then external stakeholder groups like spectators and fans have an expectation that the organisation should be open and accountable to its operations – and for a sport code this particularly applies to the fairness of the contest. Currently, really simple syndication makes it easy for sport fans to express their opinion in a public domain, such as through social media (Pederson, 2013; Pegoraro, 2010).

The AFL needs to address its stakeholders and their perceptions, particularly the sport fans. As highlighted by Stolt, Dittmore and Branvold (2012) the sport public have highly charged beliefs around fairness and justice in a sporting contest and their realities for what they perceive as unbiased result. To provide a rational explanation on how the result came about is a delicate public relations exercise, and must be communicated in a diplomatic way (Stolt et al. 2012).

The Importance of Umpire Reputation

The AFL public’s exposure to umpires is mainly through spectating (and viewing), media and the AFL corporate publicity. The AFL public’s perceptions and opinions for the umpires’ reputation are formed through this exposure. A study by Corporate Reputation Watch in Carroll and Buchholtz (2014) identified media criticism as the biggest external threat to an organisation’s reputation, and media commentaries are a big part of the AFL’s exposure. Umpires’ reputation is a stakeholder management concern, and any identified problems with aspects of the umpires’ reputation should engage stakeholder management strategies currently supported by the AFL, particularly the use of and interaction with social and traditional media (Doorley & Garcia, 2011).

As previously explored, the AFL public are exposed to the umpire performances on a weekly basis; as spectators, viewers or through readers of traditional and social media. Therefore, umpires represent the AFL administration during a game and make a significant contribution to the AFL’s overall brand. In keeping with the AFL’s drive to maintain brand strength, it needs to ensure the umpires’ reputation remains strong and admirable (McCauley, 2010; Scott & Walsham, 2005). The risk to the AFL’s brand is that the AFL public perceives umpires are not performing to an admirable level.
AFL Brand Management

At this time, the AFL currently has a very strong brand to protect, according to a rating study by Brand Finance and Landor Associates (Heathcote, 2013). There are 14 AFL clubs in the top 20 sport brands in Australia, and the AFL has the only local sporting club with an AAA rating (Heathcote, 2013).

In 2012 the AFL began operating its own media agency and uploaded a public website to report on every aspect of its operation, good and bad (Happell, 2013). The media site engages around 105 staff, including: 20 reporters working across all platforms (including web, mobile, app, Footy Record, AFL products), 12 sub-editors handling the copy of reporters, 20 video journalists and producers creating content for AFL platforms and custom publishing business (e.g. club membership campaigns), 20 development and product staff, two social media staff, five photographers, 11 designers, one analytics person and administration staff (Happell, 2013). The AFL media agency has more sport reporters than the leading Australian daily sport newspaper, the Herald Sun. The impact capabilities from a media relations perspective for the AFL media agency are substantial (L’Etang, 2008, Carrol & Buchholtz, 2014). Happell (2013) indicates that such a large team should be able to considerably influence agenda setting for conversations around the AFL.

In 2013 the AFL also released its own social media engagement policy. This acknowledges social media has increasing prevalence in both the professional and private lives of its staff, players, administrators and fans. It recognises the value in using social media to build more meaningful relationships with fans, communities and other relevant stakeholders (AFL, 2015b). The policy states that all Australian Rules football: players, coaches, officials, spectators, administrators, and all people reasonably connected to the football body (members) must comply with the policy (AFL Policies, 2015). The policy sets out conditions for use of social media in an official capacity by its members and what constitutes inappropriate use. The AFL registers the risks associated with its members using social media outside of its policy guidelines.

Corporate generated media content is used to manipulate topical conversation in traditional media and through social media in order to positively reflect a brand and enhance corporate reputation (Doorley & Garcia, 2011; L’Etang, 2008; Harrison, 2011). The AFL, like many large organisations and corporations, is aware of how its media relations activity can influence public opinion through media engagement, further demonstrated by the AFL Media Centre building an online research panel to monitor online feedback from fans (Marketing, 2013).

