



Popcult
★
MARKETING
SUMMIT

MCM LONDON • 23RD MAY 2025

Summit report

MAY 2025

POWERED BY: [experience12](#)

Introduction

Welcome to the MCM Pop Culture Summit Report, May '25.

The summit was set up last year to bring pop culture marketers from across the multiverse together in the same room to talk about their day to day experiences.

We provide the panelists the framework for discussion by briefing three fundamental questions - What changes are you seeing in your audience? How are you seeing the industry adapting? What trends do you identify going forward? But the panelists take the conversation where they want to go. That's where the real magic happens: not from the prescribed talking points, but from genuine industry experience and frontline observations all delivered with genuine passion, experience, insight and sometimes a wry smile.

Last year's summit reports didn't feel like they did the discussion justice, so we've developed the format for 2025. We hope you find reading it as interesting as we found the summit day itself.

Thanks to everyone who contributed their time and energy to speak or attend, you are all excellent human beings. We'll return in October '25, see you then.

Chris Whittle, Founder & CEO, Experience12





A wide shot of a networking area at the summit. People are engaged in conversations, some standing and some sitting at tables. The space is bright and modern, with large windows and a high ceiling.



Contents

- 5-8 KEYNOTE - Zoe Scaman -
The Fan Industrial Complex
- 9-16 BIG & SMALL SCREEN CONTENT:
Writing the Marketing Script
- 17 - 24 STRATEGY Beyond the Drop:
Evolving the big idea for a New Era of Pop Culture
- 25 - 31 GAMES MARKETING:
Adapting the Playbook
- 32 - 40 BRAND PARTNERSHIPS:
Powering Up Pop Culture and Brand Marketing
- 41 - 48 LIVE ENGAGEMENT & EVENTS:
Evolving events, activations and attention
in a fragmented world
- 49 - 55 CONSUMER PRODUCTS:
Pop Culture you can hold
- 56 - 66 CONCLUSIONS
Drawing out the common themes

THE FAN-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX.

HOW FANDOM BECAME INFRASTRUCTURE, AND WHY IP WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.





Keynote: The Fan Industrial Complex

ZOE SCAMAN

“How Fandom Became Infrastructure—And Why IP Will Never Be the Same

Fandom is no longer a sideshow, it's the scaffolding. In an era where the audience builds lore faster than studios, where mods outperform official releases, and where greenlights are dictated by hashtags, fandom has become infrastructure. It's not a marketing lever; it's the engine.

Zoe unpacked the rise of the Fan-Industrial Complex: a cultural and commercial power shift that's redefining how IP is created, distributed, expanded, and sustained. From Rockstar acquiring modders to fan campaigns reviving cancelled shows, we'll explore how control is collapsing, what co-creation really looks like, and why the future of narrative universes depends on working with, not against, the people who care most.

This isn't fan service—it's a new operating system”

It functions as:

IP Studio

GameFam developed Sonic Speed Simulator on Roblox as a fan driven experience. Sega licensed it officially, and it became the most playoffered experience on the platform with 500K+ visits.

“Fans don't just consume IP anymore. They stabilise it, they build it, they evolve it.”

ZOE SCAMAN

Takeaways

IP CONTROL IS DEAD - COLLABORATION IS KING:

Legacy IP protection models that lock down content are fundamentally broken. Success requires shifting from controlling IP to orchestrating collaborative ecosystems where fans become co-authors, not just consumers.

FANS ARE INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT AUDIENCE:

Fandom has evolved from marketing afterthought to core business infrastructure. Fans now function as R&D departments, QA teams, marketing engines, and franchise rescue squads that actively stabilize, build, and evolve intellectual property.

MEASURE VITALITY, NOT VANITY:

Traditional metrics (views, likes, reach) fail to capture fandom health. Success requires measuring fan fiction velocity, cosplay density, remix response lag, and fan-led micro-economies rather than superficial engagement numbers.

BUILD SYSTEMS, NOT STORIES:

Every content release should be treated as an "OS update" to a collaborative system rather than a finished product, creating scaffolding for different fan engagement levels from casual amplifiers to hardcore architects.

Zoe says is better than we ever could, access the complete presentation on Zoe's Substack:
Musings Of A Wandering Mind



PANEL 1: Big & Small Screen Content:

WRITING THE MARKETING SCRIPT

PANELISTS:



ADAM RUBINS
FOUNDER
THE ARC



AMBER TAYLOR
CO-FOUNDER
BEAM & CO



JEROME MAZANDARANI
ANIME CONSULTANT
AND PRODUCER



MODERATOR:
ANDY GIBBONS



"WE ARE SEEING AUDIENCES BEING EXTREMELY DISTRACTED AND HIGHLY DEMANDING. WE ARE SEEING THIS CHOICE PARALYSIS THAT THEY HAVE IN TERMS OF THEIR TIME AND THEIR OPTIONS."

ADAM RUBINS

The New Marketing Reality: When Sleep Becomes Your Biggest Competitor

In a world where viewers face ten streaming platforms, autoplay trailers, and endless "must-watch" recommendations, film and TV marketers have reached a critical inflection point. As Amber Taylor observed, "Netflix's biggest competitor is Sleep" not other platforms, not other content, but the fundamental human need for rest. This isn't just industry hyperbole; it's a new reality where on screen content more than ever competes against every possible use of human attention.

The traditional marketing playbook of broad awareness and media saturation has not just become ineffective it feels like it's become counterproductive. Adam Rubins captures this perfectly: "Audiences are extremely distracted and highly demanding," existing in what he calls "scroll, skip and silence mode." When viewers can access 20,000 titles on Prime Video and 8,000 on Netflix, the marketing challenge isn't just getting noticed, it's staying relevant long enough to convert attention into engagement and viewership.



Cultural Moments: Beyond Algorithmic Optimisation

The panel advocated that sustainable marketing success requires moving beyond algorithmic optimisation toward creating genuine cultural moments.

Cultural moments can no longer be manufactured through traditional campaign thinking, they are emerging from ecosystem thinking. Campaigns that are succeeding are creating space for fan participation, community discussion, and word-of-mouth amplification that are sparked by them transcend marketing budgets. It's the holy grail of marketing word of mouth and engagement being a budget multiplier.

The most successful marketers are no longer building campaigns, they're building entire ecosystems around their content. This represents a shift from the traditional launch-and-sustain model to what Taylor describes as creating "entertainment IP" rather than just promoting it. The almost invisible success of Anime in modern fan culture is a direct result of this shift.

"54% OF THE DEMO EXPRESSED A FANSHIP FOR ANIME. IT INDEXES HIGHER THAN KPOP... IT'S OVER INDEXING ABOVE SPORTS NOW, THE NFL, THAT ONLY DOES 48%."

JEROME MAZANDARANI



A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blue t-shirt, is speaking into a black microphone. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a colorful, stylized graphic featuring a yellow character with a large 'X' on its forehead and a blue character with a red tongue. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“Netflix's number one competitor is Sleep. Not YouTube, not the creator economy, not the streaming landscape.”

AMBER TAYLOR

“IT'S NOT DIFFICULT TO SELL IP TO AN EXISTING AUDIENCE... BUT IT'S VERY, VERY DIFFICULT NOW TO FIND A NEW AUDIENCE.”

ADAM RUBINS

The New Audience Discovery Crisis

While maintaining existing fandoms remains achievable, Rubins identified "finding new audiences" as the industry's most pressing challenge. The traditional funnel of broad awareness driving discovery has broken down in an oversaturated market where, as he puts it, audiences exist in "scroll, skip and silence mode."

This is particularly acute for entertainment that requires time investment. Rubins noted his own children (17 and 12) "have zero interest in going to the cinema because they want to be at home playing Fortnite." The competition isn't just other content, it's entirely different engagement models that provide immediate gratification and social connection.

The problem isn't just solved by more marketing. It's rethinking what entertainment means to audiences who've grown up with interactive, social, immediately responsive media.



