

Foreword

We're now in our third year of the Popcultr Marketing Summit, and it's changed from a 'let's do it and see what happens' into a living, breathing entity. Still a work in progress, but it's starting to feel like more than the sum of its parts and delivering increasingly valuable insight, the core of which can be found in this unashamedly long form report.

In a period of rapid and accelerating change, a moment to pause, reflect and find shared challenges feels more valuable than ever.

This edition was programmed to draw out a story we'd spotted as worth exploring from the last one. We gave it a beginning, middle and end: keynotes bookending the observational panels, theory sandwiched with practical insight from the people on the front lines.

Featuring two keynote speakers and 29 panellists, we brought fandom insight in from our first contributor from sport, and a research and academic base, mapped some of the provocative challenges of the here and now, looked at the Gen A audience who come next, and went into the pop culture sectors that are hugely powerful but sit outside mainstream consciousness, because the interesting stuff always happens at the edges.

See you in New York & London in October.

Chris





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Summit Overview

The Data Drop - the day opened with Experience12's own fan research, the data drop

Tom Goodwin - Goodwin opened the summit framed by one optimistic thesis: this is the most exciting time there has ever been to do this work, precisely because the old playbooks are worth less than ever

Fandom Fluency - set the day's baseline: what it really means to understand fandom

The Popcultr Edit - the summit's recurring hit-and-miss review, holding the last six months of pop culture marketing up to the light

Reading The Room - turning to publishing, an industry reshaped by BookTok and now asking what happens when the algorithm moves on

The Dark Arts - set out to demystify what goes into reaching games fans, the craft that stays deliberately opaque

The Tabletop Renaissance - a category dismissed as a hobby that has quietly become an eighteen billion dollar business

Lost In Translation - a five-voice discussion on carrying East Asian IP across cultures as anime drives huge global audiences

Culture Shock - what happens when a niche fandom goes mainstream, and how to scale an IP without losing the community that built it

Chloe Combi - a data-led portrait of Generation Alpha (roughly 2-16) and what they want from culture





CHRIS WHITTLE

Experience12 Data Drop





The day opened with Experience12's own fan research, the data drop, presented by Chris Whittle.

The headline findings reframed the audience for the day: this is the 21 to 34 youth demographic marketers chase, fandom is core to their identity, and the old assumption that fans are anti-brand has largely reversed, with a clear majority now welcoming brand engagement.

The data made a sustained, evidence-led case for long-term presence over one-off entry, for live activation as a memory and advocacy engine, and for the shift of the cultural centre of gravity toward anime, games and daily creator viewing.

The Data Drop: Experience12 Fan Research

CHRIS WHITTLE

Building Trust with Brands

Long-term presence earns fan loyalty

65%

feel more positively toward brands that show up long-term.

46% are more likely to buy from a brand that sponsors fandom content.
Trust is earned through consistent presence, not one-off campaigns.

Fandom as Identity

Finding Joy in Shared Connections

ex
12

82%

57% say meeting others who share their interests brings the most joy.

Show up for the long term, not the flash

The research put numbers behind a message that recurred across the day's panels: fandom cannot be a flash in the pan.

Chris Whittle's framing was that you cannot enter the market and then duck out again, because dealing with this group takes time and effort, and the data backs it.

65% of fans feel more positively towards brands that show up for the long term, making fandom a route to credibility and authority rather than a quick campaign.

46% are more likely to buy from brands that sponsor fandom content, roughly half the audience, with the effect skewing towards online and creator content, which aligns with what media houses report internally.

Welcoming Brands in Fandom

Embracing commercial presence in fandom spaces

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12

60%

**welcome brands into their fandom
(as long as they make the effort).**

The Impact of Presence

Memorability of Live Brand Engagement

89%

say in-person brand experiences are more memorable than social media ads.

BRAND EXPERIENCE CREATES IMPACT MOMENTS THAT LAST

ex
12

Live Activations Matter

Turning Experiences into Lasting Connections

94%

would recommend a brand, show, or game after a live activation.

90% actively seek out more content after attending an event. Live is the conversion engine.

Live activation is the memory-maker

The data drop's strongest cluster was on live activation. 89% of fans who engage with a brand experience at a show like this find the brand more memorable, evidence that in-person activation creates the impact moments marketing is increasingly built around.

94% would recommend a brand after experiencing a live activation, and 90% then actively seek out more of that brand's content.

Chris Whittle argued this vindicates the spend on physical presence. He was careful to caveat the numbers, repeatedly stressing this is clean data, unadapted and unskewed despite being the agency's own, and noting the team was as surprised as anyone when the recommendation and memorability figures came back so high.

FAVOURITE GENRE

Anime 38%

Games 34%

Films 11%

TV 10%

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12

Anime overtakes games, and creators are daily TV

The research tracked two cultural shifts marketers need on their radar. First, genre: anime has overtaken games in the last two years as the favourite genre of the fans in the room, a change Chris Whittle flagged as very significant, with film and TV in both linear and online formats dropping well down.

Anime & Games are now the defining cultural touchpoints for this crowd, a finding the audience feedback later echoed, with the rise of anime named repeatedly as a top takeaway.

Second, creators: 55% of fans watch creators every day, making creator content their equivalent of appointment television, the thing they religiously watch.

Cultural consumption has changed for good.

Daily Engagement ex 12

with Creators

Understanding the Impact of Creators on Fandom

55%

watch creators every single day.

84% say creators at live events make it more exciting or adds credibility.

Takeaways

FANDOM IS IDENTITY, AND IT WELCOMES BRANDS

82% say fandom is part of their identity, and 60% welcome brands that engage with it. Only 3% want brands to stay out. The anti-brand fan is largely a myth.

SHOW UP FOR THE LONG TERM, NOT THE FLASH

65% feel more positive toward brands that show up long-term, and 46% buy more from brands that sponsor fandom content.

LIVE ACTIVATION IS THE MEMORY-MAKER

89% find brand experiences more memorable, 94% recommend a brand after a live activation, 90% then seek out more content. The core proof for live.

ANIME OVERTAKES GAMES, CREATORS ARE DAILY TV

Anime has passed games, 55% watch creators every day, and 84% say creators at live events make it more exciting or adds credibility.

THE PERMISSION MARKETERS WORRY ABOUT IS LARGELY ALREADY GRANTED, SO THE BRANDS THAT SHOW UP FOR THE LONG TERM AND CREATE REAL LIVE MOMENTS ARE THE ONES THIS AUDIENCE REMEMBERS, RECOMMENDS AND REWARDS.



TOM GOODWIN

What Matters in a Changing World



NOW

ALL WE HAVE IS NOW

People are a little lost. Where is meaning found?

Percentage
who say
these values
are 'very
important'
to them

Patriotism

Religion

80%

60%

What Matters In a Changing World

TOM GOODWIN

Tom Goodwin opened the summit with a set of nine provocations, framed by one optimistic thesis: this is the most exciting time there has ever been to do this work, precisely because the old playbooks are worth less than ever.