AFL Strategies to Improve Umpire Reputation

The AFL appears to concede that the general reputation of umpires is not held in high regard, and that the umpire reputation does not reflect the intended brand values coveted by the AFL, as demonstrated by their public relations strategies to improve umpire reputation.

The declining availability of suitable match-day officials in the non-professional leagues is acknowledged by the AFL as due in part to poor match day environments for umpires that includes abuse and disrespect (AFL, 2015b; Burgen, 2010). The AFL has implemented a number of promotional strategies and policies to more positively profile the football public’s opinion on umpires. In 2010 the AFL began working on improving the perception of umpires through initiatives, such as: ‘appreciation for umpires’ campaigns; gender-equity in umpiring; regulating comments to the media about umpiring by AFL personnel, and; approaching and fast-tracking ex-AFL players to become elite umpires.
Promotional strategies introduced by the AFL utilised positive promotion in order to impact on the football public’s perception of umpires (L’Etang, 2008; L’Etang, 2006). ‘Umpire Appreciation Round’ and the ‘Umpiring is Everyone’s Business’ campaigns have been initiatives by the AFL since 2010 to develop a positive culture for umpiring (AFL, 2014a; Wilson, 2010).

The AFL stated in 2015 that female participants (both at administration and playing) represented the code’s largest potential growth area and needs stronger acknowledgement. Recent successes include female umpires beginning to gain traction as elite umpires for the professional and semi-professional leagues (Lane, 2015). Only three women have umpired at the elite level as goal umpires, but there is a trend towards field roles for female umpires in the second-tier VFL and other semi-professional leagues, and one female umpire has been elevated to the reserve list for senior AFL games for the 2016 season.

Enforced protection against negative media commentaries regarding umpires includes ‘AFL Regulation 16.1: Public Comments on Umpires’, stating that any negative public comment by AFL players, coaches, and team officials regulated by the AFL regarding umpires are liable for fines of up to $20,000 for a first offence introduced in 2009 (Sexton & Russell, 2009). Effectively all AFL club officials and players are banned from making negative comments regarding umpiring so as to set a positive example on conduct and attitudes towards umpires for all leagues and players.

The AFL umpiring department and AFL Players Association (players’ representative association) have been cooperating since 2010 in an attempt to recruit and fast-track former elite players to be umpires in the AFL league (Munro, 2010). The AFL has established the new ‘Player to Umpire Pathway Academy’, which helps to identify former players suitable to furthering their AFL careers through umpiring. Recently-retired players have been identified as extremely attractive to the AFL as potential umpires because they already had an understanding of elite sport, had achieved high fitness levels and were used to the pressures associated with elite level sport (Bradshaw, 2010). However, to this time only seven ex-elite players have made the transition to the top-tier of umpiring since 1945.

Umpire Reputation with the AFL Public

The author believes that the AFL public have a poor perception of the umpires’ abilities to adjudicate effectively and fairly games of AFL football. There appears to be a gap between AFL branding for umpires and how the AFL public perceived umpire effectiveness. This perception was mainly based on hearsay and observed phenomena regarding public, media and social commentaries on AFL umpires. This perception is investigated from the perspective of media and social commentaries on umpires.

A previous research study conducted through an online survey gathered information from the AFL’s key external stakeholder group (spectators, viewers and fans) regarding their perceptions of umpiring and the rules (Gill, 2012). The 2010 survey was publicly made available through a web-link and was distributed via email requests, posting on club websites and supporters’ social media sites. The 14-question survey was designed to provide quantitative data to ascertain the AFL public’s perceptions of umpires (see Appendix One). Since this survey pre-dates many of the AFL’s initiatives to protect the umpire reputation, the survey cannot draw conclusions on the success of these programs.

The survey results indicated the umpires’ reputation as adjudicators of the game with the AFL public is effectively positive. The majority of respondents (70%) rated AFL field umpires as doing a good to excellent job. In fact, almost 81% believed umpires in non-professional leagues did a good to excellent job. Therefore, survey participants’ responses positioned field umpires’ reputation as admirable to good. This reflects an
earlier AFL Commission’s investigation into perceptions on the standards of umpiring with AFL league clubs, which previously had also identified no critical issues with the umpires’ public reputation (Sanders, 2003).

