ASIA
PACIFIC
APPRJ PUBLIC
RELATIONS
JOURNAL

The Australian Football League's social agenda

Robert Gill, Swinburne University of Technology

Abstract

National sport codes are in the position of being leaders for upholding and promoting social responsibility values, due to their engagement with the public and media commentary. Sport is ideally placed to be lead awareness for social issues, particularly around equality and inclusion. In Australia, the biggest national sport code is the Australian Football League (AFL) governed by its Commission. The AFL Commission is very aware of its ability to lead social discussion and drive policy around many community issues and challenges.

The code at its professional level has evolved from a localism culture to a 'commodified sport', characterised by high-level business objectives, technology and sport elitism. The code has a strong emphasis on brand and reputation resulting in advanced professionalism and commercialisation. The Commission endeavours to protect its brand, and appears well aware of the importance of 'social responsibility positioning' in order to manage and enhance its brand. This paper looks at the social agenda the AFL promotes and analyses its positions against Organisational – Public Relationship theory to understand if the AFL motive is for commercial branding or is for contributing to the greater good in the communities it AFL operates in.

This case study reviews the social agendas the AFL promotes through its media and community presence. The case study approach of comparing the analysed media and policy output from the AFL against contemporary academic literature on social responsibility will aid sports organisations in developing their strategic communication.

Keywords: sport, social responsibility, AFL, community engagement, strategic communication

Introduction

The professional sport industry has become increasingly aware of its influence on the communities in which it operates, and uses this influence to support positions within the social responsibility agenda. According to a study (Walker & Kent, 2009) social responsibility has also become increasingly prevalent within the sport industry. But much of the social responsibility agendas reviewed previously relate to major sport organisations, associations and professional clubs and the corporate social responsibility (CSR) of these entities in terms of their influence on the social, financial and environmental settings they operate within (see for example: Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Brietbarth & Harriss, 2008; Genzale, 2006; Walker & Kent, 2009). This paper analyses as a case study the Australian Football League (AFL) and its positioning as a socially responsible leader in promoting social agendas relevant to the communities it operates within.

Socially responsible behaviour may include various activities ranging from supporting nonprofits, employee well-being, to environment and human rights issues (Mohr, Webb & Harris, 2001). Professional sport organisations are corporations in essence, because they are defined as a company or group of people authorised to act as a single entity and recognized as such in law and through governance (Brown, 2015). For corporations, CSR has emerged as a significant theme underpinning moral, financial, and ethical judgments of corporate activity (Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006; Windsor, 2006). Sports corporations' and professional teams' CSR activities have typically related to: athlete volunteerism, educational initiatives, philanthropic/charitable donations, community development, community initiatives, fan appreciation, health related initiatives, and community-based environmental programs (Walker & Kent, 2009). The AFL appears to position itself as the agenda-setter for public promotion regarding many social issues relating to equality and inclusion, and less around philanthropy.

This paper will explore social issues the AFL promotes through its policies and media statements, in order to analyse if the sport code's objectives are typically focussed on CSR operations or possible commercial gain. The paper asks: Does the AFL have a conscience on social responsibility, or is it looking to improve its commercial position through social positioning?

Defining the AFL

Australian Rules football is a football code peculiar to Australia and is commonly referred to as AFL. The game was recognised as a unique sport with its own rules in 1858, but has elements evolved from a combination of many contact sports, particularly rugby and Gaelic football, with some saying the indigenous game of Mangarook also influencing its development (AFL, 2014b; East 2012). The Australian Football League (AFL) Commission governs the vast majority of Australian Rules competitions across the nation (East, 2012). The AFL commission is professionally identified as a non-profit corporation, does not have shareholders, but is a stakeholder corporation with a vast number of Australians as fans and spectators (Carol & Buchholtz, 2014). The AFL commission operates at a non-profit level with a board of governance, but also has professional operations managed by a CEO and professional administrators – similar to the professional league's club structures (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2015). It is the most popular Australian spectator sport in terms of attendance and television viewing, generates the highest annual revenue of any sport within Australia, and it has the greatest market-share of any sport in Australia (IbisWorld, 2014).