He moved through two intentionally bleak openers, a permanent weirdness driven by outrage-monetised algorithmic media, and a financial nihilism rooted in a vast generational wealth gap, before turning the argument upward. Pop culture and fandom are where a locked-out generation now buys joy and meaning. Abundance and AI make brands more valuable, not less, because recognition reduces the risk of choice. And AI, the average of the internet, is no threat to anyone with taste, which becomes the real competitive advantage. He closed on craft, imagination and ambition as the moat against slop.

x9 Provocations

“TO BE
OUTRAGED
IS A
BADGE
OF
HONOUR”

TOM GOODWIN

1. **Global Weirding** – algorithmic media, outrage and parallel realities replace VUCA
2. **Financial Nihilism** – the wealth gap, opting out, and joy sought in little luxuries and fandom
3. **Brand Resurgence** – abundance makes brands and franchises matter more as risk-reducers
4. **Niche Culture vs Monoculture** – the long tail failed; winner-takes-all plus organised subculture
5. **Traditional vs Incumbent** – question the inherited way of doing the job
6. **The Arith'matocracy** – measurement culture rewards provable safety over illogical brilliance
7. **Reach Crisis** – people are not hard to reach, they are hard to engage
8. **New Influence** – the three C's: community, creativity, credibility
9. **AI** – the average of the internet; taste is the moat, a backlash against slop is coming



“I think what we have these days is a permanent sense of kind of weirdness”

TOM GOODWIN

Financial Nihilism

His second bleak point was financial nihilism. Across much of the developed world older people hold the wealth and younger people feel locked out: in the UK, by his figure, around 85% of wealth is held by the over-55s.

That leaves a generation feeling hopeless about property, work and politics, and the response splits two ways. Around a fifth chase hustle culture, crypto, stocks and the dream of escape, while others opt out of the mainstream and even of living, drinking less, dating less, doing less.

Both ends look for little luxuries, a coffee, a concert ticket, merchandise, a day at Comic Con. People are a little lost and asking where meaning is found, which sets up his turn toward pop culture and brands.

**“THEY NEED TO GET JOY,
AND INCREASING THE WAY
THEY GET JOY IS BY
MATCHING UP WITH WHAT
YOU IN THIS ROOM
REPRESENT”**

TOM GOODWIN

**“WE NOW THINK THAT
THINGS ARE BIG
BECAUSE THEY'RE BIG
IN OUR OWN WORLD”**

TOM GOODWIN

Niche Culture vs Monoculture

The fourth point examined what the internet did to culture.

The promise was a long tail: ultra-niche communities where anyone could find their people and popular culture would fragment. The reality, Goodwin argued, is the opposite, a winner-takes-all peak where the most famous people are more famous than ever, plus a secondary peak of organised, monetised subculture for those who actively choose to stand apart.

Genuine eccentricity has largely vanished.

What is supposed to be different looks the same, every WeWork, the same mid-century furniture, angel-wing murals, big town-name letters, queues for everything.

Fads now rise and fall faster because information and influence spread globally. And algorithms cocoon each of us in parallel worlds, so we have no idea how weird our own normal really is.

“What we consume has not been picked by us. It's been put in front of us by an algorithm that's trying to make us feel a certain way”

TOM GOODWIN



The Arith'matocracy

The sixth point, which he coined the arith'matocracy, took aim at measurement culture. Because everything is now measurable, the industry has fallen in love with measurement: short-termism over long, rational failure over illogical success, attribution treated as more important than actual impact, and a belief that data is all you need, even when it produces false precision.

He told the story of a friend at a record label who used to smell the culture and now reads dashboards, doing the job worse but with a robust data trail so he cannot be fired.

The result is a profession more interested in chasing the credit for making something happen than in making more things happen, favouring the safe and provable over the illogical and brilliant.

**“IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO
SHOW THAT YOUR STUFF
WORKED THAN TO
ACTUALLY MAKE STUFF
THAT WORKED”**

TOM GOODWIN

**“BRANDS ARE HOW
CONSUMERS REDUCE
THE RISK OF MAKING A
POOR DECISION”**

TOM GOODWIN

Abundance makes brands matter more

Against the widespread claim that AI will kill brands, Goodwin argued the opposite, calling Scott Galloway persistently wrong on this.

We live amid an abundance of everything, films, shows, books, videos, posts, even varieties of egg, and that overwhelming choice is stressful.

Brands are how people reduce the risk of a poor decision, so in an age of abundance they proliferate rather than fade: branded eggs, branded condo buildings, branded vets and dental practices.

The same logic explains entertainment, where sequels and franchises dominate because they are less risky for the studio and for the viewer, who when overwhelmed picks a franchise, a studio or a celebrity they recognise.

AI is the average, taste is the moat

Tom closed on AI, the gorilla in the room he had been warned against (everybody drink, IYKYK).

He acknowledged every reason to be angry, theft, slop, job losses, inauthenticity, abundance and thoughtlessness, then reframed it: AI is the average of the internet, a mechanism that scrapes everything that has existed and generates plausible recombinations.

That is only threatening if you are in the business of average, and he insisted the room is not, it is in the business of the remarkable, the unlikely, new colours rather than the grey of a digested rainbow. Taste is the caveat that matters and the moat. He predicted a backlash against slop as people relearn the value of craft, argued the floor is lifted so the new and under-resourced can do stronger work, and framed technology as a lever to do more.

“THERE WILL BE A MASSIVE REACTION AGAINST AI, WHERE PEOPLE SUDDENLY REMEMBER HOW IMPORTANT CRAFT AND PASSION AND THOUGHT IS”

TOM GOODWIN

Takeaways

BRANDS MATTER MORE, NOT LESS.

Abundance and AI raise the value of recognition, because a known brand or franchise reduces the risk of a poor choice.

TASTE IS THE MOAT.

AI is the average of the internet, only a threat if you are in the business of average. This room is in the business of the remarkable.

THE SLOP BACKLASH IS COMING.

As AI floods the world with the generic, craft, passion and thought become the premium again.

FANDOM IS WHERE A LOCKED-OUT GENERATION FINDS JOY.

A vast wealth gap pushes younger people toward little luxuries and the things this room represents: meaning and belonging.

THE MARKETERS WHO WIN THE NEXT FEW YEARS TREAT UNCERTAINTY AS ROOM TO BE IMAGINATIVE RATHER THAN A REASON TO RETREAT INTO DATA, BECAUSE TASTE IS THE ONE THING THE AVERAGE CANNOT COPY



Moderator:
Calvin Innes,
Fandom & Pop Culture Consultant
Innes Consulting & The Forge

Panellist:
Becky Jones
Memberships Manager
Wrexham AFC

Panellist:
Dr Rebecca Williams
Associate Professor in Media
Audiences & Participatory Culture
University of South Wales

Panellist:
Ben Woods
Creator Economy Analyst,
MIDiA Research



Fandom Fluency



“The minute you lean into fandom marketing, you're giving up a certain amount of control, and for a lot of brands, a lot of clubs that can be quite scary”

CALVIN INNES

Fandom Fluency opened the panel programme and set the day's baseline: what it really means to understand fandom. Its strength was triangulation. Calvin Innes, a fandom consultant at Innes Consulting and The Forge, moderated, putting the same questions to three vantage points: Becky Jones, Memberships Manager at Wrexham AFC, as the practitioner; Ben Woods, Creator Economy Analyst at MIDiA Research, as the researcher; and Dr Rebecca Williams, Associate Professor at the University of South Wales, as the academic.

