



WINNING ESPORTS MARKETING WITH CULTURAL BRANDING



Preface

There are brands, and there are iconic brands. As D.B. Holt put it in **How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding**, “icons come to represent a particular kind of story – an *identity myth* – that their consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties.”

An iconic brand’s mass market appeal results from aligning mythmaking with ideals relevant in culture – a social group’s commonly held attitudes, beliefs, and social practices. Especially since research shows that shared culture has a strong influence on brand perception.¹

Keep in mind, culture has historically been tied to ethnicity, nationality, and/or religion. However, the 21st century digital age is quickly changing those dynamics.

For example, video games are the heartbeat of a new media culture – influenced by the 2.9 billion people who will spend an estimated \$175.8 billion on games in 2021.² In it, competitive video games (esports) are a hugely popular activity. With an estimated global audience of 474 million consisting mostly of the 18 – 35 age group,³ esports is a massive growth opportunity for brands and marketers.

In tandem, a new wave of online games is redefining the notion of entertainment for younger generations. Where more social, community-oriented games have converged with millennial and Gen Z tastes to create a colorful, digital culture. Albeit one with equally lofty standards for brand relevance and resonance.

Cultural branding is a means of authentically participating in this fresh, vibrant culture and connecting with hard-to-reach, digital natives. Where the objective is to transform your brand into a meaningful symbol for gamers across the world.

- 1 How counterfeit dominance affects luxury fashion brand owners’ perceptions: A cross-cultural examination [<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0148296321001363>]
- 2 Newzoo 2021 Global Games Market Report [<https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global-games-market-to-generate-175-8-billion-in-2021-despite-a-slight-decline-the-market-is-on-track-to-surpass-200-billion-in-2023/>]
- 3 Newzoo 2021 Global Esports Audience Forecast [<https://newzoo.com/key-numbers/>]

Introduction

Brands become iconic by marketing through culture. Nike's Air Force 1 (AF1) sneaker line is one such example. The shoe is a classic footwear icon among enthusiasts and mainstream consumers alike. However, it was hip hop culture that provided a springboard to commercial success. Today, AF1 is one of the best-selling shoes of all time.

To be clear, Nike's 1982 release of Air Force 1 as a basketball shoe was only indirectly responsible for eventual retail success. In that, association with the sport earned credibility with urban consumers. But it was the connection with emergent hip-hop culture that eventually granted mass market appeal.



NBA stars headline Nike's Air Force 1 release

Early on, when the shoe emerged as a fashion symbol in African American communities, Nike agreed to support a special "color of the month" collection for a select number of stores in Baltimore, Maryland. A move which blossomed into selling AF1's in selected inner cities across the USA.⁴

⁴ Athletic Shoes Beyond Big Business, Bill Brubaker [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/10/athletic-shoes-beyond-big-business/7bee452e-c89c-4b01-800e-66b372f2691c/>]

The shoe supplied distinct symbolic value (prestige) to Black America's identity expression. As a result, it was a fashion mainstay in hip-hop culture through the 2000's – highlighted by consistent lyrical mentions from rap artists like Jay Z and Nelly.

As the music genre's mainstream popularity exploded, more people bought the shoe due to its cultural cachet in hip-hop fashion. Still relevant today, AF1's longevity is due, in large part, to its connection with urban culture – much more than product design and advertising budget.

Esports is a similar opportunity to meaningfully connect your product with gaming, the same way Nike connected with hip-hop through basketball, on the road to becoming an iconic brand. To do so, your esports marketing must employ cultural branding.

Along those lines, this guide details the ins and outs of branding through culture, including:

- › Understanding esports' relationship to online gaming
- › The importance of identity value
- › How to immerse your brand in the culture of games

What follows are instructive principles and methodology for brands and marketers. The goal is to guide development of a cultural branding strategy, demonstrate why it is crucial to powerful esports marketing, and ensure it is authentic to the passions and interests of gamers across the world.



Cultural Branding 101

The objective of cultural branding is to build your brand into a cultural icon – a symbol of an ideal that people hold in high regard. Celebrities, athletes, politicians, historical figures, and even physical places are examples of icons.

Branding through culture is about connecting with the anxieties and hopes shared by large numbers of people. Traditionally, it is intended for identity categories e.g., “ego-expressive products,” like automotive, beauty, clothing, etc. Since people tend to value these identity brands as a means of self-expression.

However, the connection between all brand categories and culture is particularly relevant today as more people demand that companies take a stand on current events. Such that cultural relevance is becoming a major factor in brand image – especially among the youth. To demonstrate, consumers aged 18 – 35 over index by 31% on the importance of brand involvement in social issues and movements.⁵

Brands participate in contemporary culture by taking a stand on current events and social issues. However, unique customs, symbols, and traditions (including esports) have evolved around the shared experience of playing video games. This distinct culture is normalized by a growing number of gamers worldwide.

It is important to distinguish between someone who plays games and someone who is a gamer. For the latter, gaming is more than a passing hobby – it is a lifestyle choice. Gamers identify with their passion in a way that connects them with a larger community of like-minded people.

While brand marketing is comfortable navigating popular culture, the principles of branding through gaming culture are different. Regardless, realizing its objective – building your brand into a cultural icon for gamers across the globe – has massive growth potential.

Especially considering the trend of video games influencing popular culture. For instance, Ariana Grande headlined the “Fortnite Rift Tour,” where the pop star performed five virtual shows hosted in Epic Games’ Fortnite. Available for three days in August 2021, the show was enjoyed by millions of fans worldwide.

⁵ The Impact of Culture by MAGNA GLOBAL and IPG Media Lab [<https://magnaglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Magna-IPG-Lab-Impact-of-Culture-US.pdf>]



Ariana Grande made her gaming debut in the Fortnite Rift Tour

The event successfully combined aspects of traditional music concerts with virtual mini-games and in-game items. That said, Ariana Grande was not the first music superstar to make her way into Fortnite. Travis Scott, a chart-topping hip hop artist, headlined an April 2020 event that attracted 12.3 million concurrent players.⁶

Fortnite, which generated over \$9 billion in 2018 and 2019 combined,⁷ illustrates the appeal of increasingly social online games. Such that, with more people connecting and building relationships with others through gameplay, gaming is poised as a pre-eminent 21st century marketing vehicle.

However, numerous factors associated with the unique culture of video games affect brand communication. The same way that global brands must be sensitive to cultural differences that exist between different countries, esports marketing must navigate cultural nuances in gaming.

A cultural branding strategy is the key to campaigns that resonate with the growing number of people whose lifestyle is influenced by a passion for games. Why? Because culture is a window into their needs, wants, and aspirations. Most importantly, culture is the most compelling medium for communicating what your brand offers that nothing else can.

⁶ Travis Scott Destroys 'Fortnite' All-Time Record With 12.3 Million Live Viewers [<https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/travis-scott-fortnite-record-viewers-live-1234589033/>]

⁷ Fortnite made more than \$9 billion in revenue in its first two years [<https://www.theverge.com/2021/5/3/22417447/fortnite-revenue-9-billion-epic-games-apple-antitrust-case>]

Understanding the culture of games

The term “video game” includes everything from playing a game of Sudoku on your own to massively multiplayer online games (**MMO**) like Fortnite. The popularity of online gaming has shifted perceptions of video games from an isolated activity to one that empowers players to participate in vibrant communities.