The code at its ultimate level has evolved from a localism culture to a 'commodified sport', characterised by elite professionalism and focus on generating revenue

(East, 2012). The commodification of sport is a term used to explain how sport transforms into a product that has a prominence on league administration and commercialisation. The advanced professionalism of AFL has resulted in the commercialisation of the code with a stronger emphasis on brand and reputation (East, 2012). The AFL brand generates huge revenue through games attendance, television and broadcast rights, and merchandising (IbisWorld, 2014). The AFL brand is in competition with many other sport, leisure and entertainment activities for market share (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2015). Therefore, the AFL Commission endeavours to protect and enhance its brand and tries to control all aspects of brand-management, which may include its public stance on social responsibility (L'Etang, 2013; Scott & Walsham, 2005).

AFL Brand Management

Sporting brand is an important asset in terms of an organisation's ability to generate revenue, viewing figures and memberships (Heathcote, 2013). The AFL has a very strong brand to protect, as evidenced through its financial success and spectator numbers (IbisWorld, 2014). There are currently 14 AFL clubs in the top 20 sport brands in Australia, and the AFL has the only local sporting club with an AAA credit rating (Heathcote, 2013). The AFL, like many large organisations and corporations, is aware of how its public engagement through media activity can influence public opinion and shape brand (Doorley & Garcia, 2011).

As the AFL holds a substantial share in the sport entertainment market in Australia, protecting the brand and the public's opinion of the brand (reputation) are important considerations (Beder, 2002). As an indication of the importance of positive publicity regarding brand, in 2012 the AFL expanded its own media agency, the AFL Media Centre, and began to report on every aspect of its operation, good and bad. The media agency has around 105 staff, including: reporters, sub-editors, video journalists, social media managers, photographers, designers and product staff. The media team provides significant content and influences agenda-setting for media conversations around the AFL (Happell, 2013).

Further strategies to manage the AFL brand included the 2013 release of its social media engagement policy for all AFL employees (including players and club administrators) acknowledging that social media has increasing prevalence in both the professional and private lives of its staff, players, administrators and fans (AFL Policies, 2015). The AFL Commission recognises the value in using social media to build more meaningful relationships with fans, communities and other relevant stakeholders, and how using these platforms can be a powerful tool in influencing perceptions on social agendas. The AFL acknowledges the risk associated with its members using social media outside of its policy guidelines, and sets out conditions for the appropriate use of social media in an official capacity by its members.

A study by 'Corporate Reputation Watch' identified media criticism as the biggest external threat to an organisation's reputation (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). A The AFL Media Centre has built an online research panel that is representative of its fan-base (Marketing, 2013). This enables the AFL to generate media content that can be used to influence topical conversation in traditional and social media so as to positively reflect its desired brand and enhance corporate reputation (Doorley & Garcia, 2011; L'Etang, 2008; Harrison, 2011). An emergent area for topical conversations around sport is social responsibility and the position sport organisations embrace on social issues (Spaaij, Farquarson and Marjoribanks, 2015).

Organisational – Public Relationship theory and AFL

Professional sport organisations use relationships with their stakeholders (typically: fans, spectators, sponsors and participants) to further their organisational objectives (L'Etang, 2013). Organisation – Public Relations (OPR) theory was first raised by Mary Ann Ferguson (1984) as an advancement on the relationship management discourse common to emerging public relations theory at that time. Ferguson identified three foci to guide organisation-public relations analysis: social responsibility and ethics; social issues and issue management; and public relationships - evolving the philosophy that the central importance for professional relationships is between an organisation and its key publics (Ferguson, 1984). An organisation like the AFL Commission has many dimensions to its stakeholder demographics, including involvement with the code in order to achieve gratification as a spectacle, promotional success, entertainment and sport satisfaction. As a national sport code competing for market-share, the AFL Commission is always investigating competitive edge that strengthens its connections to sport fans and spectators (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick and Funk, 2009).