The campus, the dataset and the pitch-side tested every claim from three directions. The central case was Wrexham AFC, a non-league club turned global story, and the tension between local fans and a worldwide audience arriving through Hollywood ownership. It moved through short-term extraction, brand misconceptions, and trading access for loyalty.

“THE REASON THAT IT'S BEEN SUCCESSFUL, AND THAT PEOPLE HAVE CONNECTED SO WELL WITH IT, IS BECAUSE IT'S A STORY, AND THE STORYTELLING WITHIN IT IS EVERYBODY”

BECKY JONES

Story beats reach


Wrexham is the case the panel kept returning to, and the lesson was not about reach but about story.

A decade ago it was unheard of and Americans weren't even aware that it was a town in Wales; now the shirts are everywhere and the documentary is global. What made it land was a story built on the things everyone feel: loss, grief and joy, not on exposure.

The challenge now is keeping the original community feeling seen rather than displaced as what was theirs becomes shared.

The instinct in the room was protective: guard the crest, build a gateway that lets the right people in and makes them feel part of something safe.

Authentic connection beats exposure, and it is the local story that makes the global one credible.



“fans are your gateway to visibility, fan creators, fans talking about content, having their own Discords, the more they talk, the more they create content, the more they're creating visibility for your IP.”

BEN WOODS

The long game is the only game

The same long-running-story model that draws streamers and creators to sport carries a clear risk.

The room described creators dropping into non-league football, bringing their audience and a spike of money and attention, then moving on to the next club weeks later.

For an owner that is welcome revenue; for the existing fans it raises the obvious question of people with no real affiliation turning up and leaving. The verdict was that this gets found out fast.

Fan respect is won by being in it for the long game, and the biggest misconception brands hold is that fans will resist them, when in fact most are happy to connect provided it is not a quick fix.

**“FANS CAN BE QUITE,
QUITE QUICK TO PUSH
BACK WHEN IT DOESN'T
FEEL AUTHENTIC”**

DR REBECCA WILLIAMS

**“RELEASE THOSE REINS
AND SAY, THERE YOU
GO, YOU'VE GOT THAT
GROUP, YOU'RE PART
OF THE CLUB”**

BECKY JONES


Control is exchanged, not lost

The hardest shift for brands is that fandom marketing asks them to give away control they have spent years building. Done wrong it is dangerous; done right it is hugely beneficial, and the panel agreed there is no avoiding the trade.

It rests on trusting fans, on relationships built over time, and on remembering that fandom is not a monolith, the community on Instagram cares about different things from the one on Discord or TikTok.

The trust runs both ways: fans willingly give what is technically free labour to promote what they love, but need reassurance they will not be exploited for it.

The shared conclusion was that control is not lost so much as exchanged, traded for advocacy and reach a brand cannot manufacture for itself.



“Belonging is important even if you're a fan of something that maybe isn't physically rooted in a specific place”

DR REBECCA WILLIAMS

Professionalise the relationship


The closing principle was to treat fans as professionals, part of the same ecosystem rather than a copyright problem to police.

Fans give real labour to promote what they love, and the right response is to bring them inside and value it. The room sketched a useful spread of fan-creator types, each needing a different approach: world builders who adapt a game across platforms unprompted, community mavens deep in the lore who unpack every lyric for others, and big amplifiers who pick up an IP for a couple of streams, spike engagement, then move on.

The most reliable model is to treat the committed ones like journalists, giving them genuine access and insight, then listening.

**“BRING A FAN ON BOARD,
ON BOARD AS A
CONSULTANT. TREAT
THEM LIKE A
PROFESSIONAL, PAY THEM
LIKE A PROFESSIONAL, AND
GIVE THEM THAT INSIGHT
INTO WHERE YOU PLAN TO
GO, AND THEN, AND THEN
LISTEN”**

BEN WOODS

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue uniform with a gold star on her shoulder, is smiling. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

“We have a strange scenario where we have official, non-official supporters groups right across the world, but a lot in the US and Canada, who we need to create better connection with.”

BECKY JONES

Takeaways

STORY BEATS REACH

Wrexham's rise worked because the story was human: loss, grief and joy everyone recognises. Fans connect to a story they see themselves in, not to exposure.

THE LONG GAME IS THE ONLY GAME

Parachuting into a fandom for a spike of engagement gets called out fast. Fan respect is won by being in it for the long haul.

CONTROL IS EXCHANGED, NOT LOST

Fandom marketing means trusting fans with the brand. What you give up in control you gain back in advocacy and reach you cannot manufacture.

PROFESSIONALISE THE RELATIONSHIP

Treat fan creators as the professionals they are. Map the types, bring them in, give them access, pay them, and then listen.

FANDOM FLUENCY IS NOT A CAMPAIGN YOU RUN AT FANS, IT IS A RELATIONSHIP YOU BUILD WITH THEM ON THEIR TERMS AND OVER TIME.



Panellist:
Lee Willett
Chief Marketing Officer
Woodlark Consulting

Moderator:
Amber Taylor
Fandom & Entertainment Chief
Beam Lighthouse

Panellist:
Dani Rayner
Global Marketing Strategist,
Freelance

Panellist:
Alice Johnson
Content Creator & Presenter
AlicesPixels

THE POPCULTR EDIT





“We're definitely hearing a lot more from brands who are recognising that return on investment on advertising alone is not great”

AMBER TAYLOR

The Popcultr Edit is the summit's recurring hit-and-miss review, holding the last six months of pop culture marketing up to the light. Its bite comes from a deliberate spread of seats.

Amber Taylor, Fandom and Entertainment Chief at Beam Lighthouse, chaired a panel built to stress-test work from three angles: Alice Johnson, Content Creator at AlicesPixels, as the creator voice; Dani Rayner, Global Marketing Strategist, as the strategist; and Lee Willett, Chief Marketing Officer at Woodlark Consulting, as the brand voice. Does the creator believe it, does the strategy stand up, would the brand-side buy it. The verdict was consistent: low-res, human, fan-first work cuts through a glossy AI landscape, while the misses shared a failure to respect the audience.

**“THERE'S A HUMANNESS
TO THE EXAMPLES THAT
I'M MENTIONING THAT,
FOR ME, ARE
RESONATING”**

DANI RAYNER

Low-res is the new premium

The campaigns cutting through now are low-resolution, community-led and tangible, an answer to an AI-saturated landscape.

Brands are leaning on handwriting, deliberate imperfections, even stamping work as not made with AI, like the Lego World Cup ad that flagged itself because it looked too good to be human. HP printing a billboard live on an East London street to prove a printer's reliability, and a phones-down concert tour turned into a community folder of raw, remixable files, share the same humanness.