However, the survey responses indicated that 70% of the respondents believed the field umpires are inconsistent; and 95% indicated they sometimes, often or always found it difficult to predict what the umpires’ interpretations would be (see Appendix One). An overwhelmingly 95% indicated they sometimes, often or always found it difficult to predict what the umpires’ interpretations would be. Notably, around 50% of respondents made contributions to the optional comments section (most of which were more than 200 words), which demonstrated many of the participants had a strong desire to express their opinion on the performance of the umpires and rules for the game. This may be an indicator that umpiring does play a considerable role in the AFL experience for the AFL public, and ultimately has an influence on the AFL’s reputation. Typically, such surveys would only get minimal optional comments contributions (Hakim, 1987).

Although the survey results indicated a positive reputation overall for umpires, there were some substantial gaps in the respondents’ interpretation of decision-making and the AFL rule book, gaps which are a risk to reputation. And, as many respondents were passionate about further expressing their own opinion relating to umpiring, suggests that clear communication by the AFL regarding the role and performance of umpires is important to many within the AFL public.

New Media’s Influence on AFL Brand and Reputation

The use of traditional mass communication (media like newspapers, television and radio) have the capacity to reach vast numbers of general public in a short period of time, and often has the ability to set the agenda for topical conversation (L’Etang, 2008; Harrison, 2011; Archee, Gurney & Mohan, 2013). Traditional media that addresses umpires and their decision-making will ultimately have an influence on how the AFL public who engage with traditional media formulate an opinion on umpires and umpiring. Traditional media provide content on which the receiver can make a judgement (Harrison, 2011; Keaton, Gearhart & Honeycutt, 2014). However, traditional media distribution is a model of communication involving transmission from one to many, and without its social networking engagement tools does not have the capacity to engage stakeholders to be part of the brand-building for entities like the AFL (Keaton et al. 2014; Archee et al. 2013).

Brand-building is no longer a wholly controlled process by the host organisation. Open source branding is a new science where stakeholders become co-builders of the brand through the social media eco-system (Vernuccio, 2014). The term ‘social media’ describes platforms of digital communication that allow interactive communication in the electronic environment, often through mobile communication devices (Vernuccio, 2014). Through social media expansive stakeholder networks are able to contribute directly and continuously in the process of brand-building and become co-producers of the values that underpin the brand. This has led to brand owners losing ultimate control over content, reach and frequency of messages that shape the brand and reputation (Vernuccio, 2014; Safco, 2010). Through social media, anyone engaged with that platform can contribute to the discussion or post comment; freely, quickly and easily, and often with little technical know-how (Doorley & Garcia, 2011). These contributors are part of the citizen journalism, where content and commentaries on topics has input from public groups and traditional media (Doorley & Garcia, 2011).

Social media commentaries on AFL umpires is often unregulated and can be judgement-biased because individuals often are motivated to use these platforms to express their displeasure at umpire decisions and performance (Safco, 2010). The AFL
Commission, as the brand owners for umpires, have lost a measure of control over content that contributes to their umpires’ brand (Keaton et al. 2014, Safco, 2010; McCauley, 2008). The element of relationships dominate, so discussion on branding remains dynamic through this social process, resulting in umpire reputation being formulated through collaboration and co-creation – not solely through the AFL Commission’s own network of content distribution (Vernuccio, 2014; Safco, 2010).

Any AFL fan wishing to engage in conversation about the umpiring can easily source a blogsite through a simple search, and join in the conversation. A blog (a truncation of web log) is a discussion or informational site consisting of discrete posts (text and/or visual entries) typically displayed in reverse chronological order (Gunelius, 2010). Blogs are often used for sport commentaries as they can effectively engage with stakeholders who actively seek dialogue and information on stipulated topics (Gunelius, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Sport blogs are typically easy to access and contribute to (Pederson, 2013). Twitter is one of the most popular branding microblog platforms, as it is a real-time short messaging service that works over multiple networks and devices and is open access (Safco, 2010; Gunelius, 2010; Vernuccio, 2014).