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) refined organisation–public relationships to represent patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organisation and its publics at any given time even though such representation is often dynamic. Applying this to the AFL, there are many considerations with its stakeholder groups. Each diverse stakeholder group has a dynamic relationship with AFL that is in constant change. Take for example a game-day scenario, where a controversial and last-minute umpiring decision has a significant influence on the game result. A sport fan has enjoyed a riveting spectacle but is deeply aggrieved by the official's last-minute decision to award a free kick that results in the fan's team losing. A code sponsor is happy with the extended exposure the sponsor's brand gets as the umpiring decision is the focus of much traditional and social media coverage. The individual player who is the recipient of the free-kick that results in his team winning the game is euphoric with the game outcome and his subsequent positive publicity. Three very different stakeholder responses to the very same incident, but also a relationship environment that is short-lived and likely to change with the next game!

Therefore, the AFL looks to promote areas for relationship management issues that it can have a measure of control over, such as social issues. Bruning and Ledingham (1998) used statistical analysis to identify OPR dimensions that could be categorised into three distinct types: personal, professional, and community. They further found that these OPR types could be used to predict probable public choice and behaviour (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998). In what appears to be a deliberate strategy to shape and control public opinion over the AFL's brand, the AFL have adopted strong promotional positions on social issues such as equality and inclusion. According to Spaaij et al. (2015), sport can make a valuable contribution to the public understanding of social structure, social inequalities and social change through its social power. With the AFL being the leading sport code on the national landscape, and considering it social power to reach and influence many stakeholders and the general public through media, it is ideally placed to shape conversations around Australian social issues.

Social Responsibility and Positioning

As Walker and Kent (2009) highlighted, sport organisations are aligning their brands with social issues in order to outwardly indicate social responsibility. Spaajj et al. (2015) also highlighted the drive by sport organisations to be a social power for addressing inequalities and driving community change. Positioning a sport brand to be corporately and socially responsible acknowledges the substantial impact a national sport code can have on its society and how this may be leveraged by the organisation for reputational benefit (L'Etang, 2013; Walker & Parent, 2010). In essence, sport organisations need to address

social concerns and can adopt a social position that will endear them to their key stakeholders and heighten that sport group's CSR standing in their community. But, as Du, Bhattacharya & Sen (2007) state that by putting the moral imperatives aside, this increasing commitment to CSR is often spurred in part by the growing sense that sport consumers reward good CSR through greater and more sustained patronage.

The AFL is in constant competition for the 'consumer dollar' with other national sporting codes in Australia, not the least with rugby league, union and soccer, and is seeking any competitive advantage to maximise its leadership in the Australian sport landscape (Gill, 2015). Sport clubs and associations no longer just compete amongst themselves but with a wide range of other entertainment and leisure organisations (Marjoribanks & Farquarson, 2015). Although Spaajj et al. (2015) found that sport generally reinforces societies hierarchy and social stratification, the AFL according to Gill (2015) seeks to position itself socially as a champion for inclusion and equality. Such social issues are well represented in AFL programs and policies and are given considerable attention in annual reports, which can be freely viewed on public web-page under AFL Annual Report Archive. The AFL also has a dedicated site on "Respect and Responsibility", that details all the social policies and values the AFL promotes.

As stated the AFL has a very strong brand to protect, and positioning the brand for competitive context through CSR dimensions is not uncommon for large organisation and corporations (Doorley & Garcia, 2011). CSR positioning humanises a company or brand, encouraging consumers to not just like, respect or admire the company but actually identify with it (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Springer (2006) states that CSR positioning contributes extraordinarily to an organisation's success and creates consumers who act as ambassadors for the brand. The AFL, considering its significant ability to publicise its values, is well resourced to maximise its advantage from social responsibility positioning on issues that resonate with its communities (Gill, 2015).

The following section of this paper reviews the social issues the AFL has a clear voice on and how its promotes its social position on such issues. Finally, the issues and their AFL promotion are analysed to identify where their promotion sits regarding OPR theory and the intended outcomes for such promotion.