Each game community embodies a distinct subculture reflective of its genre, player base demographics, and publisher involvement. In certain groups, the desire to compete against other players and/or improve skills through gameplay is particularly pronounced. At that point, a competitive scene – ranking, teams, and tournaments – can develop.

Every esports audience segment exists within a distinct game community- alongside gamers who are not interested in competitive play.

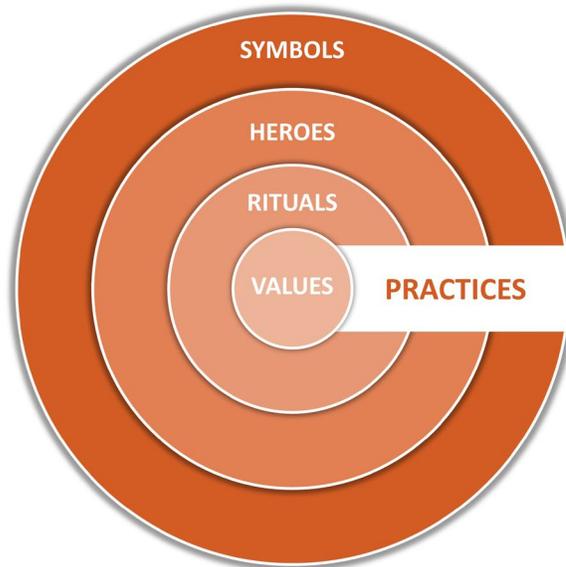
From there, an esports audience forms around organic demand for spectating competition. Thereby extending the game community’s boundaries to include fans who are not active players. A game’s player base and esports fanbase can coexist because competition is a time-honored social practice in gaming culture.

To illustrate, Mojang’s Minecraft is a popular game – purchased by Microsoft for \$2.5 billion in 2014 – that has been successfully applied in education,⁸ infrastructure planning and habitat studies. As popular and successful as the game is, it lacks all the characteristic features of successful esports titles. Yet, the Minecraft community is home to a self-sustaining competitive niche.

⁸ How Minecraft Supports Social and Emotional Learning in K-12 Education [<https://www.gettingsmart.com/2017/06/minecraft-social-emotional-learning-k-12-education/>]

Understanding online gaming culture

Hofstede's onion model applied to gaming



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Symbols

- Brands and logos
- Games as art
- In-game characters & items



Heroes

- Creators
- Pro gamers
- Video game industry notables



Rituals

- Events
- In-game routines
- Regularly scheduled gameplay



Values

- The core of game culture
- Recognition of good vs. bad, rational vs. irrational, etc.
- Can vary across subcultures



Practices

- Cosplay
- Esports
- Streaming

Meaning, online game communities are unique subcultures which nonetheless share certain tendencies. This shared cultural DNA is the source of an authentic connection with esports audiences and an even larger market of gamers. Especially since all esports fans are gamers, but not all gamers are esports fans.

The following is a cursory view of online gaming culture – not to be confused with a dedicated ethnographic study. These overarching elements give color to a diverse group of symbols, values and social practices associated with online games. All of which define the pillars and rules for cultural branding.

Commerce

The video game industry's massive revenues are proof of gamers' willingness to spend on their passion. Selling in-game content is one of the largest forms of commerce in gaming and a lucrative revenue model for game publishers. Still, in-game transactions are intimately related to the gaming community's shared attitudes, values, and motivations.

Research has also shown that social ties – such as sending gifts (“gifting”) to strengthen relationships between players – are a strong incentive to spend money in-game.⁹ Meaning, players can satisfy consumption desires without leaving in-game environments. The same dynamics impact gamers' expectations for customer experiences of all stripes.

⁹ Why do players buy in-game content? An empirical study on concrete purchase motivations [<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/250169786.pdf>]

Competition (Esports)

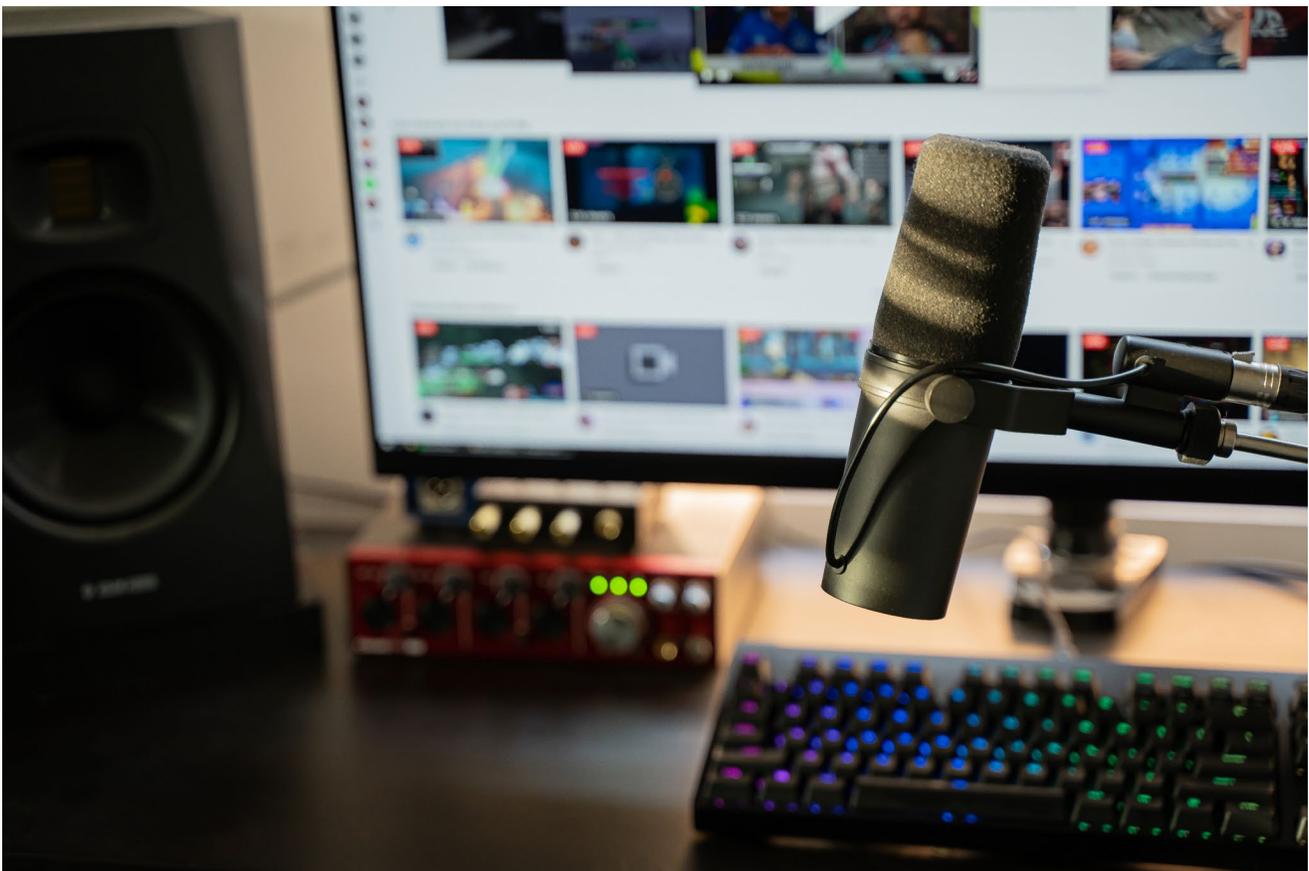
Esports is characterized by a specific flavor of competitive gameplay. It is also a touchpoint where online gaming culture comes alive through media channels. The related group of symbols, rituals and values belong to what is commonly termed, the esports community.