Marketers Must Learn from the New Masters of the Attention Economy Universe

An identified and significant shift in film and TV marketing are the adoption of creator strategies. "Creators are killing it because they know their fans better than any studio," Taylor observed, highlighting why Beast Games moved to Amazon and Sidemen partnered with Netflix.

Creators have solved the attention problem that traditional marketers are now struggling with. They've mastered what Rubins calls "co-creation and the importance of working with audiences to go out there and do the job for you." This was characterised as studios thinking in terms of campaigns, creators thinking in terms of follower relationships.

Creators have built the ecosystem model that film and TV marketing should increasingly replicate. They create content, engage communities, respond in real-time to trends, and maintain ongoing relationships between major releases.

**"CREATORS ARE KILLING IT
BECAUSE THEY KNOW
THEIR FANS BETTER THAN
ANY STUDIO"**

AMBER TAYLOR



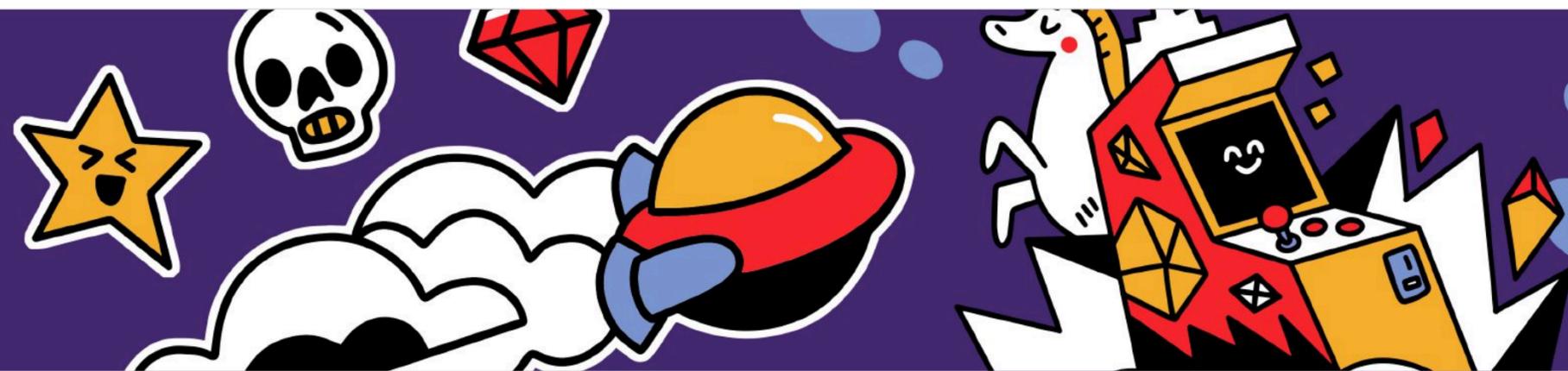
"THE PROBLEM WE'RE SEEING IN THE INDUSTRY NOW IS THAT WE'RE LOSING THAT SORT OF BOLD, CREATIVE THINKING BECAUSE MARKETING IS BECOMING TOO GENERIC"

ADAM RUBINS

The Consolidation Paradox

Even as the creator economy explodes, traditional entertainment is consolidating into "fewer, bigger, better" strategies. Studios are doubling down on known IP with mass audience appeal, with 95% of marketing campaigns focusing on established franchises. This creates a potentially troubling dynamic where, as Taylor warns, "there are a lot of titles that will get to cinema, that will get on streaming that no one will ever find because they will be lost in a library of content."

Anime's consolidation into platforms like Crunchyroll and Netflix, brings "Hollywood-style marketing but potentially losing authentic fan connection." Mazandarani worries about "losing that authentic sense of wonder and delight that we shared as the professionals leading these campaigns with our audience" as corporate structures impose controlled communication and sanitised messaging. The very fan authenticity that built these properties risks being suffocated by the corporate machinery meant to scale them.



Takeaways

1 THE MAIN COMPETITOR IS SLEEP

Every content marketing campaign increasingly competes against every possible use of human attention. Content's biggest competitor isn't other platforms, it's sleep.

2 NEW AUDIENCE DISCOVERY IS BROKEN

Finding new audiences has become content marketing's biggest challenge in an oversaturated market with distracted consumers.

3 CULTURAL MARKETING BEATS ALGORITHMS

Sustainable marketing success requires creating genuine cultural moments that generate lasting fan advocacy and audience engagement.

4 CREATOR SUPREMACY

Creators outperform studio marketing because they know their fans better. Studios are playing catch-up. The student has become the master.

"With infinite choice, only marketing that builds belonging and enables cultural moments is cutting through the noise"

PANEL 2: Strategy Beyond the Drop:

EVOLVING THE BIG IDEA
FOR A NEW ERA OF POP
CULTURE

PANELISTS:



LILY ADAMS
CO-FOUNDER
NERD PIRATES



TRACEY MCGARRIGAN
CEO & FOUNDER
ANSIBEL COMMS



VIOLET ADAMS
FOUNDER
NERD PIRATES



MODERATOR:
ANDY GIBBONS

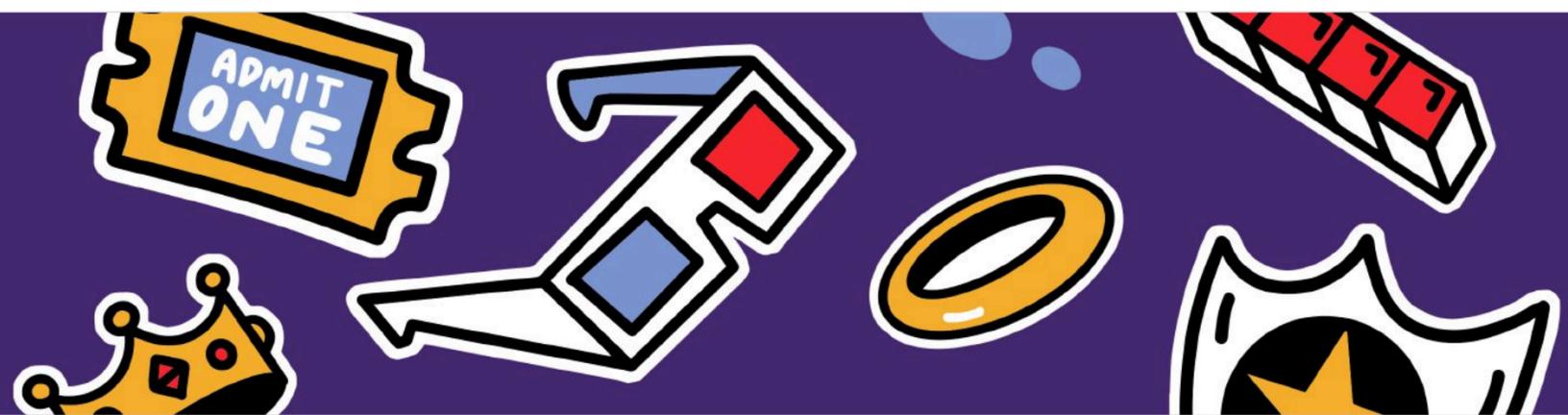
"THE FIRST THING THAT PEOPLE WILL SAY IS, WE NEED TO BE ON TIKTOK. WE NEED TO BE HERE. WE NEED TO BE THERE, WITHOUT THINKING WHY?"

TRACY MCGARRIGAN

The Strategy Foundation Crisis: Why Before What

The fundamental challenge facing modern marketing teams isn't tactical, it's strategic. As Tracy McGarrigan bluntly observed, "The first thing that people will say is, we need to be on TikTok. We need to be here. We need to be there, without thinking why?" This tactical-first marketing approach has become the industry's most dangerous trap, leading to unsustainable marketing momentum and failed campaigns that can burn through marketing budgets without building lasting engagement.

