

Does Brand Matter for AFL Umpires?

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Abstract

The Australian Football League (AFL) is the biggest sporting business in Australia and has the largest viewing audience per capita of any sport in the world. AFL umpires are a very visible presence on match day, and therefore contribute to the AFL brand. The AFL Corporation needs to pay attention to the contribution AFL Umpires make to the AFL Brand.

This paper investigates through a survey how the football public perceives AFL umpires in order to see whether they may have an effect the AFL's brand. An online survey was distributed to the general AFL football public. The survey was quantitative-based, but included an opportunity for participants to add further comment.

Results have indicated that the football public has an overall positive opinion of AFL umpires.

Key Words: Public Perceptions, Brand, Reputation, AFL Umpires

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper defines the brand for Australian Football League (AFL) umpires and aims to establish the reputation AFL field umpires have as a collective group within the football public. The football public includes players, administrators and spectators. The paper investigates determinants on why the particular reputation exists. The paper also examines why the umpires' reputation is so important to the AFL brand. To the author's knowledge, an objective and open survey on the football public's perceptions on umpiring performance has not been completed.

The AFL corporation by its own admission has a perceived reputation problem with its umpires, especially regarding recruitment and retention of umpires in semi-professional, amateur and country football leagues (Wilson, 2010). It is significantly chronicled that officials of professional and amateur sports are often maligned and held in poor regard by their publics (see for example: Kellet and Shilbury, 2007; Craven, 1998; Caldwell, Bischoff, and Karri, 2002; Catteeuw, Helsen, Gilis, and Wagemans, 2009; Bernache-Assollant, Bouchet,, Auvergne and Lacassagne, 2011). This was evident through a google search conducted by the author on traditional newspaper media for AFL (Herald Sun and The Age) where 40% of articles between June 2009 –

June 2010 relating to umpires were categorised as being negative towards the umpires' reputation (Google Search, 2010).

Therefore, it was supposed by the author that the general reputation for AFL umpires was deemed to be negative amongst the football public, and was harming the AFL's brand and umpire recruitment.

Background on AFL

'Australian Rules' football is a game peculiar to Australia and was recognised as a unique sport with its own rules in 1858 (AFL, 2010a). It is the most popular spectator sport in terms of attendance and television viewing in Australia and generates the highest annual revenue for any sport within Australia (Superbrands, 2011). The AFL corporation is the governing body for 'Australian Rules' football. The AFL is a corporation, as it is a united body working towards a business enterprise, as defined by The Macquarie Dictionary (1991).

The AFL brand, by virtue of being the largest supported sport within Australia, holds significant importance from a financial, social and ethical perspective. At the time of writing, the AFL CEO was paid five times as much as the Australian Prime Minister (Hawthorne, 2011). AFL games in 2010 had an attendance of nearly seven million and combined club membership of more than 600,000 members (Munro, 2010). The viewing of television broadcasts for the games exceeds 14.6 million viewers for each of the 16 clubs (Hawthorne, 2011). The AFL generates immense interest and wealth with annual revenue of more than \$215 million, a broadcast deal worth in excess of \$1.25 billion over five years and more than 300,000 media stories per year (Hawthorne, 2011; convictcreations, 2010). Football related spending in the state of Victoria alone is \$1.64 billion, with most of this being generated through gambling (Munro, 2010). The AFL also significantly influences social and ethical issues for Australian society through its support for community and regional football development, and its very public policies on equality and racism (Munro, 2010). It is calculated that the AFL creates on average of around \$3 million in brand exposure for each sponsor and partner (Hawthorne, 2011).

Therefore, it is fair to say the AFL is 'big business'.

Reputation

The AFL has created a strong brand as an asset that it wishes to protect. The football public's perceived reputation for the AFL brand has an influence on that asset. The Macquarie Dictionary (1991) defines reputation as the estimation in which a person or thing is held by the community or the public generally. More specifically, organisational (corporate) reputation refers to the esteem in which the organisation is held by its public and stakeholders (Beder, 2002; L'Etang, 2008). The management of an organisation's reputation can significantly contribute to the success of an organisation, so delivering on the AFL brand has considerable implications, in terms of social and financial support. (Frederick and Patil, 2010; Harrison, 2007, L'Etang, 2008). Scott and Walsham (2005) look at the gap between what an organisation promises (brand) and what it delivers (reputation). The risk to reputation for the AFL brand is

when a significant gap is perceived by the supporting public, which may lead to financial implications for the brand asset (Frederick and Patil, 2010).