The significance for the AFL brand and umpires’ reputation is the ease at which unregulated content can enter this domain of open source branding, and whether these platforms are damaging the intended brand, or justly reflecting it. This new research investigates social media platforms and traditional media in order to detail trends and make an analysis of the current reputation for umpires, and to see if it reflects the AFL’s intended brand.

The new research conducted for this paper analyses contemporary data reflecting current perceptions of AFL field umpires as portrayed through the commentaries in traditional media, a dedicated public (but non-aligned) AFL blog site and a social media platform. This new information will illuminate the current perceptions on the umpires’ reputation expressed through traditional and social media commentaries, which ultimately influence the umpire reputation with AFL public (Doorley & Garcia, 2011; L’Etang, 2006).

THE MEDIA REVIEW PROCESS

To gain a representation of commentaries on AFL umpires through traditional and social media, a media analysis was conducted between June 1 and September 3, 2014 (Gill, 2015). A quantitative empirical study was undertaken of three media distributions: a social media blog, a microblog and daily newspapers. This period in the AFL’s 2014 season was specifically chosen as it involves the build-up to the final top eight teams that then have a chance to play off for the premiership title. Football ‘emotions’ run high over this period, especially for the AFL fans, as many teams are positioning themselves for a run at winning the grand final. It is a period of time when fans are most active in their support for their clubs (Wallace, 2011; Oates, 2009).

Traditional media outlets, the Herald Sun, The Age and The Australian, were analysed for commentaries relating to AFL umpires. These traditional outlets have strong readership in the heartland of AFL (Melbourne, Victoria) and employ the highest percentage of AFL sport journalists (McCauley, 2008). Media articles analysed included reports, commentaries and investigative stories appearing in these newspapers. The social media platforms analysed were Big Footy and Twitter. Big Footy is the most popular AFL fan blog not aligned with traditional news agencies. Twitter is the most popular microblog used in Australia, and often used by AFL personnel, sport media commentators and players (Pegoraro, 2010; Oates, 2009).
The method of analysis used was clustering for quantitative analysis typically used by cluster method researchers (see for example: Krippendorff, 2004; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Neuendorf, 2002). Each identified post or tweet was positioned in a simple quantitative criteria table, under the cluster characteristics of: ‘Positive towards umpires’, ‘Neutral towards umpires’ and ‘Negative towards umpires’. The clustering method for categorising posts or articles was defined by the nature of the content being majority weighting towards one characteristic (positive, neutral or negative). For this review, the methodology was to interpret the entire text, rather than look for associated meaning in single words or phrases – so the overall characteristic for the post, article or tweet determined the cluster characteristic (Gill, 2015). It is the most simplistic approach to character identification, which often results in the best representation of the samples cluster credentials, according Wedel & Kamakura (2000).

A full review of the media content can be found in the article The Reputation of Australian Football League Umpires (Gill, 2015), but examples of categorising include:

Traditional media headline: “Umpires say Brownlow Medal voting isn't broken, so why fix it?” is categorised as “Positive” as the majority of the commentaries refer to the umpires’ astute judgement on providing best-player votes - even though the headline is negative.

The Big Footy blog had a forum on the 4th of August, 2014: “What has happened to the umpiring?”. Negative contributions about the umpires’ performance totalled 20, yet 14 contributions actually factually stated how rule changes were making it difficult for umpires and were therefore categorised as “Neutral”.

Twitter commentary is more simplistic with its limited characters (140). The tweet on August 30, 2014: “it’s the only consistency you see in a match, umpires bad calls” is categorised “Negative” as it is derogative towards umpires even though the tweet talks about consistency.

RESULTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

The below tables demonstrate the clustering results for comments on AFL umpires published in traditional media, the Big Footy Blog and Twitter.