The longer pattern matters too: the AI-slop era will pass the way VR and audio did, but the underlying discipline never changes, focus on what the consumer wants and stay true to the brand.

.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red jacket over a white top, is speaking into a microphone. She is standing on a red carpet. The background is a vibrant, stylized graphic with a blue and yellow color scheme, featuring a large yellow star with a smiling face and a blue and white patterned area. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“While it's great to work with creators, I think brands really need to focus on the fans as well, because everyone knew they were just creators”

ALICE JOHNSON

**“EVERYTHING
JUST BECOMES
WALLPAPER. IT'S
BLAND, YOU FADE
INTO THE
BACKGROUND”**

LEE WILLETT

Time the lifecycle or fade into wallpaper

Brand and IP partnerships are really a question of lifecycle timing.

Getting in early and selectively, with product that genuinely fits, reaches a younger audience without alienating the core, as an early, well-judged music-IP tie-in did. Going early risks a swing and a miss, but the alternative is worse: an IP in its final season plastered across half a dozen brands at once, where ubiquity makes every tie-in worthless and the property fades into wallpaper.

A finale that should have been a celebration, a select few brands going deeper and adding to the world, instead felt like a late-stage cash-out, and the merchandise felt hollow next to genuinely strong fan events. Distinctiveness comes from timing and restraint, not from being one more logo on a crowded property.



“It’s just about being authentic, just focus on what the consumer wants, and be authentic to your brand”

LEE WILLETT

Lead with the why, not the ego

The headline miss was a milestone marked for its own sake.


A twentieth-anniversary rebrand that existed because the calendar said so, followed by a boast about making the whole internet talk, read as ego rather than service, exactly what a daily paying subscriber does not want.

The mechanism is brand ego: a marketer congratulating themselves when everything should be rooted in the consumer. The deeper miss was fandom, because the milestone only exists thanks to a passionate fan base, so failing to co-create with them or give anything back wasted the moment.

The same fault shows wherever a buzzy idea gets a budget, gets signed off and ships with nobody asking why.

“WITH SPOTIFY FOR 20 YEARS THEY COULD HAVE GIVEN BACK TO THE FANS, AND INSTEAD THEY CHOSE TO BOOST THEIR OWN EGO”

ALICE JOHNSON



“There's this buzzy idea, yeah, cool, it's signed off, it's approved, and suddenly it's out there. And no one's actually stopped and asked the why?”

DANI RAYNER

Fans over followers

Alice Johnson, the panel's creator voice and a self-described fan, gave the theme its sharpest case.

She set a researched, fan-led interview against a surprise Pedro Pascal event for The Mandalorian stocked only with influencers, which drew criticism precisely because everyone knew there were no genuine fans in the room, and against presenters who had run their prep through ChatGPT and got an actor's filmography wrong on Dune and Fantastic Four, killing the connection.

The lesson, from inside the creator economy: audiences always know the difference. Amber Taylor turned it into a principle, that followers mean nothing without engagement and that ten smaller creators with closely-ingrained audiences do a deeper, more authentic job than one big influencer.

**“WHILE IT'S GREAT TO
WORK WITH CREATORS, I
THINK BRANDS REALLY
NEED TO FOCUS ON THE
FANS AS WELL, BECAUSE
EVERYONE KNEW THEY
WERE JUST CREATORS”**

ALICE JOHNSON

Takeaways

LOW-RES IS THE NEW PREMIUM

Handmade, low-res, human work is cutting through a glossy AI landscape. The roughness is the signal: it reads as authentic where polish now reads as suspect.

TIME THE LIFECYCLE OR FADE INTO WALLPAPER

Get in early and authentic, or arrive late when every brand already has the logo. Saturation makes the association worthless and rinsing fans at the finale backfires.

FANS OVER FOLLOWERS

Ten engaged fan-creators beat one big name. And when a fan with a profile adopts you unprompted, you cannot manufacture it, you can only build a brand worth adopting.

LEAD WITH THE WHY, NOT THE EGO

The misses missed because the why was corporate self-congratulation, not giving back to the fans that got them there. Before sign-off, answer who this is actually for.

AN AUDIENCE CAN TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BRAND THAT HAS READ THE ROOM AND ONE THAT IS ADMIRING ITSELF, SO LEAD WITH THE WHY AND PUT FANS BEFORE EGO.



MODERATOR
Emma Lowe
Event Director
The London Book Fair

PANELLIST
Sarah Jeffcoate
Senior Marketing Manager
Simon & Schuster UK

PANELLIST
Georgia Henry
Founder / Director,
The Pitch Agency

PANELLIST
Joel Rochester
Creator
Fictional Fates

READING THE ROOM





“I think publishing has a real responsibility to continue to put those stories out and to help those readers to engage when they're ready”

EMMA LOWE

Reading The Room turned to publishing, an industry reshaped by BookTok and now asking what happens when the algorithm moves on. The panel answered from the trade, the agency and the creator community at once.

Emma Lowe, Event Director of The London Book Fair, moderated, joined by Georgia Henry, Founder of The Pitch Agency; Joel Rochester, Content Creator at Fictional Fates; and Sarah Jeffcoate, Senior Marketing Manager at Simon & Schuster UK.

The shift they circled was clear: discovery has moved out of the publisher's hands and into communities and creators, so the job is to set the conditions and then let go. The clearest throughline was a posture, not a tactic, hand over creative control rather than steering it, and never depend on a single platform.

**“THE BEST CAMPAIGNS
COME FROM CREATORS
BEING ABLE TO GET
ALMOST FREE REIGN ON
LIKE WHAT THEY WANT TO
CREATE TO BEST
REPRESENT THAT
FANDOM”**

JOEL ROCHESTER

Set the conditions, don't control the outcome

The central shift in publishing is that creators and communities now drive discovery more effectively than traditional campaigns, so the strongest teams set the conditions for it rather than trying to control it.

In publishing this comes naturally, because the marketers are usually fans themselves, in it for love of books, which makes collaboration with creators feel authentic. The ambition is for a brand to become a discovery channel in its own right, present in the same platforms and communities as the fandoms, around the table and able to react.

The cut-through comes from creativity and from giving creators something close to free rein to make what best represents the fandom, because that is what lets genuine love for a thing show.



“figuring out how I can craft a story with that makes sense for both the brand and myself, that makes it really authentic”

JOEL ROCHESTER

No fandom lives on one platform

The clearest warning was against platform dependency. No brand presence should rest on a single platform, and no fandom lives on one either, a lesson sharpened by the TikTok ban scare.

Within any one channel the advice was to build several strands at once, paid, influencer, user-generated and brand-organic, so the brand is never hostage to one algorithm.

The caution cut both ways: a lean team does not need to spin up a Discord and a Substack and every supplementary platform, it needs to know where the communities actually are and be plugged into them.

The same content can fly on TikTok and fall flat on Instagram, which is itself useful signal for where a fandom really lives.