Stakeholders in the AFL (collectively known as the football public) include corporate staff, players, team administration, spectators and game administration (AFL, 2010b). The AFL brand is what the stakeholders are expecting to be delivered. The perceptions that are shaped over time by stakeholders' experiences, along with the media, culminate in the public cumulative judgment of the organisation that defines the organisation's delivery on its promises - its reputation (Beder, 2002; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; L'Etang, 2008). Umpires, as a representation of the AFL administration, contribute to the AFL's brand. Beder (2002) argues that effective brand management has a sound correlation with strong reputation. The regard in which umpires are held can contribute considerably to the AFL's overall reputation.

The AFL appears to take the position that the general reputation of umpires is not as positive as it desires in order to protect the AFL brand (Kellet and Shilbury, 2007; Wilson, 2010). The AFL has stated on their website and through media releases that 20-25 per cent of umpires are giving up umpiring every year, due mainly to poor match day environments as a result of abuse and disrespect (AFL Community Club, 2011; Burgen, 2010). Participation numbers for AFL players is on the rise and it is forecast that the gap between umpire supply and demand could exceed 20,000 by 2013 (Lane, 2010). The AFL has implemented a number of promotional strategies and policies to influence the football public's opinion, and are working hard on improving the perception of umpires with initiatives such as: appreciation for umpires, fast-tracking ex-AFL players to elite umpiring status, and limiting negative comments about umpiring by AFL clubs to the media.

The Umpires' Role in the Game

An important element of AFL is the game-day officiating, which is predominantly adjudicated by the central, or field, umpires. Umpires play an important role in ensuring the rules of the game are upheld to create a positive match-day environment (AFL Community Club, 2011). Therefore, the umpires form an integral part of the corporate brand that is the AFL. This also has implications for the financial success of the sport. Many AFL fans are exposed to the umpire performances on a weekly basis; as spectators or through traditional and social media. As the umpires are the game-day representation of the AFL administration, the football public's perception on umpire performance will contribute to the AFL's overall reputation. The risk to the AFL's reputation is that the public perceives umpires are not performing to a suitable level. It is critical to maintaining the AFL brand and improving umpire recruitment that umpires sustain a positive reputation. It is in the interests of the AFL to ensure that umpires are held in high regard by the football public.

Perceived Issues with Umpiring

There are a number of potential issues that may influence the way umpires are perceived that have been identified by the author through: his experience as an umpire and player in a semi-professional AFL competitions; general conversations with members of the football public; and, observations of the game. These include: the number of rules; personal interpretation by

individual umpires; the number of umpires; personal interpretation by spectators; the use of technology; and, the lack of high-level playing experience for AFL umpires.

The official 'Laws of Australian Football' booklet is around 90 pages long (AFL, 2009). A game in the AFL league is adjudicated by three field umpires, who interpret these rules and make decisions in the area of the field for which they are the controlling umpire (AFL, 2009). Because the game is reliant on adjudication, many in-play decisions relating to the rules are the sole responsibility of the field umpire in control at the time. Other field umpires can make decisions regarding open play, or can consult with the controlling umpire regarding their interpretation on infringements they have seen (AFL, 2009). However, the controlling umpire makes decisions based on the laws and rules spread over 90 pages of text; a text that is updated every year. The dichotomy umpires face with these interpretations of the rules is the umpires own understanding against the interpretations of passionate supporters.

Each umpire has their own intrapersonal communication that affects the way they decode the play in relation to the rules of the game (Mohan, McGregor, Saunders and Archee, 2008). This is the inner-debate that umpires go through during the split-second decision-making process for an occurrence in the game. The umpire's construction of reality at that particular moment, which is influenced by their knowledge, social, cultural and emotional experiences, has an impact on their interpretation for each occurrence in the game (Searle, 1995). Constructions of reality are obviously peculiar to each individual umpire. This can lead to subtle differences in the interpretation of the rules by the three umpires, leading to the perception by spectators and viewers of inconsistent decision-making.

This is compounded by the fact that each of the individuals who attend AFL league game (on average 36,000 each game) has their own intrapersonal communication debate going on, and each individual is influenced by their own construction of reality on the decisions made by the umpires at that game (convictcreations, 2009, Searle, 1995). Most spectators support a particular team involved in the game, which likely results in an emotionally-charged bias towards their supported team (Stewart, Smith and Nicholson, 2003). On any given decision that is reliant on the interpretation of the umpire, there is most likely going to be at least two opposing desires on the outcome for that decision.