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<th>Table 1. Traditional Media - Newspaper Articles with AFL Umpire Focus</th>
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<td><strong>Month</strong></td>
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Source: Gill, 2015
The raw cluster characteristics for data across all three mediums for the period of June 1 to August 31, 2014 indicate that the contributors (representing the AFL Public and sport media from the major AFL bracketed newspapers) have a combined 58% negative commentary relating to AFL field umpires. That is, 58% of comments made through these mediums over this period reflected poorly on AFL umpires and/or their decision-making.

The analysis can be broken down into individual mediums. In terms of commentary quantity, the predominantly AFL-bracketed Big Footy Blog recorded the highest number of comments at 673. Twitter was next with 40 comments, and newspapers had 38 articles relating to AFL umpires.

Big Footy Blog demonstrated a substantial 65% of negative comments through uploaded posts over this three-month period. Neutral comments accounted for 30%, with only 5% characterised as positive. For the month of August 2014 (the month directly prior to the finals series) 79% of comments were negative, 19% neutral and only 2% positive. Whereas, negative comments for the preceding two months were in the low 60% range.

Twitter commentaries on AFL umpires over this three-month period recorded 47.5% negative, 42.5% neutral and 10% positive. Tweets from the official information site for umpires “Umpire AFL” were not included in this data collection, as they have an obvious bias and are primarily information messages for umpires. For August 2014, tweets were 35% negative, 47% neutral and 18% positive. The preceding two months indicated 50% (July 2014) and 63% (June 2014) as negative tweets.

The newspapers with AFL-dominant sport reporting (The Age, Herald Sun and The Australian) had a substantial 61% of negative commentaries over this three-month period. For August 2014, commentaries were more moderately 48% negative, 38% neutral and only 14% positive. However, even though AFL umpire articles in the preceding two months were minimal at 5 (July 2014) and 4 (June (2014), 100% of these articles were characterised as negative.

Activity on commentaries regarding AFL umpires was diverse across the mediums during this period. For the newspaper data, 76% of commentaries on umpires occurred in the month leading up to the finals series, suggesting that sport reporters and journalists appeared to be more focussed on umpiring and their decisions during this period of the season than for the earlier stages. It should be noted that there was no
obvious indication that overall AFL media stories increased during this month compared with the preceding two months.

Big Footy Blog activity was analytically determined by the lead post and the amount of response that post would generate. Theorists Safco (2010) and Oates (2009) suggest strong post responses on blogs are linked to reader attachment and the emotional connection of fans, so sport blog activity is more linked to the theme of the lead post, as opposed to other stimulus, like the time of the season (Safco, 2010; Oates, 2009). The collected data appears to support this principle, as in June 2014 there were 458 posts, only 398 posts in July 2014 and 177 posts during the season-defining month of August 2014.

Identified Twitter activity directly related to AFL umpiring was 40 tweets. Comparatively, this may seem low against Big Footy Blog, but could be a reflection on the use of Twitter by Australians, as Twitter rates only seventh in activity for social media users in Australia, considerably lower than the three leading social media networks of Facebook, YouTube and blogging – but is Australia’s most popular micro-blog site (Cowling, 2013). Identified activity (excluding the official Umpire AFL media site) was evenly spread with a small increase of 17 tweets in August 2014.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sport branding is determined by multiple inputs, and as discussed in the literature cannot be fully controlled by the organisation. With the advancement of communication networks, particularly digital and mobile communication supporting social media platforms, the publics have access to a vast array of information that helps define the brand. Much of this information is generated by the citizen journalist, or the participants in electronic social networks. Vernuccio (2014) refers to this as open source branding, where stakeholders become co-builders of the brand through the social media ecosystem.