Yet, the esports community is notional. Since all competitive activity traces to pre-existing, game communities – each with its own subculture. Likewise, your brand benefits from engaging esports audiences through a cultural lens, instead of a narrow competitive context.

Creativity

Gamers are active in generating meaning, through the creation of media shared within communities – modifications (mods), walkthroughs, machinima, etc. This extends to the curation and preservation of games through collective activities such as emulation and online archive creation.

Video game streaming is a massively popular activity in this regard. Where services like Twitch, YouTube and Facebook allow broadcasting gameplay online (streaming), so others can watch. Unlike traditional forms of games-based media, streaming is live and unedited.



Events

For years, conventions held by the video game industry in the summer months were the gold standard for gaming events. The emergence of stadium-filling esports events has permanently changed that dynamic. Either way, offline events are an opportunity to strengthen online relationships and meet others who share the same passion.

The digital nature of online gaming also means that pre-determined updates containing major balance changes and new in-game items are calendar events. Updates for titles like Epic Games' Fortnite or Electronic Arts' Apex Legends are organized into pre-determined seasons that serve as virtual events.

Fandom

In online gaming, fandoms are like-minded groups of people who express avidity for a game franchise outside of gameplay. The term implies an explicit subcommunity with social practices like cosplay – where fans dress as characters from games as a means of self-expression and social interaction.

Fantasy elements like game lore, back stories that expand an in-game universe outside the main plot, help fandoms thrive through connection with a wider game community. The purchase of game-related collectibles and merchandise also falls under this theme.



Fashion and style

Gamers have historically adopted fashion trends from contemporary culture. However, with the gaming lifestyle's boundaries quickly expanding, designs inspired by a passion for games are in vogue. And, with gaming establishing itself in mainstream cultural canon, gamers are now influencing the fashion industry.

While gaming culture is the vehicle for a new lifestyle and related wave of fashion trends. Games are challenging fashion for the title of ultimate tool for self-expression – especially among the youth. Where more game titles allow players to craft their personal style through a range of in-game cosmetics.

Geography

Video game play connects people of all backgrounds and beliefs who otherwise would never meet. While online gaming is a common thread for many across the globe. Diverse offline cultural perspectives, inherited from different physical locations, are prominent.

For instance, societal acceptance of competitive video games as a sport varies across different countries and regions. And while most games are designed to be culturally agnostic, players perceive them through filters influenced by the geography of their personal background.

Identity

The sheer popularity of online gaming has removed gamer identity from the category of socially marginal phenomenon. For many people, playing games together is a source of peer bonding through a shared experience. Personal performance and outward expression within a game community strengthens individuality and is a chance to forge a shared identity.¹⁰

This dynamic is illustrated by the split between PC gamers and console gamers. In that, there are distinct shared identities for gamers depending on their gaming platform of choice. The overlap of individual and group identity, expressed through games, is evident within subcultures like the PC Master Race and memes devoted to distinguishing the two groups.



PC gamers vs. Console gamers meme

¹⁰ Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal Discourse and Virtual Spaces [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285068784_Going_Beyond_the_Game_Development_of_Gamer_Identities_Within_Societal_Discourse_and_Virtual_Spaces]

Innovation

As a special form of media, video games are created through the application of innovative software design and development principles. The direct influence of programmer subculture surrounding game development adds a high-tech wrinkle to gaming.

Design and development practices are core to innovation in games, which serves an immense cultural need. However, there is palpable tension between a game's creative/technical complexity and the passionate expectations of its player base. The result is an intense emotional charge, where changes to a game can polarize its community.

Language

In the years before gaming enjoyed status as a form of mass media, language was an important filter for finding other gamers with similar interests. Even today, learning jargon (lingo) is a cultural rite-of-passage for becoming a full-fledged member of some game communities. Language is also a unique identifier for classifying experience and/or dedication.

Presently, a unique vocabulary – including numeric abbreviations and other slang – enables efficient in-game communication, while doubling as a form of social bonding. Terms like nerf, camping, and grinding take on contextually different meanings within the culture.

Legacy

Since their inception as a technological niche in the 1950's, video games have evolved at an astronomical rate. This rate of change means a brief history seems much longer. Still, history is a crucial point of reference for the global community of gamers. For example, the timeline of game titles like Valve's Counter-Strike is intimately tied to the emergence of esports.

And, like movies and music, older games have tremendous nostalgic value. Retro gaming, also known as old school gaming or classic gaming, is the playing of older generation video game systems in the present. Since these systems are often obsolete or discontinued, retro gaming typically involves emulation through modern hardware.

Music

Music is the universal language, with video games not far behind. Traditionally, music has worked in tandem with games to transport audiences to another world entirely – the same way it does with other forms of media like film. Even the emergence of online games, some of which do not include in-game music soundtracks, has done little to sever intimacy between the two mediums.

For instance, Riot Games – publisher of League of Legends – launched K/DA, a multilingual, virtual girl group in 2018. The group is centered around four playable characters in League of Legends. Their first release, "POP/STARS," – an electric dance track in Korean and English featuring real-life singers Soyeon and Miyeon of (G)I-DLE, Madison Beer, and Jaira Burns – was an immediate hit with over **450 million views on YouTube** to date.



K/DA gives a shout out to fans

Norms and etiquette

While toxicity in online gaming is well documented, certain behaviors are universally encouraged or discouraged. As an example, in games with text-based player communication, it is rude to type in all caps, because that is "shouting" online.

Gamers are also expected to be friendly and welcoming to newbies – slang for newcomers – on account of their lack of experience with the game. Still, these are harder to enforce in digital environments tied to a greater degree of anonymity.

Professionalism

The multi-billion-dollar video game industry has long been a source of potential career options. However, a new wave of games-based media – esports, video game streaming, etc. – is expanding what it means to be an industry professional. Esports and streaming are increasingly attractive career outlets for young people, because it is a vehicle for making a living pursuing one’s passion.

As a space that attracts younger generations, online gaming is also marked by the widespread aspiration to achieve greater heights of legitimacy, professionalism, and spectacle. Much more than just the dream of becoming a pro gamer or popular YouTuber – qualified mentorship, career guidance and skill improvement are highly valued.

Social relationships

The connectedness of online gaming is the source of a unique form of social capital – a driving force for friendships. Specifically, the emergence of massively multiplayer online games (**MMO**) has enabled a new wave of relationships to form within game communities. Connections which are important conduits for cultural norms.

Involvement in culture can also lead to social status. Where gamers gain standing due to talent or social connections. Tyler ‘**Ninja**’ Blevins, a Twitch streamer, whose popularity rivals that of top influencers on social media platforms, is a fitting example. Ninja’s involvement in online gaming – first as a pro gamer, then as a creator – has opened the door to his own toy line and a shoe deal with Adidas.