AFL policies on social issues

The AFL has 22 publicly released policies on its website (Australian Football League, 2016). The AFL states in its Respect and Responsibility (2005) policy that "As an organisation with a strong emphasis on community and social responsibility, the AFL wants to work with government and other groups to contribute to this broader social policy agenda in all States and Territories". This statement clearly indicates that the AFL positions itself as an organisation that can positively influence the social agendas and issues for the broader communities it operates in, rather than just for the stakeholders in the AFL.

The AFL policies listed on its Policy Centre can be categorised under: organisational administration (AFL & AFL Club Privacy Policy; AFL Regulations; AFL Rules), legal (Anti-Doping Code; AFL Prohibited Providers List; AFL Prohibited Treatment List; AFL Controlled Treatment List; Collective Bargaining Agreement; Gambling Policy), player protection (Complaint & Investigation Guidelines; Disciplinary Tribunal Guidelines; Extreme Weather Policy; Match Tribunal Guidelines; Member Protection Policy; Player Transfer Regulations & Attachments), and social responsibility (Child Protection Policy; Coaches Code of Conduct; Mental Health Policy; Respect & Responsibility Policy; Sexuality & Pregnancy Guidelines; Social Media Engagement Policy; Vilification). The AFL

has branded two particular identified policies as Respect and Responsibility (R&R) – these policies are Mental Health and Vilification.

There are characteristics in a policy that are common to more than one category, for example the Anti-Doping Code has legal constraints regarding the AFL's commitment to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), but also is a policy that, arguably, protects player health and sets a social example for acceptable sport-science behaviour. However, categorising has been based on the primary function of the policy, as stated in the policy background and framework. The AFL policies we will analyse relate to social responsibility and are primarily written to position the AFL and engage with the public on particular social issues – as stated in the policy. These policies are defined below.

The Child Protection Policy refers to the treatment of children in sport, which under Australian law refers to people under the age of 18 (Thorpe, Buti, Davies, Fridman and Jonson, 2011). The policy deals with abuse and the obligations to report suspected abuse. It also deals with statutory obligations for people working with children in AFL affiliated roles, the taking of images of children and communication of guidelines.

The Coaches Code of Conduct refers to the legal and ethical conduct of AFL coaching staff at all levels of the game - citing appropriate accreditation, standards of behaviour and conduct in the best interests of the game. It states that complaints for a breach of the conduct code can be made by other administrators, parents and officials.

The AFL Mental Health Framework aims to ensure the industry establishes a shared understanding of the prevalence and impact of mental health in the community through association with the game, as well as how to support people within the AFL industry who are or may be at risk of suffering a mental health concern. The policy clearly aims to provide recognition and support for people involved with the AFL who may suffer from mental health issues.

The Respect and Responsibility Policy reinforces a position of creating a safe and inclusive environment for women at all levels of Australian Football. The policy broadly states the AFL finds any form of violence towards women abhorrent and support moves by government and other community-based organisations to eliminate violence or the potential for violence. The policy supports education programs within the industry aimed at promoting respectful relationships between all individuals, and to assist individuals make the right decisions within such relationships.

The Sexuality and Pregnancy Guidelines refers to the appropriateness of sexual relationships between AFL coaches and administrators in an objective position of authority and the athletes that they coach/possess power over and that these should be avoided as such relationships may have harmful effects on the individual athlete involved. The guidelines also state AFL members must not discriminate against, vilify or harass pregnant women, but treat them with dignity and respect and any unreasonable barriers to participation by them in the AFL should be removed.

The AFL Social Media Policy recognises the value in using social media to build more meaningful relationships with fans, communities and other relevant stakeholders. However, the AFL understands that inappropriate engagement through social media may be illegal or in breach of the AFL social agenda and has listed content deemed to be inappropriate for members of the AFL community, including players, administrators and employees of the Commission. Inappropriate content identified is likely to damage the brand and reputation or breach the codes-of-conduct for the AFL, and includes discriminatory, defamatory, abusive or otherwise objectionable language, the accessing, downloading or transmitting any kind of sexually explicit material, violent and/or graphic images.