The marketing problem doesn't seem to be that companies lack tactical options, they're drowning in them. From TikTok marketing to YouTube Shorts campaigns, from Discord community marketing to live streaming platform promotion, the marketing tactical landscape has exploded while strategic marketing thinking has stagnated. McGarrigan's experience shows that "success is where they begin, it isn't just... having somebody play your game and say, yeah, it was really nice... it's that moment where you can open the door to an ongoing relationship."



A woman with dark hair and glasses is speaking into a microphone. She is wearing a blue and white striped shirt and an orange lanyard. The background is a colorful, abstract graphic with yellow, purple, and blue tones, featuring stylized shapes like a hand and a cube.

“The biggest thing the industry needs to think about is redefining what it means by risk.”

LILY ADAMS

The Mid-Form Content Revolution

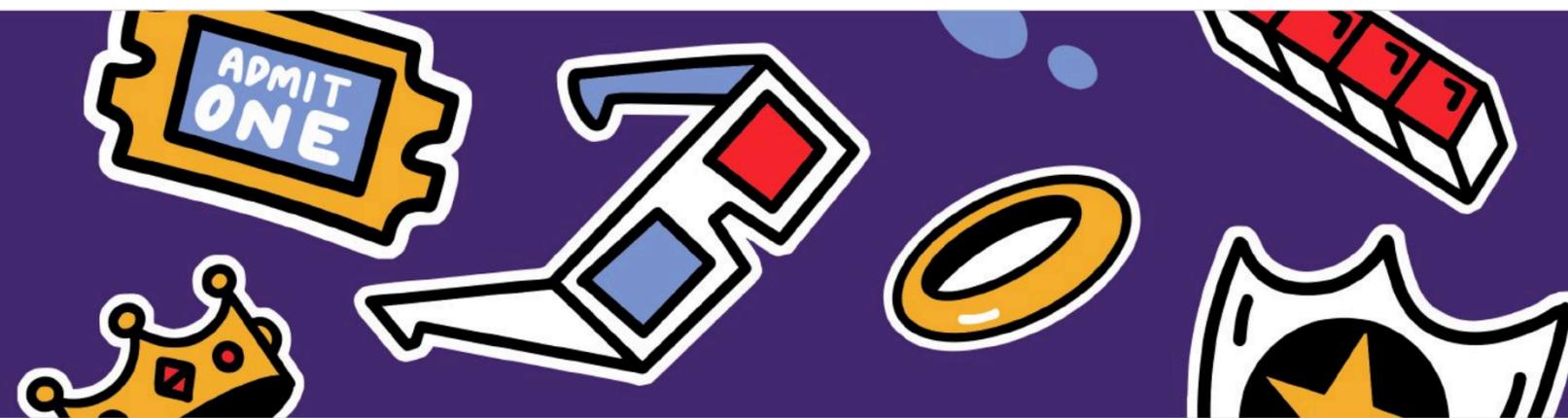
The panel identified a strategic marketing opportunity marketers should explore further: mid-form content. "Mid form represents a really important answer, it's deep engagement, which for fans who tend to spend their life on deep engagement platforms like AO3, Discord or Reddit is essential."

Content between 1-8 minutes offers deeper engagement than short-form while remaining accessible. As AI proliferates shorter content, thoughtful mid-form becomes increasingly distinctive.

The insight isn't about length, it's understanding different audience segments require different engagement depths. While casual viewers engage with 30-second clips, building fandom requires deeper engagement that mid-form enables.

“MID FORM REPRESENTS A REALLY IMPORTANT ANSWER. IT'S DEEP ENGAGEMENT, WHICH FOR FANS WHO TEND TO SPEND THEIR LIFE ON PLATFORMS LIKE AO3, DISCORD OR REDDIT?”

VIOLET ADAMS



“EVENTS ARE SUCH AN EXCITING WAY TO ENGAGE DIRECTLY WITH AN AUDIENCE, GET INSTANT FEEDBACK... AND YOU GET THAT SPIKE IN YOUR MARKETING, AND NOW YOU CAN SEE THAT SPIKE.”

TRACEY MCGARRIGAN

The Events Renaissance

The resurgence of events as marketing powerhouses was highlighted across the panel. McGarrigan observed that "events are back, in a way that fundamentally changes audience engagement and ROI measurement".

The strategic shift here is profound: events are no longer just promotional tactics but core relationship-building tools. They create what McGarrigan describes as "that spike in your marketing" that becomes visible and measurable through social amplification. The gaming industry, in particular, has rediscovered events as spaces where "you can open the door to an ongoing relationship with that gamer."

This renaissance represents a broader strategic principle: in an oversaturated digital landscape, physical experiences create the emotional resonance and community connection that drives sustainable fan engagement. Events aren't marketing expenses, they're relationship investments with measurable returns.



The Fandom Fluency Gap

There can be an organisational disconnect between those who understand fandom and those making strategic decisions. Lily Adams emphasised that "people in fandom are expecting marketing to be more fandom fluent than ever," yet "but it unfortunately, is not always being reflected brands or IPs content."

This isn't just communication structures, it's issues undermining basic effectiveness. Community managers understanding fan behaviour are less likely to be integrated into strategic planning processes, resulting in strategies missing fundamental audience insights and tactics that can feel tone-deaf.

Integrating fan insights "throughout the entire business pipeline from product ideation to launch," and bringing community intelligence into boardrooms from the people on the frontlines is a new imperative in a congested and volatile market.

“PEOPLE IN FANDOM ARE EXPECTING MARKETING TO BE MORE FANDOM FLUENT THAN EVER”

LILY ADAMS



“NOBODY HAS ANY MONEY. I MEAN, WE'RE LITERALLY STRIPPED BARE, WHICH IS ACTUALLY ALSO REALLY INTERESTING AND A FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY”

TRACEY MCGARRIGAN

Resource Constraints as Marketing Innovation Catalysts

Budget constraints are forcing creative approaches often more effective than traditional high-spend campaigns.

This constraint-driven innovation pushes companies to "redefine risk and explore untested strategies." As Lily Adams noted, "the biggest thing the industry needs to think about is redefining what it means by risk." Playing safe with expensive campaigns may be riskier than experimenting with lower-cost, community-driven approaches.

Resource constraints force focus on genuine relationships rather than buying reach. Being "stripped bare" forces innovation that larger, better-funded competitors miss because they default to expensive solutions, creating opportunities for smaller companies competing on authenticity and agility.



Takeaways

MID-FORM CONTENT ADVANTAGE

Marketing content between 1-8 minutes offers deep engagement for fans while remaining accessible to newcomers.

IRL RENAISSANCE

Physical marketing experiences create emotional resonance and measurable social amplification that digital marketing alone cannot achieve.

ORGANISATIONAL FANDOM INTEGRATION

Fan marketing insights must be integrated throughout business pipeline, not confined to community marketing management.

CONSTRAINT- DRIVEN INNOVATION

Marketing resource limitations force creative approaches that often outperform traditional high-spend marketing campaigns.

“Sustainable success is increasingly derived from building ongoing relationships through communities online and IRL, strategic content use and constraint-driven innovation”

PANEL 3: GAMES:

ADAPTING THE MARKETING PLAYBOOK

PANELISTS:



MINGZHEN LI
FOUNDER
PLAYFUL DIGITAL



AYMAN MOHAMMED
PARTNER DEVELOPMENT
MANAGER
EXERTIS



STEPHANIE LORD
SENIOR GLOBAL COMMUNITY
MANAGER
METRO FRANCHISE TEAM
DEEP SILVER



MODERATOR:
ANDY GIBBONS



GAMERS ARE BECOMING MORE PICKY AND CHOOSY ABOUT WHERE THEY SPEND THEIR MONEY."