Many elements go to make up the brand for a large sport organisation like the AFL. There are particular brand elements that the AFL highlight, including a promise to the AFL public to provide a spectacle that is fair, rich in social fabric, athletic and exciting (AFL, 2015c; East, 2012). The umpires are the game-day representatives on the field for the AFL Commission. As demonstrated by the literature regarding media commentaries and the negative perceptions in the media, it is unavoidable that the perceived performance of the umpires as adjudicators of the game will influence their reputation. The umpires’ reputation will have a direct effect on the AFL brand – particularly with regards to fairness and governance in the game. Media commentaries on AFL reaches vast numbers of the AFL public, as evidenced by the Blog and Twitter activity, and newspaper readership numbers. Around 1.9 million people purchase the Herald Sun, The Age or The Australian on a daily basis (Roy Morgan Research, 2014).

Traditional sport journalism will influence umpire reputation. Sport media reporters and journalists are professionals, with many having completed formal training and cadetships in this discipline. Also, many writers for the major daily newspapers, the Herald Sun, The Age and The Australian, are award-winning AFL journalists (The Age Real Footy, 2014). The identified data indicates that 61% of their published articles on AFL umpires over the study’s three-month period were negative, with only a total of 11% being categorised as positive. Typically, the professional qualities of such sport journalists hold considerable persuasive power over the AFL public as part of their readership, with comments made on AFL topics and issues by journalists considered to be written by informed specialists (Oates, 2008; L’Etang, 2006).
Typically, sport fans making blog contributions and tweets to open-forum sites are emotionally charged and affected by the outcome of the competition/game when posting commentaries (Oates, 2009; Pegoraro, 2010). It is suggested sport fans who relate passionately with their team and its performance have a greater inclination to commit negative social behaviours due to their team’s poor team performance, including blaming and abusing sporting authority (Keaton et al. 2014; Oates, 2009). It is fair to assume that many sport fans that make contributions to social media and blog forums after their team has suffered a disappointing loss would do so in a mood of discontent. Sport fans can harbour emotions that linger for hours or days after the event as the fans imagine and re-imagine the exhilaration of the contest (Keaton et al. 2014). In AFL, a typical game involves 37 interpretive decisions where the umpire is called upon to make a decision based on their interpretation of the rules (AFL, 2014). Thus, many AFL fans would not always agree with the umpires’ interpretation, especially if a decision has disadvantaged their team. Fans may reflect this in the heat of the moment, or soon after, through negative commentaries towards umpiring posted on social media.

Posts on Big Footy blogs and tweets on Twitter by AFL fans about umpires are more likely to be emotionally influenced by game results, rather than overall spectacle (Keaton et al. 2014). The above results indicate that the vast majority of posts (65%) on Big Footy are negative towards umpires and their decisions. Interestingly, the review of Twitter demonstrates that the majority of tweets analysed were positive (10%) or neutral (42.5%) and the minority of posts were actually interpreted as negative (47.5%). This result is surprising and contrasts with findings and expectations for different sport codes and fan reactions by other researchers (see for example: Oates, 2009; Pegoraro, 2010; Keaton et al. 2014). The average negative commentaries for both blog posts and Twitter tweets was 56.25%. This is in keeping with the literature regarding expectations for emotive influences on the sport fans’ posts and tweets.

Media commentaries will influence the forming of opinions by the AFL public, ultimately shaping their reputation and the absolute brand of the AFL (L’Etang, 2008; Doorley & Garcia, 2011). The overall average for negative comments/commentaries for both social media and newspaper articles was 58.6%. Based on the above results, newspaper articles written by professional reporters and journalists in reputable newspapers have more negative commentaries on AFL umpires at 61% than do comments made by AFL fans through social media at 56.25%. Based on these results, media commentaries are more negative towards umpires and their decision-making than what previous research surveying the AFL public’s opinion on umpires has indicated (see: Gill, 2012 and Saunders, 2003).

Therefore, effective public relations strategies on influencing perceptions through media commentaries play a considerable role in the reputation for a sport code (Stolt et al. 2012). The AFL umpire brand has a poor reputation in the media based on the results of this media analysis.