The final social responsibility policy covers Vilification, and is possibly the strongest in terms of ethical guidance above legal pretext. The policy expresses an aspiration to

promote an inclusive environment for all people within the AFL industry irrespective of their personal characteristics, status or orientation. It states a desire to achieve this objective through an organisational framework that combines: research, education, awareness, support services, social response (media) and compliance with legislation and club policies. 'Social Inclusion' is presented as "state where all people feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society" (AFL Vilification Policy, 2016). 'Anti-vilification' is deemed to be not "..acting towards, speaking in a manner, or engaging in any conduct which threatens, disparages, vilifies or insults a person on any basis but not limited to, a person's race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin, special ability/disability or sexual orientation, preference or identities" (AFL Vilification Policy, 2016).

Promotion of AFL Social Responsibility

The AFL Media Centre plays a pivotal role in promoting the Commission's position on social responsibility. The Media Centre is active in promotion, campaigns and publicity advocating the AFL's policies regarding its social position. In June 2016, the AFL created a new role of General Manager of Inclusion and Social Policy, the first role of its kind established for Australian independent sport code and has been filled by a former female indigenous rights campaigner (The Guardian, 2016). The role is charged with publicising the future strategies and policies to promote diversity and inclusion within the AFL.

The AFL Media Centre includes staff who are responsible for composing media releases and reports, sub-editors for both internal and external material, video journalists, social media managers, photographers, designers and product staff who provide strategy for the amplifying publicity (Happell, 2013). The AFL also employs a number of award winning journalists and has more football sport journalists than the leading daily national newspaper (Happell, 2013; The Age Real Footy, 2014).

The media agency uses three approaches to build engagement with its stakeholders and the public. The first is building community and industry awareness through media publicity, training and education programs and media engagements, which follows the classic sport media strategies (Nicholson, Kerr and Sherwood, 2015). The second approach is incorporating the key messages through the sport's community and internal operations, including the reinforcing social responsibility messages in the AFL campaigns (e.g. indigenous round, multicultural round, and the establishment of a Women's AFL professional league that began in 2017) and the development of competition and club resources. This approach to internalising key social responsibility messages that reinforce the brand for the AFL is an integrated approach common to promotion by professional sport organisations through the clubs, players and media (L'Etang, 2013). The final approach used by the AFL is the dissemination of key social responsibility messages through a variety of mediums, including online campaigns, social media interaction, the production of printed material and television advertising campaigns – an objective to expand reach into the broader community beyond direct fan-bases (L'Etang, 2013).

An advantage the AFL has over many of its rival codes is the advanced structure that enables it to administer its own grass-roots development programs and have a measure of control over the messages that organically grow through the clubs and development programs it manages. For example: the AFL funded and administered Auskick program is the largest national primary school-aged sport program in Australia, with more than 182,000 participants and 20,000 volunteers involved at the 2,936 centres around the country (Auskick, 2016). The vast majority of Australian Rules competitions in Australia are aligned with, and must operate under, the AFL charter. This allows the AFL to inject its brand messages around social responsibility directly into communities through the local football clubs and school programs. The message content is carefully controlled through the AFL's registration process and football operations training for all people

involved with the administration of the game at the community level. For example, players complete the registration process administered through the AFL Community website, which includes controlled AFL media around branding and key messages. All competitions that support the AFL's mandatory accreditation policy where coaches must complete an approved AFL coaching accreditation course are exposed to the controlled messages around inclusion, respect and player management promoted by the AFL (AFL Community, 2016).

In 2015, around 2,013,000 people were engaged through school or community-based clinics and promotions. There were more than 336,000 registered club players at the AFL community level and around 319,00 female participants either playing, managing, coaching and/or in administrative positions (Australian Football League Annual Report, 2015). This is around nine per cent of the Australian population who are directly involved with the AFL administration.

AFL Social Responsibility Media Analysis

The AFL has ideally positioned itself to control the messages filtering into the community. Control over external communication is maintained through an intricate process of reinforcing key messages at the community level through: school visits and education programs, accreditation and certification programs, game-day procedure policies, AFL community codes-of-conduct, AFL Media Centre and journalists reporting in the major newspapers with AFL contracts (Happell, 2013, AFL Community, 2016). The AFL Website, controlled by the AFL Media Centre averages around 4.5 million hits a week (Stensholt, 2014). This enables the AFL to extensively and repeatedly promote its position on social responsibility, particularly around social issues that are topical and of general appeal to the broader community.

