ESSENDON VFLW

Facebook Content Analysis

June to August 2019

An analysis of the Essendon Football Club's VFL Women's Facebook page from 26 June to 21 August 2019. An example of BIRGing, and an opportunity to boost fan allegiance.

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Sports teams around the world are using social media to maintain existing fanbases while recruiting new supporters. Sports fandom are shifting with globalised internet technology allowing new ways to interact with sports. Australian rules football is no exception. Australian rules is the world's oldest codified form of football (Alomes 2019, p. 3). The game's narrative has always been dominated by the male competition, most notably the Australian Football League (AFL). In 2017, the women's game was finally elevated to the AFL level, proving to be a huge success with high game attendance (Willson et al. 2018, p. 1707).

The Essendon Victorian Football League Women's team was established in 2018, born from an existing club that dates to 1877. The club currently has no AFL Women's team, making the 'Bombers' VFLW side the most elite sporting level for those playing at this historic club (Raptis 2019). In their first season, the Essendon VFLW team only won one of 14 games played, finishing last on the 13 team ladder (VFL 2019). This year saw a remarkable improvement with six wins and eight losses, finishing ninth on the ladder (Raptis 2019). This analysis will examine how this new team utilises social media to interact with fans.

The Essendon VFLW has social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The Facebook page has been selected for this content analysis because the interactions are publicly observable, which is not possible on Instagram at this present time in Australia (Rigby 2019). Facebook also affords tighter community interaction important for the social experiences of supporters (Stavros, Meng, Westberg and Farrelly 2014, p. 460). The platform has been effectively analysed in previous research (Wallace, Wilson and Miloch 2011).

Image 1: Essendon VFLW team wins

Image 2: Essendon VFLW team loss

Table 1: 'Win/Loss' Average Post Engagement

	TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT - AVERAGES			
WIN/LOSS	**Reactions**	**Comments**	**Shares**	**Engagements**
Win	273	17	29	319
Loss	89	9	6	104
No Attribution	90	5	11	106
Total	147	9	16	173

Engagement = Reactions + Comments + Shares

Table 2: 'Win/Loss' vs 'Type of Post' Post Frequency

	TYPE OF POST - FREQUENCY			
WIN/LOSS	**Link**	**Video**	**Photo**	**Total**
Win	4	5	2	11
Loss	2	0	3	5
No Attribution	8	3	8	19
Total	14	8	13	35

This paper will analyse 35 posts from the posted over eight weeks between 26 June and 21 August 2019. The analysis covers eight games, half of the 16 rounds this VFLW season. Particular attention will be placed on the topics posted, the types of posts shared whether the team wins or loses, and how fans respond to these posts.

The data reveals large variances in how fans interacted with posts depending on whether the team won or lost (Table 1). During the collection period, Essendon had four wins, three losses and one bye round in which they did not play. Following a win fans were three times as likely to react and engage with a Facebook post. Following a loss, fans were no more likely to interact with these posts than they were with posts not attributed to either match outcome. The type of interaction did differ depending on outcome. After a win, these posts were shared more (M = 29) than posts unrelated to match outcomes (M = 11) and almost five times as likely as they were to be shared after a loss (M = 6). The difference can be seen in comparison of near identical posts in Image 1 and Image 2. The willingness of fans to publicly associate themselves with the winning team shows demonstrates BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory). BIRGing is the tendency of fans to affiliate themselves with a winning team (Jacobson 2003, p. 8). Additionally, fans show signs of avoidance or CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure) after a loss. Surprisingly, fans were 80% more likely to comment on posts when the team lost (M = 9) than on posts not attributed to a game's outcome (M = 5). While fans of Essendon publicly separated themselves from the team by not sharing posts on their own feeds, they were still willing to show support for their team - albeit, in the less personal space of Essendon's Facebook post. These fans are an asset to the club as it shows loyalty to the VFLW team, even when they are not performing well. Table 2 shows how marketing capitalised on this success with more posts celebrating each win (M = 2.75) than following a loss (M = 1.67). This is effective, considering that five most successful posts over the two-month period were 'win' related posts, accounting for 38% of all engagement.

Table 3: Topics

TOPIC	Frequency	Total Engagements	Avg Engagement
Team Selection	7	734	105
Pre Game	7	808	115
Post Game	9	2954	328
Match Recap	6	957	160
Player Interview	3	450	150
Sponsor	3	141	47
Total	35	6044	173

The Bombers routinely posts regular content every week: team selections on Thursdays, game information on Saturday morning, post-game results in the afternoon, and a news article recapping the match by Monday (Table 3). While consistent, there is a lack of variety. Aside from three sponsor-related posts, every other post on Facebook was related to sport's product – the team and the players. Non-product related marketing is also important to encourage fan engagement (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos and Chadwick 2015, p. 364). These are important for brand perception and connection with the team. In this study, there were no posts about the Windy Hill venue. It was merely noted as the location the games were played. Fans are attracted to the home grounds and other symbolic spaces of their clubs (Giulianotti 2002, p. 33). For Bombers fans, this is Windy Hill, and that should be a focus in the marketing.

Posts that directly invite fan participation can boost engagement. Vale and Fernandes (2018) identified the connections between the motivations and engagement behaviours of sports fans. The content Essendon VFLW posted only encouraged the weakest level of engagement: consumption. This is useful for fans seeking information about the team like the links to news articles and posts about the games the Bombers shared. To maximise engagement however, the stronger behaviours of contribution and creation – that allow for fan input and recognition – must be used. These behaviours are linked to empowerment and brand love, each of which work towards forming fan allegiances with the Essendon VFLW team.

This analysis has found a consistent social media strategy is being used by the Essendon VFLW that capitalises on the team's strengths. Fan engagement varies on the type of content and match outcomes. While there is evidence of loyalty from fans, the team has many opportunities to boost engagement. It is recommended that the Essendon VFLW publishes posts encouraging contribution and creation from fans. Additionally, they should celebrate their fans and their 'home' to strengthen fan allegiances with the team.

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