AYMAN MOHAMMED

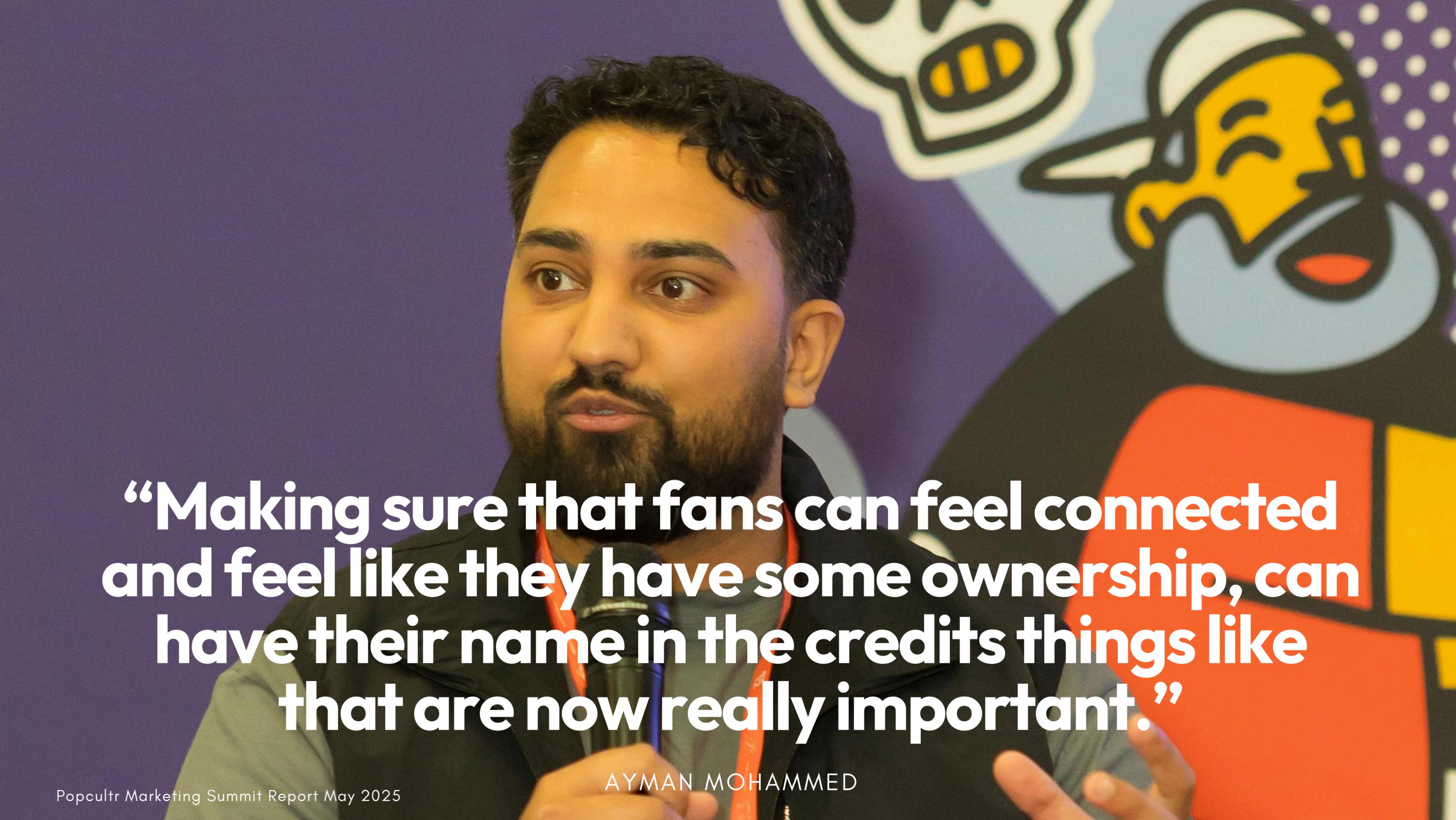
The Marketing Price Reality Revolution

The gaming marketing landscape faces dual pressure: studios operating with reduced marketing budgets while gamers become "more picky and choosy about where they spend their money."

This forces marketing teams to abandon traditional premium pricing campaigns for value-driven strategies using bundling, Kickstarter funding, and alternative revenue models.

Mohammed's critical insight reveals a marketing intelligence challenge: "the loudest voices are in the cheapest seats" vocal feedback from low-spending customers doesn't represent broader market sentiment. Successful gaming marketing now requires sophisticated community analysis to "sift through that player sentiment" and identify actionable insights from meaningful audience segments.



A man with dark curly hair and a beard is speaking into a microphone. He is wearing a dark jacket over a grey shirt and a red lanyard. The background features a large, stylized cartoon character with a yellow face, blue body, and red and yellow accents. The character has a wide, open mouth and is looking towards the left. The overall scene is set against a purple background with white polka dots.

“Making sure that fans can feel connected and feel like they have some ownership, can have their name in the credits things like that are now really important.”

AYMAN MOHAMMED

Global Expansion: The China Imperative

Li reveals games marketing's biggest opportunity: "30% of Steam users are using Chinese language" represents a fundamental shift in gaming's global marketing dynamics.

This expansion demands cultural marketing approaches beyond simple translation.

The strategic distinction Li emphasises: "localize your campaign, not just translate into Chinese" it requires marketing teams with genuine cultural expertise, not just language skills. Success demands understanding local gaming behaviors, platform preferences, and community dynamics for effective marketing campaigns.

Li's strategic imperative: "if you don't do anything to the market, you won't get any reward." Companies mastering global marketing localisation access growth opportunities impossible in saturated Western markets.

“I THINK CREATING CHANNELS FOR YOU TO BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE AND ENGAGE DIRECTLY WITH THE CHINESE PLAYERS, WILL BE KEY.”

MINGZHEN LEE



“LET DEVS COOK, A LOT OF THE CONTROL IS NOW WITH THE CORE DEVELOPERS AS WELL AS THE MAIN LEAD STUDIOS”

STEPHANIE LORD

Creative Authenticity Over Trend-Chasing

"Trend chasing has to be dead... games take too long to make to be chasing trends." Gaming's 2-5 year development cycles mean trend-based marketing decisions become obsolete before reaching market.

A "let devs cook" philosophy recognises authentic, passionate development creates more marketable games than formulaic trend-following. Players sense authenticity, making it powerful marketing differentiation in oversaturated markets.

This requires marketing teams to liaise with Devs and key into becoming fluent storytellers who communicate the Dev's unique creative vision than fitting games into predetermined market categories.



Early Engagement and Rapid Iteration: The New Development

Gaming's long development cycles create unique challenges and would benefit from early player engagement throughout development processes. Traditional models keeping games secret until launch are giving way to strategies building anticipation and community investment early, transforming players into advocates rather than critics.

Early engagement serves multiple strategic purposes: preventing costly late-stage changes through invaluable feedback and enabling "failing fast" principles crucial for high-cost, extended development timelines. Getting negative feedback on prototypes is infinitely preferable to discovering fundamental problems after years of development investment.

Platforms like Discord and Reddit provide direct, unfiltered feedback from engaged community members, contrasting sharply with traditional market research offering broad but shallow insights. Early engagement creates development processes inherently responsive to player needs, producing better games and marketing grounded in genuine player feedback.

“GETTING IN THAT EARLY FOCUS AND PROTOTYPING AND SHOWING USERS THIS IS WHAT COULD BE ACHIEVED, IS REALLY, REALLY IMPORTANT”

AYMAN MOHAMMED



Takeaways

1 PRICE SENSITIVITY STRATEGY

Focus on value demonstration through bundling and alternative funding rather than competing purely on price.

2 COMMUNITY INTELLIGENCE INTEGRATION

Bridge the gap between community managers and executives by integrating player sentiment into strategic planning.

3 GLOBAL-FIRST APPROACH

Treat international markets (especially China) as primary opportunities requiring cultural understanding, not just translation.

4 AUTHENTIC CREATION OVER TRENDS

Support unique creative visions rather than chasing market trends, recognising authenticity as a marketing differentiator.