All these variances in interpretation can have a profound impact on the way AFL umpires are perceived to have performed in their role of applying the rules of AFL to the game. The umpires' reputation is inherently hedged to the AFL public's perception of their decision-making competence.

The media are also a major contributor to the public reputation of AFL umpires. The traditional media play a significant role in defining what is topical, especially in sport (Harrison, 2007). Areas relating to umpiring that are highlighted and discussed by the media provide the information for which the AFL public base their own opinions on. The influence traditional media has on the public's opinion relating to topical issues is well documented by L'Etang (2008).

Although the media can have a propensity to highlight those issues that are sensational, AFL umpiring is yet to embrace technology at the elite level of the game that may eliminate many of the contentious decisions that the media focus on. At the time of writing this paper the AFL had announced the trial use of goal-line technology to help analyse decisions regarding scoring shots. No indication has been given to the notion of using video-technology to aid field umpire decision-making. The use of technology in elite sport has successfully been adopted by many professional sports including tennis, American football, cricket and rugby league (Gardner, James, O'Leary and Welch, 2006).

2. HYPOTHESIS

The AFL umpires' reputation with its public, as adjudicators of football games, is effectively diminished due to the gap between expectation and perception, as a result of one or a combination of the following criteria:

- The rules are open to different interpretations between field umpires
- Too many rules in the game for umpires to remember
- Three umpires on the field in charge of the game is too many
- Lack of technology to aid decisions
- Too many AFL umpires who don't come from a high-level playing background

These criteria are a result of perceived issues the author has identified over discussions, experience as an umpire and player in a semi-professional AFL competitions, general conversations with members of the football public, and observations of the game.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted through an anonymous online survey specifically designed to gather information from the AFL public regarding their perceptions of umpiring and the rules (see Appendix One).

The online survey was made available through a web-link and was distributed amongst the AFL public via email requests, posting on club websites and supporters' social media sites. The survey went live on June 17, 2010, and was actively publicised and directly promoted up to October 2, 2010. The survey was eventually closed on September 16, 2011.

The aim was to have more than 500 responses to the survey from a range of AFL enthusiasts with a mixture of playing, age, gender and social backgrounds.

The 14-question survey (see Appendix One) includes three demographic questions, one open-ended comment section, and 10 Likert scale questions relating to the performance of the umpires and the current structure of adjudicating a game of AFL football. The questions were designed to provide quantitative data relating to the above hypothesis. The open-ended question provided an opportunity to record any qualitative feedback from respondents.

Due to the high number of respondents adding further comment to section 14 of the survey, which was not an intended component for the hypothesis, an analysis based on Grounded Theory was conducted on these comments. Following the ‘Glaserian Strategy’ of coding responses and grouping, a new table of data was created by categorising written responses (see Table Two) that has contributed further, and significant, insight from the survey (Glaser, 1998).

4. LIMITATIONS TO THE RESEARCH

The survey relied heavily on social media for distribution. Due to the nature of social media interaction and the genre of the text, a formal statement of intent (as a condition of ethics clearance) that must preface the actual survey may have been a deterrent to those people who use social media sites (Mohan, *et al.* 2008, L’Etang, 2008). Social media sites specific to AFL football, like forums and blogs such as: bigfooty.com, realfooty.com.au, often target particular aspects of the game and specific incidents that have occurred around that time. The idea of a general survey often did not suit the theme of the blogs and may have been perceived as less appropriate to the readership of that site (Harrison and Hirst, 2006; L’Etang, 2008). Therefore, the overall response number of 319 was lower than originally anticipated.

The survey did not offer incentives or prizes as a means to encourage greater participation. Given that a social media audience has many other similar survey opportunities that do provide incentives, this survey’s participants needed a real passion for football and/or felt the need to contribute to the knowledge surrounding AFL umpires and their performances. This may also have an effect on the demographic imbalance of the respondents (Harrison and Hirst, 2006).