Limitations to the research

A limitation to the research method is the potential for subjective interpretation when identifying cluster characteristics. Even though the characteristics were kept deliberately simplistic an element of researcher bias may influence some of the cluster allocations, particularly when dealing with social media where context can be hard to detect (Krippendorff, 2004; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Neuendorf, 2002). The subtleties of interpretation around intended viewpoint within the commentary cannot always be exactly determined when using the cluster characteristics to label data, as the allocations rely on literal interpretation. However, this is balanced by the method of identifying terminology majority-weighted to either be positive, negative or neutral.
The sample groups may not be a holistic representation of the AFL public, as the contributors on the reviewed social media sites are possibly skewed towards those who are commonly active on social media. Many contributors may also have a passion to engage in the conversations around umpiring that involves their supported team. It should also be noted that many of the contributors to these social media sites were repeat contributors on these topics, and on other themes around AFL football, and their personal biases may skew results.

The length of time for the study is quite contained, and is deliberately drawn from a period in the AFL season when emotions run high as much is at stake for AFL teams and their supporters. It can be argued that emotive reactions may not be as strong outside of this intense football period (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Krippendorff, 2004; Wallace, 2011). A more longitudinal analysis of the media may reveal a less emotional attitude towards umpires and their decision-making, particularly during the off-season when imbedded interest is less (Pegoraro, 2010; Oates, 2009).

Finally, surveying of the AFL public regarding their opinion on AFL umpires may have changed since the last referenced research around five years ago. New data on the umpires’ reputation with the AFL public may give a more accurate comparison between public opinion and media commentary regarding umpires.

Opportunities for further research also include a more comprehensive and longitudinal study of media covering all the season and out-of-season periods to see if there are connections between umpire reputation and playing/non-playing periods. Also, a longitudinal study could highlight if there are differences in particular seasons regarding the perceived performance of umpires.

**Final recommendations**

The research data highlights substantial amounts of negative commentaries regarding AFL umpires being generated from traditional and social media. The AFL needs to consider if they can do more to constructively influence the media commentaries around umpires in order to improve umpire reputation within the media and build a more positive AFL brand, especially considering the perceptions of the AFL public. The AFL Media Centre has considerable resources, including highly respected journalists and a broad team of online content builders and social media managers. By utilising these resources more effectively the AFL can generate more positive content regarding umpires and their ability to fairly adjudicate football games – and ultimately add further value to the AFL brand.
REFERENCES


### Appendix One

**Table 1. Summary of results: Umpires’ Reputation Survey (Gill, 2012)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Quantitative Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Respondents’ gender: 289 male, 29 female respondents, 1 no answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Respondents’ ages in years: 170 over 35, 120 between 20-35, 20 between 15-19, and 7 under 15 years, 2 no answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Football background for respondents: 2 AFL, 62 semi-professional, 107 social/amateur, 90 as under-age players only, 57 never played, 1 no answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Performance at AFL level: 12 at 5/5, 108 at 4/5, 101 at 3/5, 61 at 2/5, 1/5, 3 no answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Opinion on what most think of AFL umpires: 6 great, 87 good, 148 average, 73 poor, 5 no answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Umpire performance in other leagues: 15 excellent, 78 very good, 126 good, 38 average, 14 poor, 44 not applicable, 4 no answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Difficulty in predicting an umpires’ decision: 15 never, 233 sometimes, 57 most of the time, 12 all of the time, 2 no answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Too many rules in Australian Rules Football: 150 yes, 143 no, 23 unsure, 3 no answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Each umpire interprets the rules the same: 55 yes, 242 no, 20 unsure, 2 no answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Number of times AFL umpires make clear mistakes: 67 less than 3, between 4-6 123, between 6-9 66, 10 or more 60, 3 no answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>More or less AFL umpires in charge: 31 more, 65 less, 191 3 field umpires is the right number, 25 unsure, 7 not answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Video review for difficult decisions: 98 yes, 216 no, 5 not answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Umpires needed from high-level playing backgrounds: 111 yes, 17 no, 188 not a necessity, 3 no answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Further comments: 156 (see breakdown below)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Gill, 2015*