**“NO BRAND PRESENCE
SHOULD REALLY BE
RELIANT ON A SINGLE
PLATFORM, AND ALSO NO
FANDOM EXISTS IN A
SINGLE PLATFORM”**

GEORGIA HENRY

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt with a graphic, is speaking into a purple microphone. She is seated at a panel discussion. In the background, another woman is partially visible, looking towards the speaker. The background is a vibrant, cartoonish wall with various icons like a star, a pencil, and a speech bubble. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“it's not trying to control it, and it's embracing fandom, embracing community, and working with them on your campaigns”

SARAH JEFFCOATE

**“AUTHOR AS BRAND IS
SOMETHING THAT HAS
EMERGED”**

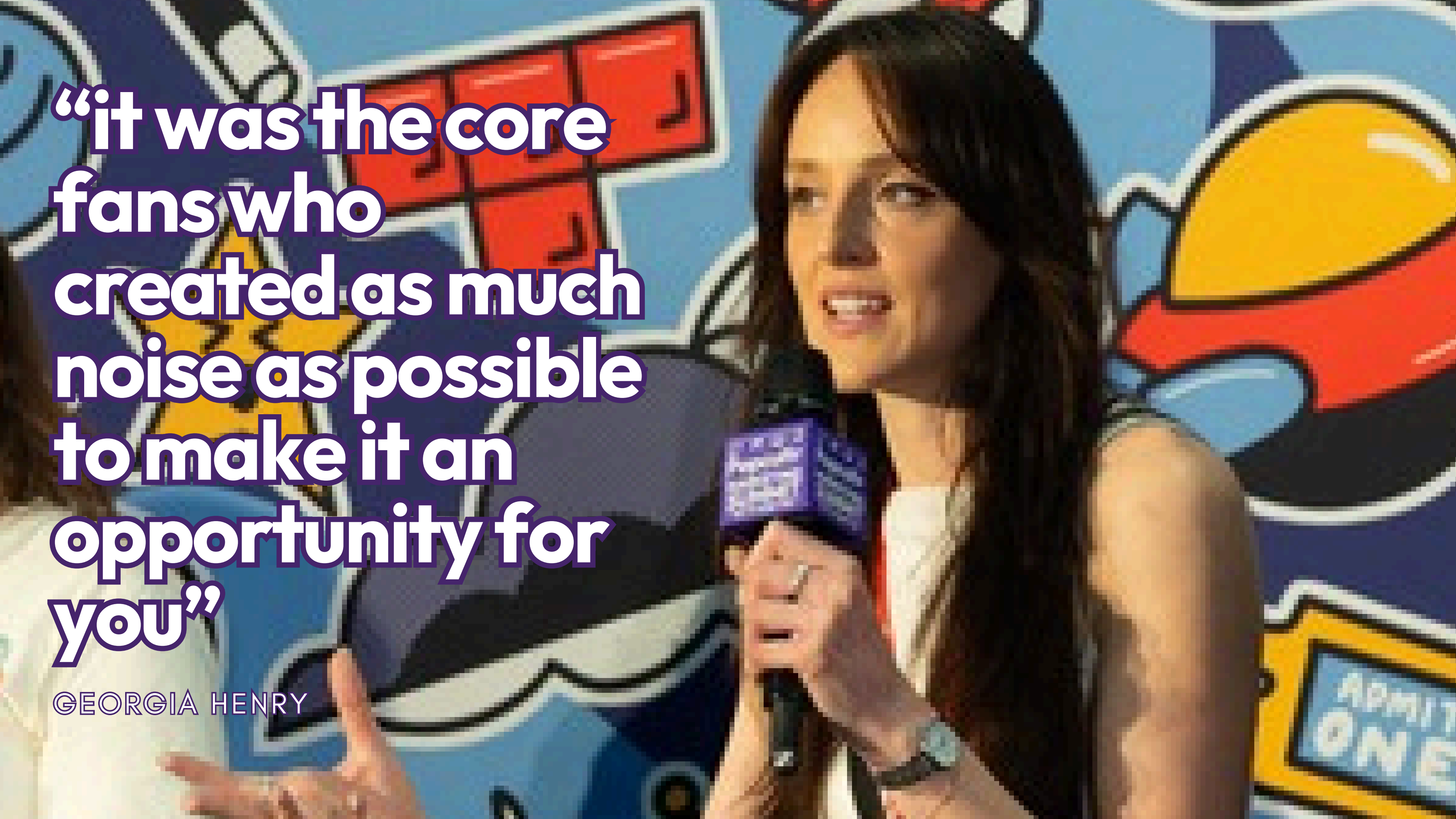
JOEL ROCHESTER

The author is the brand, not the publisher

Publishing breaks the usual brand model, and the panel leaned into the difference. The average reader does not know or care who published a book, but they know the author, so the real work is making the author the brand across many platforms, often well beyond books, a marked change over the last ten to fifteen years.

As short-form content has risen, more authors build audiences directly, and publishers increasingly watch the initial social response to an idea before committing, so a proven track record in a community de-risks acquisition.

The operational consequence is that each campaign has to be rebuilt for where that particular fandom sits: the audience for a pop memoir is nowhere near the audience for a big fantasy title.



“it was the core fans who created as much noise as possible to make it an opportunity for you”

GEORGIA HENRY

Discovery is an experience again

The final thread pulled discovery out of the feed and back into physical, human spaces.

Sarah Jeffcoate described how special and exclusive editions have become a much bigger lever with retailers, with the collectability that fandoms prize now at the forefront and retailers getting savvier about what they can offer.

Georgia Henry explained the mechanics of creator events through Shelves in the City, where the opportunity for a retailer is content capture: at an event with creators you are not sponsoring their videos or telling them to post, you are giving them the raw material to create, and that is the value exchange. Joel Rochester brought it to life with a bookshop scavenger hunt in Oxford that ended in meeting the author, mixing real fandom connection with content that serves both brand and creator.

**“SPECIAL EDITIONS HAVE
BECOME A MUCH BIGGER
THING WITH RETAILERS”**

SARAH JEFFCOATE

Takeaways

SET THE CONDITIONS, DON'T CONTROL THE OUTCOME

The best teams enable community-driven discovery rather than steering it. Hand creators genuine free rein and the work reads as authentic because it is.

THE AUTHOR IS THE BRAND, NOT THE PUBLISHER

Most readers neither know nor care who published a book. The author and the fandom are the brand, so campaigns get reinvented audience by audience.

NO FANDOM LIVES ON ONE PLATFORM

No brand or fandom should depend on a single channel. Build several strands, follow the creators across platforms, and you can turn campaigns around fast.

DISCOVERY IS AN EXPERIENCE AGAIN

Special editions, indie bookshops, events and passionate booksellers are where fandom discovery now happens. With creators, the value exchange is content, not a sponsored post.

IN PUBLISHING THE BRAND IS THE AUTHOR AND THE FANDOM, SO MARKETING'S JOB IS TO SET THE TABLE, HAND CREATORS THE PEN, AND FOLLOW THE STORY WHEREVER THE PLATFORMS MOVE IT.