The AFL has structures in place that enable it to effectively function within the basis of Organisational – Public Relations theory. The model suggested by Fergusson (1984) for operative OPR relating to wide stakeholder and community relationships involve the organisation addressing social responsibility and ethics; social issues and issue management in an open public environment. The AFL has established the communication pathways in traditional, social and mobile media to reinforce its messages and brand position on social issues. The reach that the AFL Media Centre has into the community, enables the AFL an expansive platform to tap into the social conscience of the communities it operates in, this enables connections that will enhance its relationship with those communities (L'Etang, 2013).

An evolving concept in OPR theory is the central importance around galvanising professional relationships with those key publics through interaction (Broom et al. 1997). Even though the AFL Commission is a large organisation centralised around Melbourne, Australia, digital and electronic communication platforms have advanced its capacity to create ongoing links and exchange communication with public groups through a wide-ranging network of online communities. For example, by late 2014, the AFL had posted more than 280,000 videos on its twitter site alone (Stensholt, 2014). The AFL has targeted social issues through its social media interactions, such topics as: alcohol use, anti-doping, illicit drugs, gambling, match-fixing, mental health, respectful relationships, and vilification and discrimination (AFL Social Media, 2016). The AFL uses platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter to publicise its policies and positions on social responsibility topics and to further endorse its standing through public education tools (videos, memes, and players as advocates).

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) explored the idea that OPR theory can be further developed at a social conscience level by tapping into personal, professional, and community ideologies. If an organisation can predict probable public choice, response and

behaviour then the relationship can be fortified and fused (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The AFL has chosen topics of importance that prick the conscience for broad areas of the community and positioned itself to reflect the more favourable and majority-held position in Australian society. In this way, the AFL has reinforced existing social structures through its own values and rules of engagement with those of other social institutions, like government, ethical and legal organisations in order to reproduce the more approved hierarchy and social stratification (Spaaij et al. 2015). This enables the AFL to further strengthen its brand and reputation within the communities (Doorley and Garcia, 2011).

The AFL's strategy is a classic example of the pre-emptive Inoculation Theory, where the sport's brand loyalty can maintain a more stable following through its favourable fan-engagement approach, even when its core product (standard of football) doesn't live up to expectations (Compton, 2016). The AFL is able disseminate information through its vast media channels and is not limited to time or geography, so any perceptions of poor performance in its football operations can be overwhelmed with publicity on social responsibility that resonates strongly with the majority of the community (Compton, 2016). For example, the AFL announced the launch of the 2017 professional women's league on June 15, 2016 – and continuing headlines about the league and its developments being prominent in the media every week throughout June and July of 2016.

The AFL has a very visible and public approach to promoting its socially responsible behaviour. The AFL Community has a stand-alone website from the Media Centre, and includes much of the community, social and educational focus for the AFL that is not directly aligned with league results and fixtures. The AFL Annual Report (2015) is a 140-page document released to the public, with only six pages devoted to the financial report for the AFL Commission, with the rest of the document focussing on fans, community and school developments, programs and policies.

Areas for further development

The analysis focus for this paper is confined to the performance of the AFL and how it promotes it social responsibility agenda within Organisational – Public Relations theory. A much broader study could provide an analysis of the AFL's social responsibility performance against other major national sporting codes in Australia. This would allow a comparison across codes and provide a benchmark for socially responsible behaviour by a sporting code, which may lead to an ability to rank a sport code on its socially responsible performance. Once a benchmark is established, a longitudinal approach could be applied to analyse performance over a period of years and establish any trends. However, this would be a considerable study requiring substantial resources.

Conclusion

The AFL has a strong social responsibility agenda, which it promotes through many channels including its media centre, education and accreditation programs, and policies. The AFL considers itself a socially responsible leader as its social agenda has a dedicated profile in its public communication and reports. This is evidenced through the number of policies committed to social responsibility, the way in which the values of these policies are reinforced through the operations of the AFL Commission and substantial media space dedicated in annual reports and online information directly related to the AFL's position on such social issues. The appointment of a General Manager of Inclusion and Social Policy further reinforces the AFL's commitment to its social policies and agenda.