“Gaming’s recent reality is encouraging marketing to adapt to embrace more community integration, global engagement and highlight creative authenticity”

PANEL 4: Partnerships:

POWERING UP POP
CULTURE AND BRAND
MARKETING

PANELISTS:



ADAM HARRIS
FOUNDER
GAGGL.TV



SARA RODRIGUEZ
DIRECTOR OF CLIENT
STRATEGY
FANDOM



RICHARD BARNES
CEO
BRIDGE



MODERATOR:
ASHANTI OMKAR

**“EVERYONE'S WATCHING
JUST BECAUSE THEY WANT
TO BE PART OF THE
CONVERSATION... FAN
BEHAVIOR IS BECOMING
MAINSTREAM”**

SARA RODRIGUEZ

The Fluid Audience Challenge

Entertainment marketing and partnerships face fundamental audience behaviour shifts where traditional franchise loyalty gives way to conversation-driven consumption. Rodriguez captures this transformation: "Everyone's watching just because they want to be part of the conversation."

This requires partnership marketing strategies that respond to rapidly shifting cultural conversations rather than relying on stable audience segments. "fan behaviour is becoming mainstream" means partnership marketing must account for audiences expecting participatory experiences across all demographics, not just dedicated fandoms.

Successful partnership marketing now demands agility to capitalise on trending content that captures widespread attention, requiring frameworks operating across multiple content types and audience behaviours simultaneously.



A man with a shaved head, wearing a black t-shirt and a red lanyard, is seated and speaking into a microphone. He is gesturing with his hands as he speaks. The background is a dark blue wall with some abstract light-colored shapes.

“ The audience now is just demanding and expecting a lot more from a collaboration. The brand has to bring its own personality and its own storytelling as well, it's got to give the fan more of that IP through the channel ”

RICHARD BARNES

The Generational Challenge

Harris identifies a critical partnership marketing challenge: "anyone over 40 doesn't realise the power of gaming channels." This generational disconnect affects every partnership strategy and measurement approach.

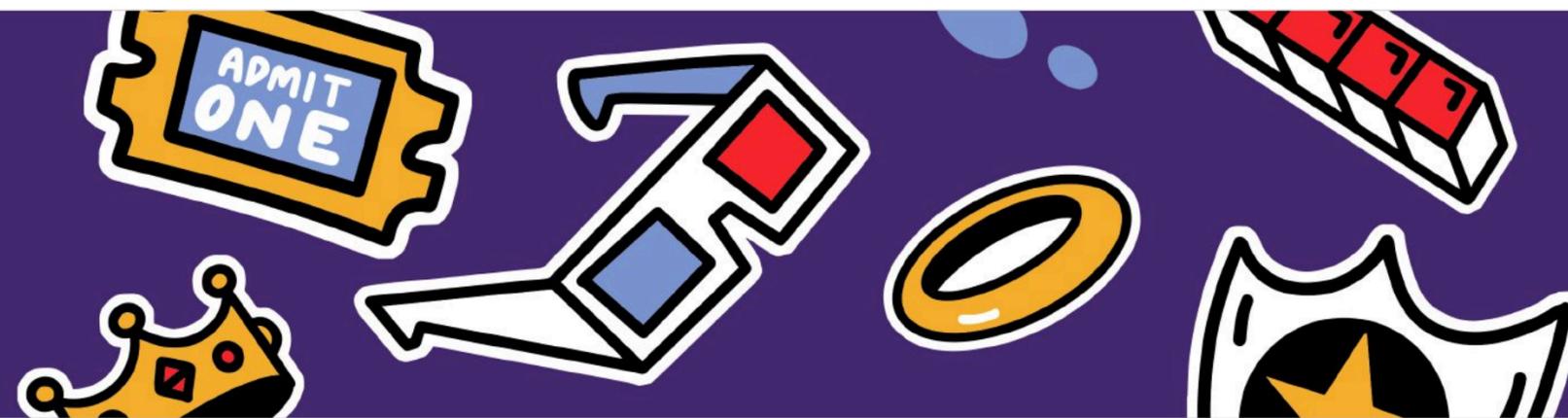
The "iPad generation" expects interactive responses to all inputs. This creates demand for gamified partnership experiences across all media, including TV content becoming collaborative and interactive rather than passive consumption.

Decision-makers measuring partnerships against traditional KPIs miss the actual power of gaming, live streaming, and creator-driven channels dominating younger audience attention. This creates partnerships optimised for metrics that don't reflect actual audience behavior.

Partnership marketing success requires bridging this generational understanding through education, cross-generational teams, and evolved measurement frameworks capturing community engagement over impression delivery.

"THEY'VE BEEN BROUGHT UP AS THE IPAD & IPHONE GENERATION... FOR EVERY KIND OF INPUT THEY REQUIRE AN OUTPUT IN RETURN. MY SON COULD USE AN IPAD AT ONE AND EXPECTED NETFLIX ON THE TV TO OPERATE LIKE THE IPAD"

ADAM HARRIS



“THERE'S A WHOLE NEW WORLD OUT THERE. A BRAND CAN WORK WITH AN IP AND NOT TOUCH ANY OF THEIR TRADITIONAL ASSETS AND ACTUALLY HAVE A LOT, LOT MORE FUN WITH IT CREATIVELY.”

RICHARD BARNES

Authentic Partnership Integration Over Logo Placement

Barnes articulates partnership marketing evolution: "A formulaic partnership does not go down as well as it could" Modern audiences demand meaningful brand collaborations which provide genuine value rather than just a superficial logo placement within existing content.

Successful partnerships require "a real, good reason for brands and entertainment properties to come together" an authentic integration where both parties contribute creative collaboration enhancing entertainment value. Barnes emphasises creative opportunities: "there's a whole world out there... have a lot more fun with it creatively."

Standout success comes from creating entertainment value giving fans more meaningful engagement with IP through brand channels rather than exposing them to obvious commercial messaging. Partnership marketing must evolve beyond traditional metrics capturing quality of creative collaboration and audience response to integrated experiences.



A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a black t-shirt with a colorful graphic and a red lanyard, is sitting on a dark couch and speaking into a microphone. He is gesturing with his hands. To his right, a woman with long dark hair and glasses is partially visible, also wearing a red lanyard. The background is a colorful, stylized graphic with yellow and red shapes on a purple background.

“Anyone over the age of 40... doesn't seem to realise how incredibly powerful gaming channels are.”

ADAM HARRIS

37

Real-Time Cultural Responsiveness

Rodriguez identifies critical partnership marketing capability requirements: responding quickly to unexpected cultural moments. Her example of "GTA trailer dropped and got 100 million views in 24 hours" illustrates speed at which cultural opportunities emerge and disappear.

Traditional partnership marketing operates on longer cycles unable to respond to real-time cultural developments. Successful brands need "both planned partnerships and agile capabilities" rather than relying solely on predetermined partnership calendars.

An agile response to cultural moments often provide highest-value partnership opportunities because they capture widespread attention and genuine audience interest. This requires considering organisational capabilities that can present institutional difficulties : rapid decision-making, cross-channel coordination, and creative teams developing appropriate responses quickly.

“WHEN THE GTA TRAILER DROPPED SOME MONTHS AGO AND IT GOT 100 MILLION VIEWS IN 24 HOURS. WE DIDN'T KNOW THAT WAS GOING TO DROP, IT OBVIOUSLY GOT A LOT OF TRAFFIC”

SARA RODRIGUEZ



“WANT THINGS THAT ARE FAR MORE AUTHENTIC, LESS CURATED. LET THEM PLAY WITH IT. LET THEM ROLL AROUND WITH THE BRAND AND THE IP, AND HAVE SOME FUN”

ADAM HARRIS

Strategic Partnership Evolution

Modern partnerships now bring brands and properties together for a moment as genuine cultural participants together the aim being to be seen or to be participants in a cultural moment rather as external advertisers interrupting cultural content.