Ninja's toy line by Wicked Cool Toys

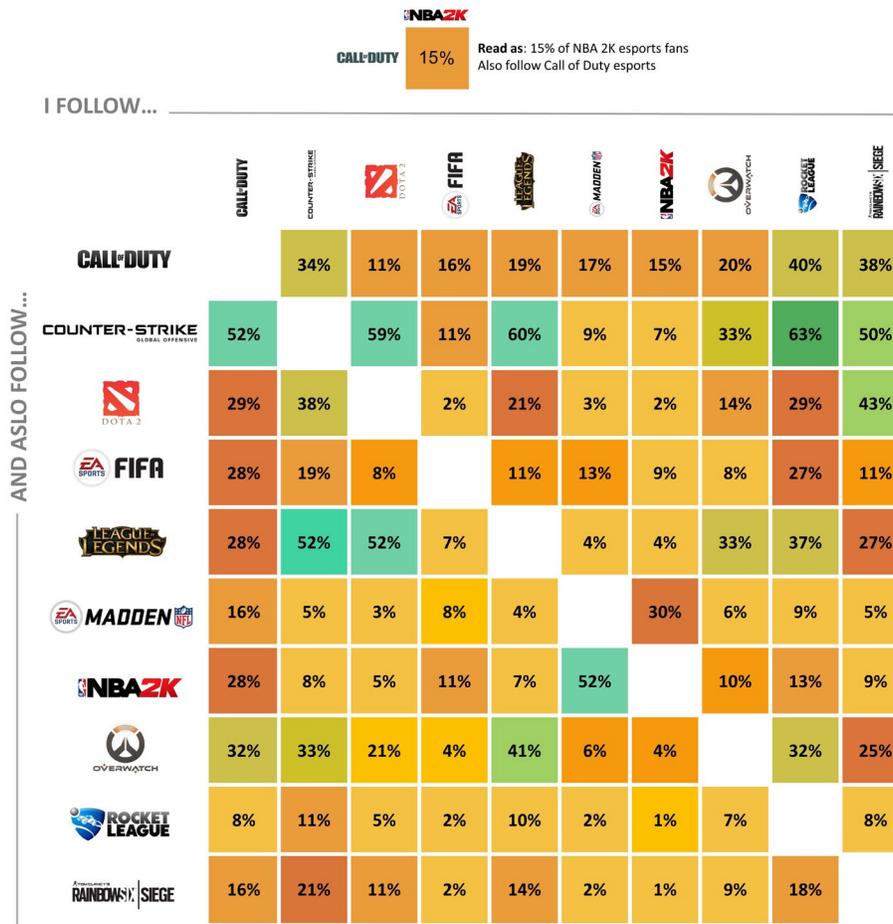
Empowering identity

Online gaming spaces are marked by a shared ethos that members participate in due to passion for games, not because they are being paid or because they seek status or power. In these tightly knit communities, games are the primary lever for emotional connections, favorable associations, and viral buzz.

This out-of-market terrain is also a fresh opportunity to meaningfully connect with younger generations. For example, competitive video games are responsible for a new media trend that, powered by attention from hard-to-reach demographics, has encouraged brands to spend an estimated \$641 million on esports sponsorship in 2021.¹¹

Esports Audience Overlap

Number of titles followed by esports fans of each game



Source: Social data of 80,000+ English-speaking esports fans

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Powered by SPORTS IQ

¹¹ Newzoo 2021 Global Esports Market per Revenue Stream [https://newzoo.com/key-numbers]

Unfortunately, the esports landscape is hyper fragmented e.g., audience interest is scattered across a multitude of games. Conventional sponsorship models, focused on identifying the appropriate segment and target messaging, are ill-suited to succeed in this challenging territory.

Plus, for companies outside the video game industry, esports sponsorship is a cross-border marketing initiative. Where brand sponsors connect with audiences via association with specific parts of a complicated ecosystem e.g., media platforms, esports companies, and/or influencers. The resulting relevance, which depends on association with a third-party, comes with certain risks.

For instance, in July 2021, the state of California filed a lawsuit against Activision Blizzard – suing the video game publisher for “frat boy” culture, sexual harassment, and unequal pay. Shortly after, several high-profile sponsors – including Pringles, State Farm, IBM, and Cheez-It Grooves – cut ties with the Overwatch League, Activision Blizzard’s esports circuit.

The long-term return on investment (ROI) for all former Overwatch League partners depends on how well they spoke to fans beyond initial awareness and affinity. This is important since, regardless of the circumstances, all sponsorship agreements eventually end. And in esports, it is your brand’s connection with gaming, not paid association with a company or individual, that wins customers.

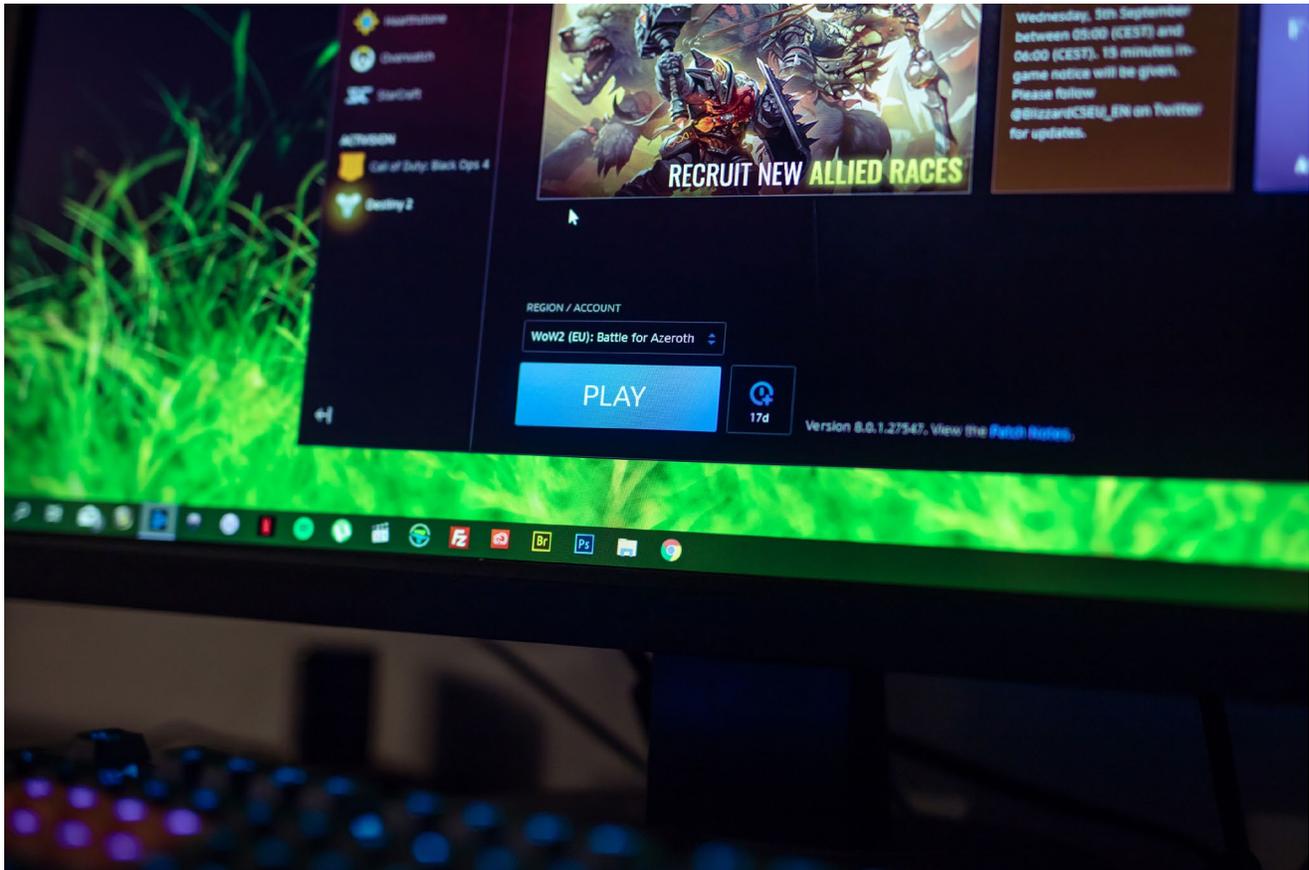
On top of that, over-targeting fans and followers of a specific league, team or influencer creates niche relevance. Where the exclusion of a wider cross-section of potential customers polarizes your brand presence instead of amplifying it throughout a larger community.