5. SURVEY RESULTS (See Appendix One)

Insert Table A1: Summary of Survey Responses

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

* Likert Scale where 5 = excellent to 1 = poor

Table A2: Summary of grouped 'Further Comments'

Grouping	Total
Umpiring needs to be more consistent	53
Disagreement with rule changes made by the AFL	44
Umpires need to become full-time professionals	16
Generally positive comment about umpires and their efficiency	14
Negative comments regarding particular personalities in the umpire ranks	12
Only award obvious free kicks, not technical interpretation	7
Ex-players should make up the umpiring ranks	5
Technology should help with decision making	3
The game needs more umpires	2

6. ANALYSIS

The results indicate that AFL umpires are perceived by the football public to do a good to very good job with 66% of respondents replying in the 3/5 - 4/5 range. Below average performance was indicated by 19 per cent and 11 per cent thought the umpires did a poor job. Only four per cent considered the umpires to be excellent. These results slightly contradict how the respondents perceived others would rate umpire performance, with a strong majority (77 per cent) indicating an average, good or great job. Only 23 per cent considered others would view umpires as doing an unsatisfactory job of officiating games. This appears to indicate that many people would consider they judge umpires more harshly than how others would judge umpires (Mohr and Larsen, 1998). When considering the responses regarding umpiring in lesser leagues to AFL, only 15 per cent rate umpires below acceptable standards. This could mean respondents consider the standard of umpiring is better in lower leagues, which contradicts past studies by Sifkus (2005), or their expectations of umpires are less in these leagues.

From these results it can be generalised that the vast majority of the respondents considered the umpiring at AFL level and lower leagues to be acceptable or better. This result surprises the author, as a driving factor to conduct the survey was his perception that umpires are generally held in poor regard by the majority of the football public – based on observations, personal conversations and contributions to AFL social media sites. It is typical for such surveys to attract responses from more passionate people, who often express their more extreme views in either a positive or negative persuasion, so the moderate results of this survey are even more surprising (Hakim, 1987).

An overwhelming majority (95 per cent) responded that they find it difficult to predict what a decision will be sometimes, mostly or all the time when the umpire blows the whistle to stop play. Only five per cent indicated they always can predict what the decision will be. This may reflect confusion regarding interpretation of the rules by the spectators, or confusion by the umpires in the way they interpret the rules, or both, as indicated by Mohr and Larsen (1998) in a previous study involving AFL umpires.

Almost half (47 per cent) stated they don't believe there are too many rules in AFL, where 45 per cent believed that there were, and seven per cent were unsure. The author's personal view, upon reflection of his own umpiring experiences in a semi-professional league, is that the basic rules are simple enough to remember, but the constant technical applications of the rules laid down by the governing body for umpiring can lead to confusion relating to interpretation. It is widely acknowledged that the finer technical breakdown of each rule is designed to eliminate differences in interpretation, but it is the author's and many of the survey's respondents' beliefs that inconsistency in game decisions results from the abundance of bi-laws associated with the basic rules (AFL, 2009).

More than 70 per cent believe that each field umpire can interpret the rules differently to the other umpires, with only 27 per cent believing this doesn't happen. This reflects the theories regarding differences for intrapersonal communication that exists between all umpires and the resultant effect this has on their constructs of reality during interpretation of an incident within the rules of the game (Mohan *et al.*, 2008; Searle, 1995). The author can relate personally to this experience of sharing field umpiring in a semi-professional league, recalling many occasions where the partner umpire has made an interpretation for a situation quite different to the author's.

Of the respondents, 39 per cent of respondents believed 4-6 mistakes are made per game and 21 per cent stating mistakes happen less than three times a game. The efficiency of AFL umpires is primarily judged by the public and the Umpire Board (governing body for AFL Umpires) based on the game decisions. The AFL Umpire Director claimed 85.9 per cent of these decisions are deemed to be correct (Warner, 2010). A typical game involves 37 interpretive decisions, meaning the umpires are considered to make five mistakes a game on average, which reflects comparatively with the perceptions of the survey respondents (AFL, 2010b).

Having three field umpires per game is judged by survey respondents to be the right number to adjudicate an AFL game, with 60 per cent agreeing with current field umpire numbers. Only 10 per cent believed the game needed more umpires, and 21 per cent indicating it needed less. From the author's experience, he considers there have been times when an extra set of umpire-eyes would help improve the decision-making process in his league, which operates on two field umpires. In these circumstances, it is believed the angle of sight from a third umpire can aid in ensuring a more correct interpretation is made.

An overwhelming 73 per cent responded that video technology should not be introduced into AFL games. This is a surprising result, considering the high-stakes of a professional game and implications that incorrect decisions might have on team success and gambling payouts (Munro, 2010). The innovative technology used to broadcast games is already employed to analyse numerous decisions in the game by broadcasters. Many high-level and professional sports currently use visual technology to aid decision-making and officiating (Gardner *et al.*, 2006).