This demands shifts in the traditional partnerships viewpoint, development, measurement, and optimisation.

Successful partnerships are developing to deliver agile capabilities enabling participation in real-time cultural moments while maintaining strategic relationships providing sustained engagement. Most importantly, recognising effective partnerships requires genuine understanding and respect for communities and cultures they seek to engage.



Takeaways

AGILE CULTURAL CONVERSATION PARTICIPATION

Brands must actively engage in evolving cultural dialogues and trending conversations rather than relying on static demographic targeting strategies.

CREATOR CULTURE COMPETENCY

Partnership teams need a deep understanding creator ecosystems to develop relevant strategies. One size no longer fits all.

AUTHENTIC CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Partnerships should involve genuine creative input and shared vision rather than superficial brand placement or simple sponsorship arrangements.

REAL-TIME CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Companies must build internal systems enabling rapid response to cultural trends and moments while maintaining brand authenticity and consistency.

“Modern partnerships require authentic cultural collaboration meeting interactive generation expectations through creative integration and real-time responsiveness”

PANEL 5: LIVE ENGAGEMENT & EVENTS:

EVOLVING EVENTS, ACTIVATIONS AND ATTENTION IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

PANELISTS:



CHARLIE COOPER HENNIKER
HEAD OF BRAND EXPERIENCES,
ITV PLC



GEORGE BATEMAN
MANAGING DIRECTOR
EXPERIENCE12



NEALE MAKER
TRANSVERSAL MARKETING MANAGER
/ ESPORTS MANAGER
NORTHERN EUROPE AND CANADA
UBISOFT



MODERATOR:
ASHANTI OMKAR



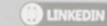
Charlie Cooper Henniker
Head of Brand Experiences
ITV plc



George Bateman
Managing Director
Experience12



Neale Maker
Transversal Marketing Manager
/ Esports Manager for Northern
Europe and Canada



BRINGING PROPERTIES INTO THE REAL WORLD AND GIVING FANS SOMETHING MORE EMOTIVE AND IMMERSIVE IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST TRENDS OF THE MOMENT

GEORGE BATEMAN

The IRL Renaissance: Physical Experience as Strategic Response

Pop Culture faces unprecedented content oversaturation with therefore the war for consumers attention across all verticals is real and they're all competing with each other and everything else.

Physical experiences provide unique advantages digital cannot replicate: emotional depth, community connection, and memorable moments that cut through infinite scroll fatigue. As Bateman explains, "bringing them into the real world and giving them something more emotive and immersive" creates premium value through natural scarcity.

Where audiences can access unlimited content instantly, exclusive physical presence becomes a differentiated offering commanding attention and justifying investment through comprehensive amplification across multiple touchpoints and sustainable relationship building.





“We bring stakeholders on the journey, all the ups and downs... the more they trust us, and the more they feel they have been part of that process, the better for all of us.”

CHARLIE COOPER HENNIKER

Community-Centric Design Over Product Demonstration

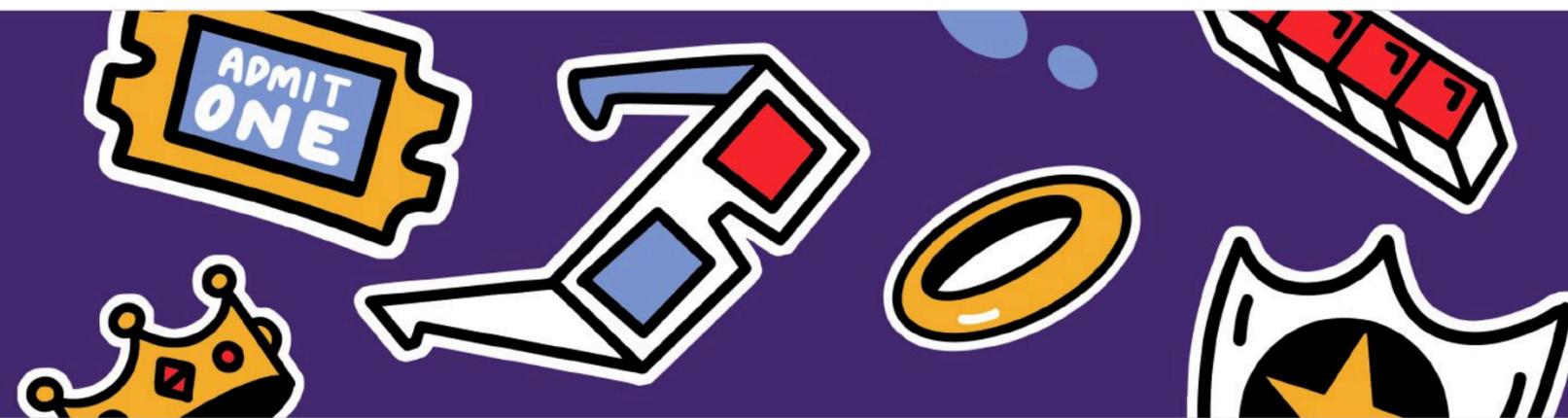
Fan events have evolved there's a shift from product-focused to community-celebrating experiences. Maker observes "those days of massive stands with 300 stations don't exist anymore" because development cycles and audience expectations have fundamentally changed.

Successful fan events must now work even harder to celebrate existing fan investment through immersive experience, meaningful talent use, developer access, voice actor interactions, and behind-the-scenes creative insights fostering a relationship rather than a one off throwaway engagement.

This reflects practical realities, timelines, and early access approaches making traditional preview events less relevant but community celebration seen as an opportunity to strengthen long-term relationships and drive sustained engagement and advocacy.

“THOSE DAYS OF MASSIVE STANDS WITH 300 STATIONS TO PLAY GAMES DON'T EXIST ANYMORE, BECAUSE THE GAMES INDUSTRY HAS MOVED ON.”

NEALE MAKER



“THE EVENTS AREN'T JUST BEING PART OF A WIDER CAMPAIGN. THE EVENT IS BECOMING THE CAMPAIGN MOMENT WITH OUT OF HOME, INFLUENCER AND SOCIAL BEING BUILT AROUND IT”

GEORGE BATEMAN

Multi-Touchpoint Amplification: Events as Strategic Platforms

Physical experiences are now treated as anchor points for comprehensive digital amplification rather than standalone events. Maker's framework captures this: "if you have your anchor and work out all those different pulse points" it transforms events into content creation engines.

Planned amplification includes pre-event community building, live content capture, post-event relationship development, and cross-platform integration.

Success measurement extends beyond attendance to comprehensive digital impact: press coverage, social sharing, influencer content, community advocacy, and long-term relationship building.



A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a white shirt and a red lanyard, is speaking into a microphone. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**“What a fan
wants is to be
the protagonist
of their own
story”**

GEORGE BATEMAN

Democratisation of Amplification: Beyond Metropolitan Concentration

Geographic expansion beyond high-footfall metropolitan areas creates untapped engagement opportunities in a world of distributed content creation. The Creator and Influencer ecosystem has democratised the geographic distribution of amplification.

Regional locations provide compelling reasons for using them: entire communities rally around rare premium experiences, local media provides dedicated coverage, authentic appreciation creates genuine social amplification. When major branded experiences appear in smaller communities, they become significant local events capturing attention impossible in oversaturated metropolitan markets.

Budget allowing optimal strategy balances metropolitan reach with unexpected community engagement combining broad reach with authentic community connection and unique local content creation opportunities.

“METROPOLITAN AUDIENCES ARE SO MUCH MORE SELECTIVE THAN THEY USED TO BE, AND THEY NEED TO HAVE A REALLY GOOD INCENTIVE ATTEND”

CHARLIE COOPER HENNIKER



Takeaways

1. IRL HAS RETURNED MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER

In-person experiences have rebounded, not just as complements to campaigns but often as the campaign itself. These experiences cut through digital fatigue and foster deeper emotional engagement.