Identity value is a clear picture of how your brand helps gamers express who they want to be.

Fortunately, identity value – a clear picture of how your brand helps gamers express themselves – creates an anchor of meaning within culture. So, while sponsorship provides access to a considerable audience of passionate fans, identity value is persuasive messaging that forges long-lasting relationships.

Why? Because passion for games is core to the esports community’s collective identity. Value that aligns with that shared trait is an impactful way to acknowledge and address this diverse, fragmented audience. Such that purchasing your product becomes a positive act of self-expression for all fans.

Branding through culture uses identity value to portray how your product fits into the gaming lifestyle. The resulting message resonates with both the esports and larger online gaming community because esports fandom is an expression of online gaming culture. It also builds a relationship with customers based on who they are (identity), as opposed to through a third-party association (sponsorship).



Identity value is also a powerful marketing tactic that wins credibility e.g., being recognized as a brand that “gets it.” Executed correctly, your product is promoted as a trusted vehicle for transporting consumers (gamers) to an ideal destination (enhanced self-expression).

The following campaigns utilize identity value to win cultural authenticity. All three brands deploy esports sponsorship assets to create symbolic value for gamers across the world. The ROI is a unique place in gaming culture, independent of a sponsorship agreement.

Kia's #VoyageToInspiration

To promote a selection of new electric vehicles, the French division of South Korean car brand, Kia partnered with esports organization Team Vitality in July 2021. The collaboration is initially focused on video content, featuring several Vitality team members and Kia electric cars.

The first digital campaign, #VoyageToInspiration, highlights the incredible journey it takes going from being inspired to becoming an inspiration. **The headlining video** is a nod to Vitality's founder and owner, Fabien 'Neo' Devide, who is also featured in the spot, and his personal journey in digital sport.



Kia takes a voyage to inspiration with Team Vitality

Most importantly, it avoids product benefit marketing e.g., focusing on vehicle performance, style, cost, etc. Instead, emotionally compelling music and a direct story arc portray a personal quest that connects with the shared identity of esports and gaming fans. In turn, audiences are encouraged to pursue a customer journey with Kia.

Symbolic visual elements highlight Kia's identity value – a vehicle for realizing the aspirations of gamers everywhere. One which resonates with the company's 2021 brand slogan "Movement that Inspires" and is communicated through the following online gaming cultural themes.

Competition

Neo drives a Kia vehicle, with a passenger sporting an official Vitality jersey in the backseat, towards a large sports stadium. The vehicle's voyage, shown throughout the ad, represents the drive to compete/improve/achieve in esports.

Geography

The Kia vehicle makes its way into a heavily wooded area before venturing onto an open road towards its destination. The forest trees symbolize roots in the physical world that are core to self-expression in digital (online games).

Legacy

The passenger begins as a young child but has matured into an adult by the ad's conclusion. The growing up, which takes place while the vehicle is immersed in a virtual (in-game) environment, symbolizes the impact gaming has on the personal history of younger generations. It also represents the evolution of esports, from grassroots to mainstream.

Innovation

Creative use of mixed reality provides a futuristic, in-game feel to parts of the journey. The resulting high-tech effect resonates with gamers who do not follow esports.

Professionalism

The large, open-air sports stadium, marked by a beacon of light, symbolizes acceptance of competitive video games as a legitimate sport.

Dollar Shave Club's Boost series

Subscription-based shaving brand Dollar Shave Club entered a deal with North American esports organization 100 Thieves in February 2021. In the deal, Dollar Shave Club is a presenting sponsor for a digital content series called Boost. In it, 100 Thieves creators are challenged to step out of their comfort zones with fresh style transformations.

The creators are popular personalities who create content on platforms like Twitch and YouTube. Organizations like 100 Thieves sign creators, who do not compete professionally, to capitalize on their large followings – which also includes esports fans.

Read the [guide to esports influencer marketing](#) to learn more.



Fuslie stars in Dollar Shave Club's Boost series

Boost episodes present identity value in the form of dream transformations authentic to the gaming lifestyle. By bringing popular creators' dream look to life, Dollar Shave Club is positioned to help all gamers improve their personal care – without resorting to awkward product placements and/or forced taglines.

The series is hosted by Alex Costa, a Brazilian-American fashion influencer, and 100 Thieves CEO/founder Matthew **'Nadeshot'** Haag. In one episode, Leslie Ann **'Fuslie'** Fu – a popular streamer signed to 100 Thieves – gets a style transformation modeled after one of her favorite childhood shows, *Gossip Girl*.

Fuslie shares details about her private life as a professional streamer and how it impacts her personal style. As an influencer, Fuslie is also a tastemaker. Similarly, her lifestyle is influenced by online gaming culture. The makeover highlights those cultural touchpoints (see below) in a way that amplifies Dollar Shave Club's brand presence in gaming.

Creativity

A new wave of breakout creators have emerged from the world of online gaming. Fuslie is one such streamer who broadcasts multiple game titles, but also uses music and interviews to engage audiences. She personifies what is called a variety streamer – a creative entertainer who is not limited to a single content category.

Fashion and style

Boost’s fashion transformations are particularly relevant in gaming. Where creators like Fuslie, more than in any other industry, draw large online audiences. With their personal brand key to unlocking monetization potential, these gamers are more conscious of their image and fashion sense.

Professionalism

As a professional creator, Fuslie must strike a balance between authentic self-expression and growing her audience. She is also a role model for legions of young people who aspire to combine a love of games with their career choice. Fuslie’s makeover by a team of equally skilled professionals taps into this dynamic.

KitKat’s Mission Control

KitKat, the chocolate brand produced by Nestle, expanded its partnership with Riot Games’ League of Legends European Championship (LEC) esports circuit in 2021. The deal will see KitKat become the LEC’s main partner, communicating its commitment to digital sport with the “Mission Control” campaign.

The campaign slogan, “Even the biggest champ needs a break,” extends KitKat’s previous support of LEC game breaks. It also doubles as strong identity value that promotes the brand as a symbol for good gaming habits. Especially since prolonged gaming sessions and esports competitions can be linked to an increase in stress levels.¹²

KitKat’s marketing mix taps into multiple cultural themes (see below) in a way that builds trust and credibility. And, by speaking to League of Legends esports fans through the language of culture, the brand is positioned as a meaningful symbol for the entire game community.

¹² Virtual sports deserve real sports medical attention [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6887499/>]



KitKat's Hextech Chest and Key

Fandom

Fan culture is a driving force in the growth of online games. For esports audiences, the passion for competition and games is tied together. For example, all LEC fans are also League of Legends fans. KitKat taps into League fandom with creative promotions like prize giveaways based on the in-game universe.

Language

KitKat's **Mission Control advertisement** depicts parts of a gamer's brain – ego, intelligence, mind, reason, and skill – on the edge of burnout. Multiple characters, played by different actors, are portrayed in a state of emergency after gaming too long. Comedic use of gaming lingo like "Elo Hell" and sharp references to "tilting" transform the 30-second spot into entertaining, culturally relevant content.