The use of umpires from a high-level playing background is not a strong priority for 60 per cent of the respondents, with five per cent stating umpires shouldn't come from high-level playing backgrounds and 35 per cent stating they should. The author's umpiring experience revealed a pool of umpires for the league to have come from an experienced semi-professional and non-experienced playing background, No noticeable correlations between the umpire backgrounds and particular interpretations was observed.

An unexpected result is that almost 50 per cent of respondents contributed details in the optional 'further comments' section of the survey. Many of these comments were longer than the standard one-sentence comment, with 11 comments being multiple paragraphs and 78 being multiple sentences (Hakim, 1987; Glaser, 1998). Around 10 per cent of these comments reflected positively on the umpires, whereas 90 per cent of the comments were detrimental to the reputation of AFL umpires. This starkly contrasts with the overall positive results for umpiring from the quantitative questions in the survey, but does correlate with the initial supposition that the football public generally have a poor regard for the reputation of umpiring in the AFL, which was a trigger to conduct this research.

Of the 156 comments made through question 14, 107 directly related to the application of, and the number rules for, the game. Only 33 comments related to the umpires and their individual abilities. This suggests that the AFL public's dissatisfaction with officiating is linked more to the rules rather than those who are employed to uphold the rules. Regardless of the intended meaning of these comments, the fact that these respondents made the extra effort to contribute broader analysis to the research beyond quantitative responses through further comments indicates their strong passion for the role of umpires in AFL (Hakim, 1987).

7. CONCLUSION

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents (70 per cent) rated AFL field umpires as doing a good to excellent job at adjudicating football games. Thus, the criteria for the hypothesis, with the exception of rules being open to interpretation, have returned results in this survey disproving the hypothesis that the AFL umpires' reputation with its public as adjudicators of football games is effectively diminished. Even considering many of the media reports from the daily Victorian newspapers relating directly to umpiring focus on negative aspects, this does not seem to have had a significantly adverse affect on the AFL public's perception on the performance of umpires. Therefore, it can be said that the field umpires' reputation is held in 'healthy' regard with the AFL public.

However, what is evident from the survey results is that 70 per cent of the AFL public believes the field umpires often have different interpretations of the same rule that produces inconsistencies in decision-making. An overwhelmingly 95 per cent indicated they sometimes, often or always found it difficult to predict what the umpires' interpretations would be. Different interpretation by individual umpires is in keeping with the theories behind intrapersonal communication and construction of reality. The author's own umpiring experience reflects this belief, as a decision is often applauded by part of the crowd and disputed by another part. This is compounded by the fact the AFL has many rules and laws that are open to interpretation by one of the three adjudicating umpires at an AFL league game (AFL, 2009). This suggests the AFL need to address internal understanding for, and consistent application of, the rules across all leagues – as decisions made on these rules ultimately reflect back on umpires.

The fact that so many respondents (around 50 per cent) contributed to the optional comments section demonstrates that many of the survey participants have a strong desire to express their opinion on the performance of the umpires and rules for the game. Therefore, umpiring does play a considerable role in the AFL experience for many supporters, players and administrators, and ultimately has an influence on the AFL's reputation. This has significant implications for the ongoing management of relationships between the AFL and its public regarding the role and performance of umpires.

This research can be strengthened by increasing the sample of respondents through gaining the AFL Corporation's approval for distribution of the survey through their networks to the AFL public. The current sample is dominated by males (91 per cent) and respondents over 35 years old (54 per cent) and may not be an entirely accurate reflection of greater AFL public, but more directly reflect the views of those who are concerned enough to complete a survey on AFL umpires. A broader sample may address this current imbalance. An ideal sample group of 1,000 plus responses would provide stronger data for analysis (Hakim, 1987).

In conclusion, the AFL umpires' reputation has been shown to be of an acceptable standard by its football public. Based on the results of the survey, there appears to be no significant risk to the AFL's corporate brand as a result of the umpires' reputation currently perceived by the football public in relation to the umpires' ability to effectively adjudicate games of Australian Rules Football. What hasn't been answered from this survey and requires further investigation is why the numbers of umpires in lower-level football competitions is dwindling, as it has been well-documented that public and media abuse of umpires has affected recruitment and retention of umpires even though this survey's results demonstrate umpire reputation to be strong among the AFL public (Kellet and Shilbury, 2007; Wilson, 2010).

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