2. AUDIENCES WANT PERSONAL, NOT GENERIC

Fans now expect experiences tailored to them, not generic IP moments. Whether it's immersive dinners in 'jungles' or customised trading cards, events must feel specific and interactive.

3. EVENTS ARE STRATEGIC ANCHOR POINTS

Instead of adding events onto a campaign, top brands are designing entire campaigns *around* live moments, using them as storytelling engines across press, social, and influencer content.

4. REGIONAL IS UNDERSERVICED

Events outside of expected regular metropolitan locations. It's not always about footfall; it's about cultural relevance going to creators and influencer's back yards and emotional connection.

“Physical experiences provide emotional touchpoints and community connection that cut through digital oversaturation”

PANEL 6: Consumer Products:

POP CULTURE YOU CAN
HOLD

PANELISTS:



AUSTIN PANNELL
POP CULTURE MANAGER
HMV



MATT KNOTT
MD AND CO FOUNDERD
LUDO GAMELABS



MODERATOR:
ASHANTI OMKAR

“COLLECTING IS A REALLY COMPELLING WAY TO DEMONSTRATE YOUR STATUS, RIGHT? IT'S A BIT OF A STATUS SYMBOL.”

MATT KNOT

The Rise of Personal Expression Through Collecting and Displaying

Austin Pannell identifies a powerful trend where consumers use pop culture products as personal identity markers in professional spaces whether at home or in the office: "Clean desk policies are long gone... they want to display their personality as much as possible on a desk.

If I can have a Pop Vinyl that shows I'm the biggest Pokemon fan, you might strike up a conversation at your office."

This shift from hidden collecting to public display creates new marketing opportunities. Products become conversation starters and relationship builders rather than just collectibles.

Consumers actively photograph and share their desk setups, creating organic user-generated content that amplifies brand reach without additional marketing spend.



“Pop culture is now about identity. You don’t just love a thing — you wear it, display it, post it, pre-order it.”

AUSTIN PANNELL

The Experiential Pre-Purchase Phenomenon

Consumers want to "purchase a t-shirt before the movie comes out, so they can be sat there in the cinema wearing something.

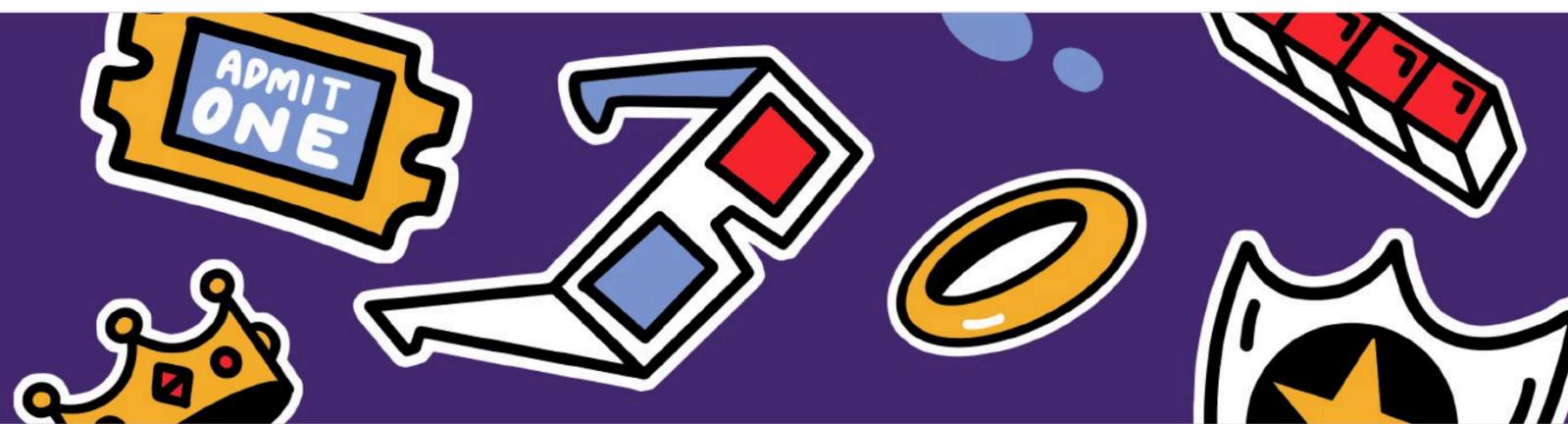
This represents a shift from post-consumption merchandising to pre-experience identity alignment.

HMV responds by launching activations 4-6 weeks before movie releases, allowing fans to "walk into the cinema before they've even seen the movie, if they trust the franchise, with their pop culture products to truly get the experience."

This creates extended engagement windows and builds anticipation while generating early revenue streams that traditional post-release merchandising cannot match.

**"PEOPLE WANT TO
PURCHASE A T-SHIRT
BEFORE THE MOVIE COMES
OUT, SO THEY CAN BE SAT
THERE IN THE CINEMA
WEARING SOMETHING."**

AUSTIN PANNELL



“MYSTERY BOXES... YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT 72% AND THEN 86% YEAR ON YEAR GROWTH... OUR LARGEST GROWING FORMAT BY QUITE A LARGE MARGIN”

AUSTIN PANNELL

Format Innovation Driving Massive Growth

Mystery boxes represent one of the most explosive growth categories, with Austin reporting "72 and then 86% year on year growth" for HMV. This format success demonstrates how packaging innovation can revitalize entire product categories and create new engagement models.

Plush products have "absolutely dominated for the last two, three years" with examples like Squishmallows becoming social media phenomena. These format innovations prove that marketing success often comes from reimagining how consumers interact with products rather than just creating new IP, offering accessible innovation opportunities for brands.



The Shift Toward Individual Collection Curation

Rather than mass standardization, the trend moves toward personalised collection building where "no Funko collection is the same." Austin observes that consumers can now "really dive into what they like rather than having to buy a knock off tee from somewhere."

This individualisation creates stronger emotional connections and higher lifetime value. Matt Knott adds that collections become "status symbols" where consumers demonstrate their uniqueness through curated selections.

Marketing strategies can leverage this by offering extensive variety and personalization options, creating deeper brand relationships than traditional mass-market approaches allow.

“IN VIDEO GAMES, THAT'S CALLED A PROGRESSION MECHANIC... WE'RE PEOPLE, THAT'S WHAT WE DO. WE COLLECT THINGS, WE BUILD THINGS, WE HOARD.”

MATT KNOT



Takeaways

DESK CULTURE = PERSONAL EXPRESSION

Pop culture products becoming identity markers in professional spaces, creating organic social sharing opportunities

EXPERIENTIAL PRE-PURCHASE

Consumers buying merchandise before experiencing content (movies, games) to enhance their viewing experience, extending engagement windows

FORMAT INNOVATION SUCCESS

Mystery boxes and plush products driving 72-86% growth, proving packaging innovation can revitalize categories

INDIVIDUAL COLLECTION CURATION

A move from mass standardization to personalized collecting, creating stronger emotional connections and higher lifetime value

“Fans use merchandise to make culture their own and express identity through collecting, displaying, and sharing. Products are culture-shaping tools that connect audiences to passions and maintain long-term fan relationships”

Fandom isn't audience.
IT'S INFRASTRUCTURE.

CONCLUSIONS:

THE COMMON THEMES



1. The War for Attention

2. Audience Reach to Fan Belonging

3. The IRL Renaissance

4. Cultural Moments Are Built

5. Creators and Communities

The War for Attention:

Pop Culture's Biggest Battle

Pop culture isn't just fighting other pop culture, it's fighting for a sliver of your time in a world overflowing with distraction. Fans are choosing between your story, TikTok trends, Champions League highlights, three podcasts, the great outdoors and maybe sleep.

This isn't a metaphorical battle, it's a mathematical reality defined by finite human attention spans colliding with infinite content supply. The entertainment industry has reached a critical inflection point where traditional assumptions about audience engagement have fundamentally broken down. Quality content no longer guarantees discovery. Established franchises can disappear without trace. Even massive marketing budgets struggle to cut through the noise of oversaturated digital environments.