Professionalism

Burnout and fatigue is a major issue in online games. With so many young people grinding to find a career – whether in streaming, competing, casting, organizing events, etc. – mental health is a key concern. KitKat's Twitter gaming account acknowledges that collective anxiety by consistently encouraging followers to take a break more often. The posts reaffirm KitKat's symbolic value in relation to healthy gaming habits.

Winning with culture

While the buzz and popularity surrounding competitive video games is attractive, marketers often struggle when faced with critical decision making about how to approach the market. Especially as the lines between different forms of gaming continue to blur. Regardless, esports is but one link in the chain that is online gaming culture.

To the point that developing an esports marketing strategy naturally pivots into a broader gaming strategy. And since culture is a bridge to the world of online games, branding through the culture of games should serve as the basis of a cohesive strategy.

Simply put, cultural branding attaches your product to the gaming lifestyle – through identity value – and creates the perception it is personalized for gamers. This symbolic value wins credibility and establishes a meaningful place in esports/gaming for your brand.

Cultural branding attaches your product to the gaming lifestyle-through identity value-and creates the perception it is personalized for gamers.

Even if branding through culture does not guarantee that your campaigns will reach the entire community. It does ensure your message is relevant to a larger market of esports fans and other gamers. Meaning, esports marketing should serve the directives of a cultural branding strategy. One which charts your brand's path to icon status in the world of online gaming.

But what does effective cultural branding look and feel like? To illustrate, the following non-endemic brand has achieved icon status in esports and gaming by marketing through culture. The return on investment (**ROI**) is massive brand equity among highly valuable demographics that few outside the video game industry can match.

The Red Bull formula

Red Bull, an early innovator in the energy drink market, was co-created by Chaleo Yoovidhya and Dietrich Mateschitz, and first sold in 1987. Early on, a nascent product category and expensive traditional advertising costs forced the company to pursue non-conventional marketing tactics.

Instead of spending on traditional beverage industry media like TV or outdoor advertising, Red Bull used guerilla marketing tactics to promote its brand and product to the most likely drinkers: 18- to 34-year-old-males. Soon enough, the brand began to make a name supporting athletes on the fringe of pop culture. Today, it is the number one energy drink in the world.

The brand motto, “Red Bull gives you wiiings,” promotes the drink as a means of taking flight and pursuing your biggest dreams. A distinct identity value that was initially communicated through immersion in youth culture of the 90’s – specifically association with extreme sports. Over time, this expanded into other areas like aviation and music.

The energy drink maker also began sponsoring professional video game players in 2006. Currently, Red Bull has an impressive presence in events, training facilities, and content creation geared towards the gaming community. This outstanding record of execution puts Red Bull in a category by itself, compared to most non-endemic brands.

Red Bull successfully adapted its motto to, “Giving wiiings to gamers!” A theme which also sums up its identity value in esports and gaming. An equally strong background in traditional sports, events, and media production empowers the brand to deliver meaningful experiences that uplift the global community of gamers.

Whether in organizing tournaments, or compelling storytelling, or sponsoring creators the brand speaks to all gamers saying, “We are with you and one of you.” Marketing through culture has also enabled Red Bull to avoid pitfalls that ensnare other non-endemic brands.

To illustrate, after entering esports in 2013, global beverage brand Coca-Cola made waves with several well-received partnerships. However, Coca-Cola's esports marketing did not communicate how the beverage fits into the online gaming lifestyle.



A Coke Esports webcomic

As a result, the now inactive Coke Esports Twitter account became known as a source of cringeworthy webcomics about gaming, many of which became memes. Mostly because the comics failed to authentically connect the brand with culture. Instead, the message was “Drink Coke because we’re an esports sponsor.”

On the other hand, Red Bull's brand marketing is immersed in the culture of games. From creating documentaries on game development to a podcast series highlighting gaming celebrities to augmented reality (AR) games featuring popular creators, the company's brand presence covers the depth and breadth of the culture.

Keep in mind that functional product benefits are absent from marketing communications. Instead, the identity value of giving wings to people and ideas is consistently expressed through involvement in culture. In turn, purchasing and drinking Red Bull energy drinks is promoted as a ritual for gamers across the world.

While competing niche alternatives like GFuel are scientifically designed to meet the demands of gamers. A strong connection with culture creates the perception that Red Bull is on-par as an energy drink for the gaming lifestyle. This symbolic value is especially powerful in non-endemic brand categories.

Even competitive events like Red Bull Wololo V: Enthroned are draped in cultural themes. The 1v1 Age of Empires II Definitive Edition competition starred the world's best players against each other in a custom version of Empire Wars (Creativity).



A champion is crowned at Red Bull Wololo V: Enthroned

The LAN final (Events) took place against the backdrop of a transformed Gothic Castle Heidelberg in Germany (Geography). Audiences were transported back in time by players and casters decked in Medieval-themed cosplay (Fandom, Fashion & Style) that perfectly matched in-game content.

Providing impeccable entertainment and spectacle (Professionalism) for a 20+ year old game community (Legacy) resonates with the brand's identity value of giving wings to all gamers – not just fans of the newest, trendy game genres and titles. The community's moment of recognition that Red Bull "gets it," creates a strong emotional connection with the brand.

Red Bull has achieved icon status by consistently creating moments of recognition across the entire spectrum of online gaming. A path which your brand can follow by embracing cultural branding principles.



A model for success

Your brand can achieve icon status in esports and gaming through cultural branding. Where gamers value your product for what it means to their identity first, followed by its functional benefits. Cultural branding differs from the three main models prevalent in conventional marketing today – emotional, mindshare and viral (see below).

- **Emotional** – Centered on interpersonal interaction and building deep emotional relationships with customers.
- **Mindshare** – Companies establish a consistent, ownable set of associations whose repetition leads customers to perceive benefits when buying the product.
- **Viral** – Word of mouth focused communication that motivates consumers to become brand advocates and ambassadors.

The applicability of conventional models varies based on the product category in question. For example, the mindshare model is a better fit for highly technical categories like computer hardware than it is for bleeding edge fashion. Whereas the viral model is tailor fit for mobile apps.

When it comes to esports marketing, cultural branding is particularly powerful for products unrelated to gaming. Why? Because it employs culture to ensure brand marketing is relevant, provocative, and inspiring for esports fans and gamers alike.

Most importantly, cultural branding leads to the benefits espoused by conventional models. In that, tapping into the culture that shapes the identity of gamers leads to developing emotional connections, owning a focused position, and going viral with the same as customers.

Strategic direction helps your brand capture the market results of branding through culture – by pushing esports marketing activities in the right direction. It also helps make tough decisions by outlining criteria that distinguish better choices from worse ones.

Among other things, an impactful cultural branding strategy defines:

- Identity value
- Cultural elements that meet brand guidelines
- Partnership decision-making criteria

Cultural Branding Model

The building blocks of a cultural branding strategy

Identity Value

- What does your brand mean to the self-expression of gamers?
- Are there any relevant anxieties and/or desires?
- What is the intended moment of recognition?

Cultural Principles

- What are the boundaries or off-limit topics?
- How should your brand's identity value be framed within culture?
- Which principles resonate with your brand's values?

Partnerships

- Who can help amplify your brand's identity value?
- Which partners align with your cultural principles?
- Have they partnered with brands in your category before?

Brand Presence

- Is there an existing brand presence in esports/online gaming?
- Any previous experience with cultural branding?
- What are the risks of communicating through culture?