PANELLIST
Michael Urban
Freelance Marketing
Lead

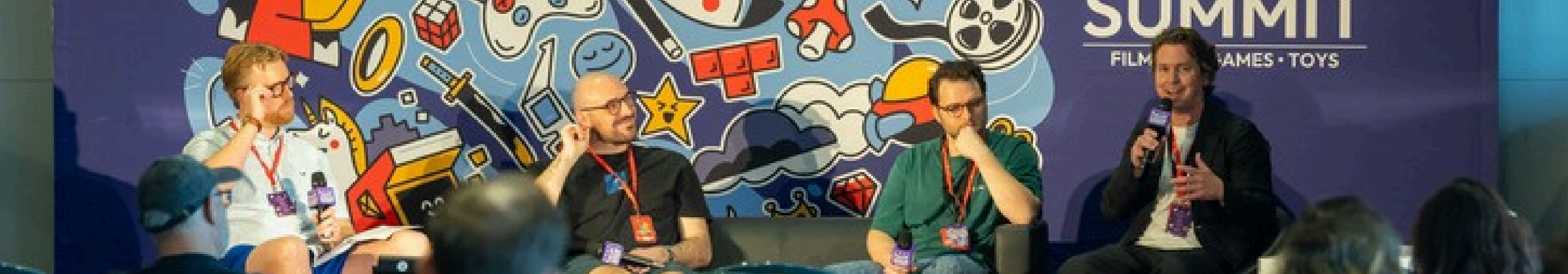
PANELLIST
Trevor Poulsum
Senior Client Partner
Fandom

PANELLIST
George Willard
Co-founder
Secret Sauce

MODERATOR
Joe Talboys
Chief Strategist & Creative Director
Calibrate Creative



THE DARK ARTS



“really the goal here today is to demystify what goes into a successful pop culture campaign, and in particular, games”

JOE TALBOYS

The Dark Arts set out to demystify what goes into reaching games fans, the craft that stays deliberately opaque. The panel was weighted toward people who run campaigns inside games culture. Joe Talboys, Chief Strategist at Calibrate Creative, moderated, joined by George Willard, co-founder of Secret Sauce, and Michael Urban, Freelance Marketing Lead, both hands-on campaigners, with Trevor Poulsum, Senior Client Partner at Fandom, on platform and audience scale.

With that slant set, the discussion covered why games audiences are distinctive, intense competition, deep co-authorship, real investment, then worked through reach, platforms, budget, community seeding and measurement. The spine was authenticity as a hard filter rather than a soft value: games fans detect and reject anything that does not genuinely belong.

“DIVE INTO THOSE COMMUNITIES TO GET A SENSE FOR WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO THEM, WHAT'S NOT IMPORTANT FOR THEM, WHAT SPACES ARE THEY USING, WHAT SPACES ARE THEY NOT USING.”

GEORGE WILLARD

Relevance, not reach

What makes games fans distinctive is the sheer competition for their attention, with tens of thousands of new titles a year, so the question is no longer reach but relevance, and a marketer who does not play will be seen through instantly.

The upside is that those same players become the marketing team, making memes, streaming, reporting bugs and spreading word of mouth. The bond runs deeper than in film or books because players are active co-authors, building wikis and advancing the story themselves, which creates real emotional buy-in.

The vast majority engage well beyond playing, researching lore, joining discussions, making content, attending conventions, so there is a wealth of touchpoints, and with AAA titles costing real money the investment is personal as well as financial.

A man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, is speaking into a microphone. The microphone has a purple sign attached to it that says 'TOYS'. The background is a blue wall with large, white, stylized letters that spell out 'SUMMER TOYS'.

“gamers, they know best, they have an incredibly powerful voice, and we need to treat that with respect”

TREVOR POULSUM

**“ARE YOU GIVING
THE AUDIENCE
VALUE OR ARE YOU
JUST EXTRACTING
ATTENTION FROM IT”**

MICHAEL URBAN

Authenticity is a detector, not a virtue

Across the summit authenticity was the word of the day; this room treated it as a detector rather than a slogan.

The games audience sniffs out the manufactured faster than any other, and the most heavily edited, longest-to-produce videos routinely perform worst.

Players want raw, screen-recorded footage and a real voice over perfect audio, and they ignore anything clearly cooked up in a boardroom to hit buzzwords.

There is no fixed playbook because algorithms change constantly, so you have to be a genuine, active participant on a platform, present as a real user and not just a marketer.

The sharpest test is intent: does a piece of content give value or merely extract attention.



“The question isn't necessarily about reach, it's more about relevance”

MICHAEL URBAN

**“EVERY FAN HAS A
DIFFERENT TYPE OF
CONNECTION TO A
DIFFERENT IP”**


TREVOR POULSUM

Find the identity before the platform

The panel pushed back hard on platform-first thinking. The common mistake is starting with we need to be on TikTok, when the earlier step is finding the game's identity and adapting that to platforms, not the reverse.

Every fan has a different connection to a different IP, so the questions are where and how you meet them and what the cultural entry point is. Characters drive enormous connection and make a strong creative anchor.

The most useful idea was unexpected connections: a player of one title is rarely only interested in that title, so an adjacent passion like anime can be the way into a games audience rather than hammering the IP head-on. The message matched to the platform mindset, quick and self-contained on a feed, deep and research-led on a wiki.

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a black t-shirt and a red lanyard, is speaking into a microphone. He is gesturing with his hands. The background is a colorful, stylized graphic with a yellow star, a yellow hard hat, and a red banner. A purple name tag on the microphone reads "Pop Culture Marketing Summit".

“Those unexpected audience connections exist everywhere across lots of different mediums”

GEORGE WILLARD

Plant grassroots early, measure brand trust

The final thread joined community seeding, budget and measurement into one argument for patience.

The advice was to start really early and plant grassroots, behaving like a content creator yourself, embedding in streamers' chats long before there is a product so the goodwill is there at launch.

Constraints breed the best work; a lot of the most creative campaigns come from budget restrictions, while big spend on trailers and influencer pushes often converts almost nobody. Spend should match a game's shape, held back for a slow-building title, committed early to one the community will run with, and the IP should not be forced, with players' own blueprints sometimes better than overriding them.

**“YOU NEED TO REALLY
START SUPER EARLY AND
JUST REALLY PLANT THOSE
GRASSROOTS”**

MICHAEL URBAN

Takeaways

RELEVANCE, NOT REACH

With 19,000 games launching on Steam in a year, nobody wins on reach. You win on relevance, and the players themselves become the marketing team.

AUTHENTICITY IS A DETECTOR, NOT A VIRTUE

Players sniff out the manufactured fastest of any audience. Over-polished work performs worst, and the only way in is to be a real user, not a marketer.

FIND THE IDENTITY BEFORE THE PLATFORM

Don't start with 'we need to be on TikTok'. Find the game's identity first, then meet each fan at their own entry point and unexpected connection.