The war for attention isn't won through traditional awareness campaigns. It's won by creating experiences so memorable, shareable, and emotionally resonant that they become cultural touchstones worthy of precious human time in an era where sleep itself has become the ultimate competitor.

“YOU ARE IN A WAR FOR CONSUMERS ATTENTION THERE’S MORE PRESSURE THAN EVER ON THEIR TIME, AS MARKETERS, WE NEED TO GET SMARTER AND WORK HARDER TO GRAB THAT TIME. AND THAT IMPLICATION RESHAPES EVERYTHING”

CHRIS WHITTLE



Takeaways

Every swipe is a "No"

Split-second decisions determine content survival. Your property competes not just against similar entertainment, but against every possible use of human time

Entertainment isn't a given, it's a contender.

The assumption that quality finds its audience no longer holds. Properties must actively earn attention rather than expect it

To win, you have to be worth the attention

One-time engagement means nothing. Success requires creating repeat experiences so compelling that audiences choose to return despite infinite alternatives

Audience Reach to Fan Belonging

and the Word-of-Mouth Engine

Your biggest reach will come from your most passionate fans. Fandom is a chain reaction. Reach your core, and they'll do the rest.

Older models assume bigger budgets and mass awareness campaigns would drive success through volume. That paradigm has changed. In oversaturated digital environments where audiences actively filter content, passionate advocacy from authentic fans generates more meaningful engagement than advertising spend could achieve.

The mathematics of fandom create exponential rather than linear growth. A single passionate fan becomes a content creation engine generating discussions, creating memes, starting group chats, writing fan fiction, producing reaction videos, and building communities. Each genuine fan becomes a broadcasting node, amplifying content through networks of trust that no paid advertising can replicate.

"PEOPLE REALLY WANT TO SHOW OFF WHAT THEY LOVE, WHAT THEY'RE INTO, WHAT THEY COLLECT, A BIT OF THEIR PERSONALITY."

AUSTIN PANNELL



Takeaways

1 Early adopters aren't just viewers

They're evangelists, amplifiers, meme-makers, group chat starters. These aren't customers; they're unpaid marketing departments with authentic credibility that brands can never purchase

2 Build for belonging

Communities built around shared passion create content, conversations, and cultural moments that transcend any single marketing campaign. They'll spread word better than any ad ever could

3 Events = community builders

Not just promotional tactics. Physical experiences create the emotional peaks and shared memories that digital cannot replicate, generating the kind of belonging that drives sustained advocacy

The IRL Renaissance:

Craving Real in the Age of Infinite Digital

This isn't nostalgia, it's a response to digital oversaturation that's fundamentally altered how audiences value experiences. The proliferation of AI-generated content, endless social feeds, and algorithmic optimisation has created a profound hunger for authenticity that can only be satisfied through physical presence and genuine human connection. When everything becomes instantly accessible and algorithmically curated, scarcity and spontaneity become premium offerings.

The transformation represents a complete reversal of pre-pandemic assumptions about digital-first strategies.

This reflects broader recognition that physical experiences create emotional peaks digital cannot replicate. It provides what digital cannot: unpredictability, emotional intensity, and the kind of shared experiences that create cultural moments worth discussing long after they end.

“BRINGING PROPERTIES INTO THE REAL WORLD AND GIVING FANS MARKETING THAT IS MORE EMOTIVE AND IMMERSIVE TO CONNECT TO AND TALK ABOUT IS A HUGE SHIFT”

GEORGE BATEMAN



Takeaways

Audiences Crave Shared Energy Over Scrolling

Digital fatigue creates genuine demand for experiences that create lasting memories through physical presence. before, during, and after launches

Events Are Campaign Anchors

Physical experiences have evolved from supporting tactics to strategic centerpieces that drive the rest, creating content and conversation that extends far beyond attendance

IRL Returns, Because We Need It

In environments where AI can generate infinite content instantly, human curation, spontaneous moments, and authentic community connection will become increasingly valuable

Cultural Moments Are Built, Not Dropped

Cultural gravity is in. Real impact comes from showing up early and often and then letting the fans carry it further.

This represents a shift from campaign-based marketing to ecosystem thinking. The traditional model treated launches as discrete events, massive budget deployments designed to create immediate awareness spikes followed by media pushes. That approach assumes audiences are passive recipients waiting to be impressed by production values and reach metrics. The reality is that modern audiences, particularly fandom communities, want to participate in story creation rather than simply consume finished narratives.

Cultural gravity builds through consistent value delivery over time. Fans need reasons to stay engaged between major releases. They need content that rewards their investment and provides material for community discussion. Most importantly, they need to feel like participants in an ongoing story rather than targets for periodic promotional campaigns.

“HOW DO YOU OPEN THE DOOR TO AN ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH THAT GAMER... SUCCESS IS: ARE PEOPLE STILL TALKING ABOUT THE GAME AFTER THE FRIST COUPLE OF WEEKS?”

TRACEY MCGARRIGAN



Takeaways

Watch your form

Use long-form, mid-form, and behind-the-scenes as narrative breadcrumbs. These aren't supplementary content, they're the foundation that creates sustained engagement and community investment

Treat Launch as Ignition, Not the Finish Line

The launch becomes the moment when accumulated community energy transforms into cultural momentum, not the culmination of marketing efforts

Fans Inside Campaigns, Not Watching Outside

Campaigns should feel like living stories fans are inside, not just watching from the outside. Creating participatory experiences where fans become co-creators rather than passive consumers

Creators and Communities

Are leading the way

There's a post pandemic power shift, community have become the primary drivers of cultural influence, with creators serving as their authentic representatives rather than gatekeepers. The relationship isn't just creator-to-audience, it's creator-within-community, where successful creators emerge from and remain embedded within the communities they serve. These communities actively shape content direction, provide real-time feedback, and they collectively determine what becomes culturally significant.

Communities succeed in driving culture because they operate as living ecosystems rather than passive audiences. They create fan art, generate memes, build wikis, develop theories, and expand universes far beyond original content. When communities embrace something, they don't just consume it they transform it into a shared cultural artifact that extends far beyond any individual creator or piece of content.

**“THEY MOVE
INCREDIBLY QUICKLY
ON CREATING CONTENT
AND TAPPING INTO
TRENDS”**

AMBER TAYLOR



Takeaways

Build with communities, not just creators

True partnership means engaging entire communities in concept development, recognizing that creators are community representatives rather than isolated influencers

Let communities lead storytelling, creators amplify

Let communities lead storytelling through their creators. Successful creators amplify community voices and perspectives rather than imposing external narratives, serving as conduits for authentic community

When communities care, culture spreads

Community enthusiasm creates exponential amplification through networks of shared passion that no individual creator or traditional campaign could achieve alone



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TO ALL THE SPEAKERS AND PANELISTS

Zoe Scaman, Adam Rubins, Amber Taylor, Jerome Mazandarani, Lily Adams, Tracey McGarrigan, Violet Adams, Mingzhen Li, Ayman Mohammed, Stephanie Lord, Sara Rodriguez, Adam Harris, Richard Barnes, Charlie Cooper Henniker, George Bateman, Neale Maker, Austin Pannell and Matt Knott.

Also our Moderators: Andy Gibbons & Ashanti Omkar

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Ex12 team: Tariq Shaded, John Bibby & Rob Harris. The MCM Team: Dan Jones, Annie Byrne, Kahlil Schweitzer and all the team. Ian Senior, Briony Twidle & Ana Goncalves from ExCel London. Amber O'Dell on the socials, Nick Andrews for the photography, GeoLaw for the amazing graphics, Jack Woodhams at Posterspy for art direction & content

THE SUMMITEERS

Everyone who attended the summit, we know your time is more precious than ever so thanks for choosing to spend it with us and being such a great, inclusive and engaged crowd. See you next time



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