Cultural Territory

- What is the distinct cultural real estate your brand will own?
- Which marketing channels – storytelling, influencer marketing, etc. – best outline your territory?
- Is your brand's replacement value high or low?

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The following are building blocks of a cohesive and coordinated strategy for your marketing activities in esports and gaming. This approach focuses on authentically engaging culture through identity value instead of relying on abstract associations e.g., product and emotional benefits, brand personas, etc.

The model is a blueprint – not a complete strategy – for moving your brand towards icon status in the gaming community. Since no one-size-fits-all strategy can account for each brand's unique marketing goals, stakeholders, etc.

Targeting an identity value

An effective cultural branding strategy depends on clear identity value that supports self-expression through gaming. The value should address desires and/or anxieties that apply to a collective identity. Identity value clearly answers the question, “What does your brand mean to the average gamer?”

The same way that over-targeting esports audience segments polarizes messaging in conventional models, it is crucial to avoid the same with cultural branding. In other words, the value should be relevant to the largest number of customers possible.

Why? Because identity value is expressed through culture. And the benefit of tapping into shared attitudes, beliefs, and social practices is that your message inherits an inclusive tone. Meaning, it is important to avoid force fitting identity value into unnecessarily exclusive target audiences.

Instead, identity value should flow from the intended moment of recognition – the point in time where a community realizes your brand “gets it.” Defining your brand’s promise in culture – such that keeping it creates moments of recognition – is the basis of relevant identity value.

Identifying cultural principles

To become iconic in esports and gaming, your brand must find its way in culture. Specifically, the previously described principles help depict your brand’s place in a lifestyle that is relevant to the online gaming community. The same codes also frame identity value.

Regardless, each brand is unique. Just as some areas of culture are a good fit for your company’s mission and values. Others could be off-limits, depending on brand guidelines or comfort level. Either way, it is important to identify which themes best align with your approach to the market.

Clarify brand presence

Just as digital marketing expands your online presence, cultural branding – with its focus on connecting products to lifestyle – is key to a strong presence in online gaming. Marketing through culture can also amplify existing brand presence through connection with identity, values, and perspectives shared by extended audiences.



Nadeshot takes aim at headaches with Excedrin

However, the approach could clash with benefits marketing strategies, for example. Excedrin – an over-the-counter headache pain reliever – claims research shows that gamers who play through headaches perform poorly. The findings, and a partnership with 100 Thieves CEO and former Call of Duty pro Matthew **'Nadeshot'** Haag, are part of a campaign targeted to help gamers beat headaches.¹³

¹³ Gamers Who Play Through Headaches Perform Poorly, New Research Shows [<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/gamers-who-play-through-headaches-perform-poorly-new-research-shows-301261404.html>]

Excedrin's functional value is driving current positioning, to the point that it risks conflict with esports marketing through culture. In that, identity value – what Excedrin means to the gaming lifestyle – is unrelated to research-backed benefits and/or tangible features.

Partner selection

Esports brings online gaming culture to life in the form of unique storylines, personalities, history, etc. The resulting community is home to video game content particularly suited to media channels. This visibility has given birth to an ecosystem of companies – tournament organizers, game publishers, teams, etc. – available to help advertise to hard-to-reach audiences.

Most brands utilize some form of partnership within the ecosystem to meet esports marketing objectives. And since cultural branding resonates with a wider audience of gamers who do not follow the competitive video game scene. Your partners should be evaluated on how well they align with key elements of a cultural strategy. Specifically, does a potential partner:

- Understand its place in the 21st century gaming lifestyle?
- Have prior experience with culturally focused programs?
- Lean towards building long-term customer relationships vs. awareness and visibility?

Partner selection also affects which game communities and audience segments your campaigns will have the most reach within, by association. Still, unlike traditional approaches to targeting and positioning, cultural branding is relevant beyond those boundaries.

Owning cultural territory

Icon status in esports and gaming is marked by an ownable place in the culture of games. Instead of product associations or emotional benefits, marketing through culture delivers a distinct cultural territory shaped around identity value. Esports marketing activities – dictated by a cultural branding strategy – work to support territory ownership.

The territory evolves in tandem with your brand presence. With each activity – whether storytelling, content creation, etc. – helping to construct a fence around the area. However, it also requires care and feeding.

In the same way that landowners use outdoor power equipment to maintain their property, marketing channels – Twitch, YouTube, social media platforms, etc. – are tools for upkeeping your brand's online gaming real estate. With the objective of keeping a high replacement value – the cost for competitors to clone and/or replace that place in culture.

Getting it right

Buffalo Wild Wings (BWW) is an American casual dining restaurant and sports bar franchise, based in the United States, which specializes in Buffalo wings and sauces. In June 2020, BWW filed a trademark with the United States Patent and Trademark Office to become “The Official Sports Bar of Esports.”

The dining establishment also teamed up with Riot Games’ League of Legends Championship Series (LCS) esports circuit for a special promotion in February 2021. The “LCS 10 Wing Bundle” comes with fries, ten boneless wings, Red Bull, and a code to redeem a free Hextech Chest and Key. Buffalo Wild Wings also gained the right to activate the partnership throughout key seasonal events, including the LCS Spring and Summer Playoffs.



Buffalo Wild Wings

The LCS 10 Wing Bundle

As the leading sports bar chain in the USA, Buffalo Wild Wings is keen to tap into growing esports viewership and participation toward giving guests a go-to sports bar for match day. However, the notion of a sports bar for esports fans faces a cultural hurdle.

In that, sports bars are well established in American popular culture as a hub for socializing with like-minded fans or simply watching a game with family/friends. Locations like Buffalo Wild Wings have capitalized on a ritualistic relationship with athletic competition, to the extent that sports bars have developed as a unique restaurant style in the USA.

On the other hand, comparable rituals surrounding esports do not yet exist in the culture of games. The challenge for Buffalo Wild Wings’ brand marketing is to create a meaningful connection between their restaurant locations and the expression of esports fandom.

14 The Official Sports Bar of Esports [<https://uspto.report/TM/90022728>]

The following applies the previously defined branding model to demonstrate how BWW can build that connection through its esports marketing. Where the objective is to establish BWW as an iconic location for the esports community in North America (NA).

Identity value

McGreevy's, called America's first sports-themed bar, was a mainstay in Boston, Massachusetts dating back to the late 1800's, when it was the place to be for baseball players, politicians, gamblers, and die-hard fans known as the "Royal Rooters." At the time, it was the center of Boston's sporting and political worlds.

From then on, a pattern of family-owned pubs and taverns began popping up close to sports stadiums across the country. These establishments extended the tradition of European precursors that date to 15th century England. In the American versions, patrons could listen to games on the radio while they enjoyed food and drink.

That is, until 1979 when the Legends sports bar opened in Long Beach, California and became the first American establishment to broadcast live sporting events through a satellite feed. Legends marked the birth of the modern sports bar, as is known today.

Sports bars have roots in American mainstream culture that are over 120 years old. For Buffalo Wild Wings (BWW) to promote its locations as a destination for fans of digital sport, it must connect with a shared identity rooted in gaming culture. One that unifies fragmented interest in different game titles, teams, etc.



**BUFFALO
WILD
WINGS**
NA. WINGS. ESPORTS.

Towards that end, the brand's current trademark can be adapted to create an identity value of, **"The Home for North American Esports Fans."** Which ties BWW to the identity expression of esports fans who share a location/nationality. The result is a creative canvas for building relationships with a large market of customers in the USA and Canada.