The AFL's engages with its key publics (including its fans, players, administrators and communities) regarding its social responsibility agenda, and measures consistently with the principles of OPR theory. The AFL embeds the values of its social doctrines in its media, training, education and operations. It utilises a variety of media to reinforce its

messages on its position for social issues, particularly around equality and inclusion. There is a consistency of message across communication platforms, media, reports and policies. The AFL network is vast in terms of participants, viewers and spectators and its communication processes and consistency of message regarding social responsibility across these publics reflects strong OPR theory principles.

An analysis of the objectives relating to marketing and social conscience for the AFL's positioning on social issues is more difficult to review, in terms of its strong promotion on its position regarding social issues. There is no doubt regarding the AFL's structures that promote its brand manage its reputation, as indicated by its vast media network. The reviewed information in this paper is not privy to the internal conversations around intended outcomes for promoting the AFL's social responsibility, so judgement can only be made against the AFL's external communication. This communication takes a definite position on social issues and is further reflected in the AFL's operational practices right down to its community-based control. Large organisations use the promotion of their social responsibility to enhance their brand as evidenced in many public relations texts (see for example: Doorley and Garcia, 2011, Harrison, 2011, L'Etang, 2013).

However, based on the evidence it is not possible to determine the primary objective for the AFL's strong voice on social issues is for commercial gain, and based on its policies and media content, the AFL has a social conscience on many of the issues its communities are confronted with.

References

AFL Community. (2016). Retrieved from http://www.aflcommunityclub.com.au/

AFL Vilification Policy. (2016). Retrieved from http://s.afl.com.au/staticfile/AFL%20Tenant/AFL/Files/Respect%20and%20Responsibility/AFL_Vilification_Policy.pdf

Auskick. (2016). NAB and AFL Auskick. Retrieved from http://www.aflauskick.com.au/nab-and-afl-auskick/

Australian Football League. (2016). *AFL Policies*. Retrieved from http://www.afl.com.au/policies

Australian Football League Annual Report. (2015). Retrieved from http://s.afl.com.au/staticfile/AFL%20Tenant/AFL/Files/Annual%20Report/AFLAnnualReport2015.pdf

Babiak, K., & Wolfe, R. (2006). More than just a game? Corporate social responsibility and Super Bowl XL. *Sport Marketing Quarterly,* 15, 214–222.

Beder, S. (2002). Environmentalists help manage corporate reputation: changing perceptions not behaviour. *Ecopolitics*, 1(4), 60-72.

Bhattacharya, C., & Sen, S. (2003). Consumer-company identification: A framework for understanding consumers' relationships with companies. *Journal of Marketing,* 67(2), 76-88. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/30040524

Brietbarth, T., & Harriss, P. (2008). The role of corporate social responsibility in the football business: Toward the development of a conceptual model. *European Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 8, 179–206.

Brown, B. (2015). *The History of the Corporation*. Sumas, WA: BF Communications Inc.

Broom, G. M., Casey, S., & Ritchey, J. (1997). Toward a concept and theory of organization–public relationships. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(2), 83–98.

Carol, A.B., & Buchholtz, A.K. (2014). *Business & Society: Ethics, Sustainability and Stakeholder Management* (9th Ed.) Stamford CT: Cenage.

Compton, J. (2016). Inoculating against losing: Can inoculation-informed public relations strategies protect fan loyalty. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 9, 1-12. http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/IJSC.2015-0016

Doorley, J., & Garcia, H. F. (2011*). Reputation Management. The key to successful public relations and corporate communication*. New York: Routledge.

Du, S., Bhattacharya, C.B., & Sen, S. (2007). Reaping relational rewards from corporate social   responsibility: The role of competitive positioning. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 24(3), 224-241. doi:10.1016/j.ijresmar.2007.01.001

Ferguson, M. A. (1984, August). Building theory in public relations: Interorganizational relationships. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville, FL.