PLANT GRASSROOTS EARLY

Start years before launch and let budget limits force creativity. Much of the impact is invisible to a dashboard, so measure brand trust, not the last click.

IN GAMES YOU CANNOT BUY YOUR WAY PAST THE AUDIENCE, YOU EARN RELEVANCE BY BEING A REAL PARTICIPANT, PLANTING ROOTS EARLY, AND RESPECTING PLAYERS WHO WILL AMPLIFY YOU IF YOU DO.



PANELLIST
Maddie Cullen
Content Creator
notthevampire

MODERATOR
Jasmin Sangha
Founder,
Loud Bark

PANELLIST
Simon Rogers
Owner
ProFantasy Software & Pelgrane Press

PANELLIST
Louise Sugden
Content Creator & Founder
Rogue Hobbies

THE TABLETOP RENAISSANCE





**"I would say it's
no longer a
subculture, it's a
culture"**

SIMON ROGERS

The Tabletop Renaissance was the post-lunch panel, on a category dismissed as a hobby that has quietly become an eighteen billion dollar business.

It brought together the publisher, the retailer and the community. Jasmin Sangha, Founder of Loud Bark, moderated, joined by Simon Rogers of ProFantasy and Pelgrane Press as the game-maker; Louise Sugden, Founder of Rogue Hobbies, on retail and community; and Maddie Cullen of notthevampire as the player-community creator. Their case was that the renaissance is a long, steady rise rather than a boom, and that the throughline is human: tabletop is the antidote to the internet, an alibi for real connection and catharsis screens cannot replicate.

From there the panel turned practical, on how brands enter the space credibly without flattening what makes it work.

**“A LOT OF
PEOPLE GO TO
TABLETOP TO
MAKE A
CONNECTION”**

MADDIE CULLEN

The antidote to the internet

The tabletop renaissance is less a comeback than a steady rise, now an eighteen billion dollar space that sells out the O2 for live shows.

The throughline is human: tabletop is the antidote to the internet, which mainly makes famous people more famous, where games instead quiet everything down and reconnect people. The pull is something ancient, an alibi for real human interaction, making stories together around the campfire, the oldest form of connection there is. The barrier to entry has collapsed, with watchable shows and virtual tabletops letting anyone drop into a weekly game from anywhere.

People come to make a connection, to sit in a room and engage, and the emotional bonds are real enough to bring players to tears when a character dies.

A woman with long, straight pink hair and a red headband with a yellow smiley face on the side. She is wearing a dark blue top and a red necklace. She is holding a large yellow smiley face emoji in her hands. The background is a blue wall with white cloud-like patterns.

“A lot of people go to tabletop to make a connection. It's a really nice way of building a community,”

MADDIE CULLEN

**“THE ONE THING
THAT US NERDS
CAN SNIFF OUT IS
SOMEONE WHO'S
NOT DONE THE
RESEARCH”**

LOUISE SUGDEN

Do the work or get sniffed out

Authenticity here was framed as non-negotiable. Louise Sugden, ten years at Games Workshop, said authenticity here is non-negotiable, because a craft-proud community sniffs out anyone who has not done the research, the brand that cannot tell Space Marines from the bad guys.

The route in is concrete: find a friend who plays, learn the niche jokes, do the homework. The sharpest warning was about AI: in a community where people spend three hundred hours painting a miniature the size of a thumb, advertising with AI reads as a slap in the face, expecting fans to pour in effort while the brand puts in none.

The structural fix is to have someone already deep in the hobby, or to pay people to go and play the games and paint the miniatures and come back full of genuine enthusiasm, because they will build a far better strategy.

**“IF YOU GIVE THEM AN
AIR FRYER WORTH 300
POUNDS, THEY WILL
LIGHT UP”**

LOUISE SUGDEN

Understand the value, not just the spend

The most memorable thread was about value rather than spend.

War gamers will happily drop six hundred pounds on a box of miniatures yet balk elsewhere, so gifting a tournament winner that same Warhammer barely registers, they were going to buy it anyway, while a three hundred pound air fryer delights them because it is something they would never buy themselves.

The marketing lesson is that you do not want to be selling orange juice to orange juice drinkers; a brand's value has to come from outside the hobby, not duplicate what fans already purchase. Sponsorship has to work both ways, too: it is not enough to place an ad on a creator's platform, the brand must give fans something real and point its own audience back to the creator.

A woman with reddish hair, wearing a black jacket and a headpiece with two large, round, orange and white decorative elements, is speaking into a microphone. The microphone has a purple label that reads "Pop Culture Marketing Summit". The background is a colorful, stylized graphic with a blue background, a yellow star, and a grid of red squares. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**“Do your next,
marketing meeting at
a LARP thing, it'll be
the most fun thing
you've ever done.”**

LOUISE SUGDEN

Be a co-pilot, pay your nerds

The closing instruction to brands was to be a co-pilot, not a sidecar, someone who understands the journey and why it matters and adds to an experience fans are already deep in, rather than slapping a character on a can.

These are lifers, ride-or-die people built on talent and passion who do not chase the next new thing, a community to be protected. They follow their heart and their community rather than a wish list, picking a ten-year-old game off a shelf on a whim, which makes them unlike any other audience.

The advice was disarmingly simple: talk to people in this space, ask what you can do to help the community, and they will tell you, and tell you what they can do for you in return.

**“WE'RE LIFERS, WE'RE IN IT,
WE'RE IN IT FOR LIFE,
AND WE ABSOLUTELY
RIDE OR DIE
LOVE THE THING”**

MADDIE CULLEN

FILM • TV • GAMES • TOYS



“playing games gives you an alibi for social interaction, and they're real human interactions, and particularly tabletop role playing allows you to explore things about yourself and your friends and do the most ancient thing, which is make stories together: sitting around the campfire”

SIMON ROGERS

Takeaways

THE ANTIDOTE TO THE INTERNET

Tabletop is an alibi for real human connection in a digital world. People play for catharsis and community, the oldest reasons there are, which is exactly why it is growing.

DO THE WORK OR GET SNIFFED OUT

This audience smells a brand that hasn't done the research. Genuine engagement is the only way in, and AI in a 300-hour handcraft hobby is a slap in the face.

UNDERSTAND THE VALUE, NOT JUST THE SPEND

Warhammer players drop hundreds on miniatures but light up at an air fryer. Don't sell orange juice to orange juice drinkers, bring value from outside the hobby.

BE A CO-PILOT, PAY YOUR NERDS

This community wants a co-pilot, not a sidecar passenger. Bring in the people who live in it, pay them, and add to the experience already happening.

TABLETOP'S GROWTH IS BUILT ON REAL HUMAN CONNECTION AND CRAFT PRIDE, SO BRANDS WIN BY PAYING THE EXPERTS, ADDING VALUE FROM OUTSIDE THE HOBBY, AND JOINING AS A CO-PILOT RATHER THAN A PASSENGER.