The new identity value serves as a re-brand of sorts that bridges the gap between sports bars' mainstream roots and gaming culture. Meanwhile, BWW is positioned as a relevant symbol for an entire regional fanbase.

Cultural principles

Buffalo Wild Wings' (BWW) cultural branding aligns with the following themes. It is important to note that BWW is tapping into online gaming culture to connect with the esports community – instead of force fitting competitive video games into mainstream culture.

Geography

In online gaming, regions refer to centralized server hubs game publishers make available to players. Players login to the server in the geographically closest region to minimize lag, or ping, of their Internet connection. As a result, each region tends to have a unique 'meta' or playstyle.

Competition

Brackets for professional competitions are often grouped into regions, which can mirror those in traditional sports e.g., American football's NFC and AFC conferences. Global tournaments typically invite several prominent teams from each region to compete in an overall category.

Identity

BWW offers a connection with regional identity that is especially relevant in competitive video games. Given that regions provide a powerful sense of belonging for players and fans in a truly digital sport.

Legacy

BWW's identity value taps into the collective angst for NA esports fans. In that, the size of North America's player base makes it one of the major regions in most online games. But it lacks a history of competitive success. Nonetheless, iconic moments like Cloud9's victory at the ELEAGUE Major in 2018 are permanently etched in the fanbase's collective memory.



Cloud9 claims victory for North America at the 2018 ELEAGUE Major

Norms & etiquette

BWW's cultural branding is a vehicle for influencing norms and rituals in the esports community. Although, differences in gaming could dictate unique approaches. For instance, it might make sense to encourage a fan club atmosphere at restaurant locations instead of live watch parties since esports competitions can take place in different global time zones.

Social relationships

Similarities in offline location can still factor into the friendships created through online gaming, even if physical proximity is not critical to making connections.

Brand presence

Cultural branding expands Buffalo Wild Wings' (BWW) brand presence in esports. One which dates to a 2016 partnership with Turner's ELEAGUE – a Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CSGO) circuit broadcast on TBS and online.

The chain went on to host tournaments on behalf of Blizzard Entertainment's Hearthstone Fireside Gathering events and other esports watch parties. It also inked an official sponsorship with Team Dignitas, a North American-based competitive gaming organization, which included logo placement on the sleeve of Team Dignitas jerseys, player appearances at restaurants, and exclusive branded content.

However, a cultural rebrand empowers BWW to build relationships with an entire market of fans based on their membership in the NA esports community, instead of by third-party association (paid advertising). The company can then speak directly to customers from the perspective of a social hub for the region's esports community.



Geography's fundamental role in online gaming culture – and esports fandom by relation – also helps respond to shifts in gaming. For example, the emergence of new game titles becomes an opportunity to grow brand presence through the lens of gamers' physical location.

Partnerships

Esports marketing through culture creates symbolic value, which removes dependence on sponsor recall – audience recognition of sponsor name/logo/category based on association. Such that brand awareness and affinity is more likely to remain intact after a partnership ends.

Identity value, as the home for NA esports fans, promotes BWW as a symbol of togetherness for an entire region. This anchor of meaning empowers consistent and relevant messaging across partnership activations. To the point that BWW could easily expand its brand portfolio to include collegiate esports without conflict.

Cultural territory

Buffalo Wild Wings (BWW) is currently known as the home of wings, beer, and sports. Where guests are treated to the ultimate social experience for sports fans the moment they walk through the door. As a result, BWW locations symbolize an expression of sports fandom in American culture.

Cultural branding uses identity value to deliver a similar perception in esports. The result is an authentic place in gaming culture that competitors cannot easily clone. Since it is more feasible for a BWW competitor like Applebee's to sponsor a former partner like Team Dignitas, than it is to duplicate, **"The Home for North American Esports Fans."**

Pursuing sponsorship without cultural branding returns low replacement value. Esports marketing through online gaming culture yields high replacement value. It also means BWW can authentically connect with esports fans as gamers. Further opening the door to brand activations that appeal to a wider audience of gaming fans.



Sam Hartman-Kenzler ✓
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Don't you dare tell me not to get excited about worlds.

I've represented NA league of legends for 11 years. As one of the very first pro players and ever since as a caster. I don't give a [REDACTED] if we are underdogs, I will ALWAYS cheer on our teams 🙏

4:58 PM · Oct 3, 2021 from Los Angeles, CA · Twitter for Android

220 Retweets 15 Quote Tweets 7,064 Likes



WHAT'S YOUR B-DUBS NAME?

STEP 1: USE THE FIRST LETTER OF YOUR IN GAME NAME TO FIND YOUR SAUCE.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| A - SMOKY ADOBO | N - NASHVILLE HOT |
| B - BLAZIN' CAROLINA REAPER | O - ORANGE CHICKEN |
| C - CARIBBEAN JERK | P - PIZZA |
| D - DESERT HEAT | Q - CHIPOTLE BBQ |
| E - HOT | R - PARMESAN GARLIC |
| F - LEMON PEPPER | S - SALT & VINEGAR |
| G - SPICY GARLIC | T - TERIYAKI |
| H - HONEY BBQ | U - LEMON PEPPER SEASONING |
| I - MANGO HABANERO | V - MEDIUM |
| J - JAMMIN' JALAPENO | W - WILD |
| K - SWEET BBQ | X - BUFFALO SEASONING |
| L - THAI CURRY | Y - ORIGINAL BUFFALO |
| M - MILD | Z - ASIAN ZING |

STEP 2: TAKE YOUR SAUCE + YOUR FAVORITE VIDEO GAME CHARACTER.

Destination: Metaverse

The emergence of gaming as an entertainment juggernaut continues to alter the consumer landscape and upend marketing norms. Namely, a collection of digital enclaves – oriented around games – is creating a new consumer metaverse.

This metaverse – a term coined in Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel “Snow Crash” – is a futuristic collection of digital worlds that allows players to interact across platforms. The vision is for players to move across digital worlds and bring assets along for the ride. So that a Fortnite in-game cosmetic could be brought into Minecraft, for example.

In short, online gaming is a key pillar of tomorrow’s metaverse. Which explains why some are predicting that the metaverse will disrupt the marketing and advertising industry like e-commerce disrupted retail. Facebook’s announcement of investing \$50 million to build the metaverse responsibly, only adds fuel to the fire.¹⁵

One way or another, the same online gaming culture that dictates how well your esports marketing connects with gamers will apply in the metaverse. So, while many companies are still testing gaming’s mettle as a marketing vehicle. As more competitors shift budget in that direction, the time to wait on the sidelines is nearing an end.

Likewise, a cultural strategy is a must-have for charting your brand’s path to becoming iconic in esports, gaming and beyond. Especially since, more than any other form of entertainment, gaming captures the imagination and attention of younger generations; and marketing through its culture empowers your brand to create greater engagement, build relevance and meet business objectives.



15 Facebook is spending \$50 million to ‘responsibly’ build the metaverse [<https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/27/22696578/facebook-metaverse-ar-vr-fund-research-definition>]



Competitive video games are a massive market opportunity to stay top of mind with younger demographics. Esports Group is an experienced team that understands this fast-evolving, digital landscape inside and out. Above all, we understand that human connection is at the heart of effective communication.

In our fast-changing, digitally connected world, authenticity is an invaluable commodity. Esports Group has earned an authentic perspective through consistent involvement in the online gaming community for years. We are equally invested in you gaining the same.

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