Genzale, J. (2006). Sports and social responsibility. *Sports Business Journal,* December,

34–37.

Gill, R. (2015) The reputation of Australian Football League umpires. *Sporting Traditions*, 32(1) 79-96.

Happell, C. (2013, 29 April). More footy reporters than the Herald Sun: Why the AFL's media play threatens the big media players. *The Citizen*. Retrieved from http://www.thecitizen.org.au/media/more-footy-reporters-herald-sun-why-afls-media- play-threatens-big-media-players#sthash.9nFvKNu7.MBvh8COF.dpuf

Harrison, K. (2011). Strategic Public Relations: A practical guide to success. South Yarra: Palgrave McMillan.

Heathcote, A. (2013, December 5). AFL clubs "running away" from NRL in brand value race: Report. *Business Review Weekly.* Retrieved from http://www.brw.com.au/p/marketing/afl_clubs_running_away_from_nrl_8YL6ZuV 3VlH0C9MWmepfaK

IbisWorld. (2014). *Australian Industries Report: Major Companies*. Retrieved from http://clients1.ibisworld.com.au/reports/au/industry/majorcompanies.aspx?entid=1 975

Latest AFL News. (2016). Retrieved from http://www.afl.com.au/news

L'Etang, J. (2008). *Public Relations. Concepts, Practice and Critique*. London: Sage.

L'Etang, J. (2013). *Sports public relations*. London: Sage.

Ledingham, J. A., & Bruning, S. D. (1998). Relationship management in public relations: Dimensions of an organization–public relationship. *Public Relations Review*, 24(1), 55–65.

Lockett, A., Moon, J., & Visser, W. (2006). Corporate social responsibility in management research: Focus, nature, salience and sources of influence. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43, 115–136. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00585.x

Marjoribanks, T., & Farqharson, K. (2016). Contesting competence: Chief executive officers and leadership in Australian Football League clubs. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 34(2), 188-202. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2014-0171

Mohr, L. A., Webb, D. J., & Harris, K. E. (2001). Do consumers expect companies to be socially responsible? The impact of corporate social responsibility on buying behavior. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 35, 45–72.

Nicholson, M., Kerr, A. & Sherwood, M. (2015). *Sport and the media: Managing the nexus*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge

Scott, S., & Walsham, G. (2005). Reconceptualizing and managing reputation risk in the knowledge economy: Toward reputable action. *Organization Science*, May/June 2005, 16(3), 308-322. doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0127

Shilbury, D., Westerbeek, H., Quick, S., & Funk, D. (2009). *Strategic Sports Marketing* (3rd ed.). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Spaaij, R., Farqharson, K., & Marjoribanks, T. (2015). Sport and Social Inequalities. *Sociology Compass*, 9(5), 400-411. DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12254

Stensholt, J. (2014, November 17). AFL website climbs high on back of big hits. *Financial Review*. Retrieved from: http://www.afr.com/lifestyle/afl-website-climbs-high-on-back-of-big-hits-20141116-11nwt7

The Age Real Footy. (2014, October 1). The Age football writers top AFL media association awards. *The Age*. Retrieved from http://www.theage.com.au/afl/afl-news/the-age-football-writers- top-afl- media-association-awards-20141001-10ofxr.html#ixzz3F371VUxM

The Guardian. (2016, 22 June). *Indigenous rights campaigner Tanya Hosch appointed as AFL diversity chief*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/jun/22/indigenous-rights-campaigner-tanya-hosch-appointed-as-afl-diversity-chief

Thorpe, D., Buti, A., Davies, C., Fridman, S., & Jonson, P. (2013). *Sports Law*. South Melbourne, Vic: Oxford University Press.

Walker, A., & Parent, M.M. (2010). Toward an integrated framework of corporate social responsibility, responsiveness, and citizenship in sport. *Sport Management Review*, 13(3), 198–213. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2010.03.003

Walker, M., & Kent, A. (2009). Do fans care? Assessing the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer attitudes in the sport industry. *Journal of Sport Management*, 23, 743-769

Windsor, D. (2006). Corporate social responsibility: Three key approaches. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43, 93–114. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00584.x