MODERATOR
James Gates
Japanese Pop Culture
Writer & Specialist

PANELLIST
Mingzhen Li
Founder
Playful Digital

PANELLIST
Jiella Esmat
Founder
8 Lions Entertainment

PANELLIST
Stu Levy
Founder & CEO
TOKYOPOP

PANELLIST
Mark Bayliss
Founder & CEO
Animanga Pop & Pop Nippon

LOST IN TRANSLATION





“To bring our culture to the West feels like more of a national pride”

MINGZHEN LI

Lost In Translation was the largest panel of the day, a five-voice discussion on carrying East Asian IP across cultures as anime drives huge global audiences. The breadth was the point. James Gates, Japanese Pop Culture Specialist at Plastic Love, moderated, joined by Stu Levy, CEO of TOKYOPOP; Jiella Esmat, Founder of 8 Lions Entertainment; Mingzhen Li, Founder of Playful Digital; and Mark Bayliss, CEO of Animanga Pop and Pop Nippon, between them covering Japanese and Chinese IP, licensing and in-market activation.

They mapped the full journey of an IP across markets. The diagnosis recurred: the home-market instincts that protect Japanese and Chinese IP, tight control, caution, relationship-led dealing, become the bottleneck overseas, and copy-paste localisation fails because performance-led launches spike then die without local expertise.

“THEY'RE VERY PROTECTIVE OF THEIR CONTENT, WHICH IS GREAT, BUT IT ALSO LIMITS THE WAY THAT WE CAN MARKET THE CONTENT OUTSIDE OF JAPAN”

STU LEVY

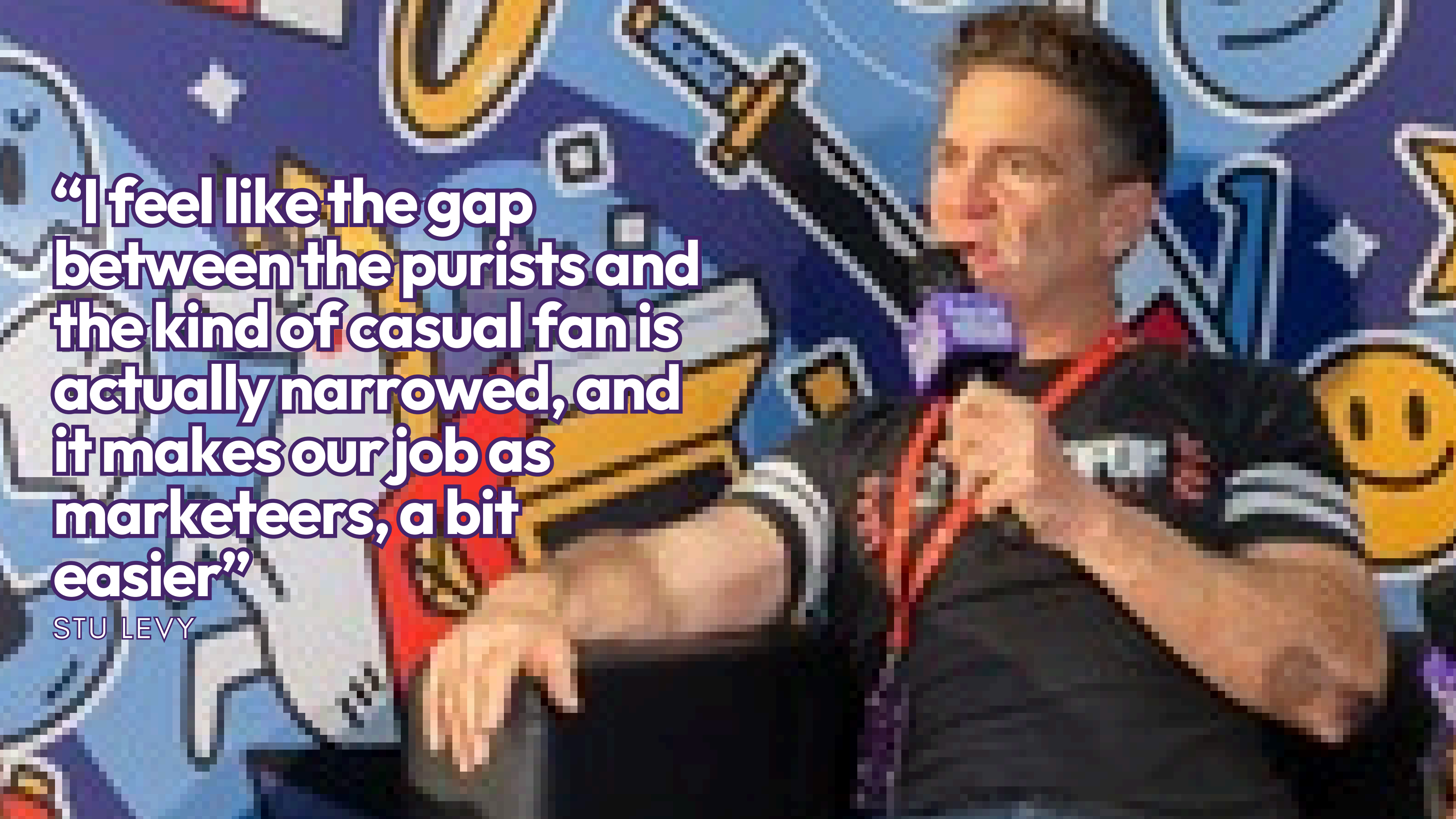
The rules that don't travel

The structural friction of moving Asian IP west starts with rules that do not travel.

Japanese owners require overseas partners to follow the rules set in Japan and are fiercely protective of their content, which is admirable but limits how it can be marketed abroad.

Things that work at home do not transfer instantly, maid culture being the classic example, carrying a wholly different connotation in the West and needing patient explanation, and contracts arrive only after many dinners and a lot of relationship-building. Deal-making style is markedly different again in Japan and China, usually needing give on both sides, so an intermediary often helps.

The very instincts that protect this IP at home, control, caution, relationship-led negotiation, become the bottleneck overseas.



**“I feel like the gap
between the purists and
the kind of casual fan is
actually narrowed, and
it makes our job as
marketeers, a bit
easier”**

STU LEVY

**“THEY DIDN'T REALLY
THINK WESTERN
MARKET IS A DIFFERENT
MARKET, THEY JUST
COPY AND PASTE THEIR
CHINA MARKET
STRATEGY”**

MINGZHEN LI


Copy-paste is not a strategy

The sharpest practical warning was against treating localisation as translation.

Studios often assume the West is the same market and simply copy and paste the strategy that worked at home, translating the campaign into English and shipping it. It fails because home markets can measure success very differently, pouring money into a launch window to buy peak exposure through conversion spend and influencers, then moving on.

Without investment in long-term community, the moment the money stops and the streaming stops, the title naturally dies.

The same failure explains a record-breaking animated film whose box office collapsed abroad because the owners would not fund dubs for a family title, losing the peak.



“You can't be doing global distribution or monetization of IP without having people in your team who have hands-on experience of what works in that country, what colours fly, what colours don't fly.”

JIELLA ESMAT

“YOU SEE PEOPLE TRYING TO PERCEIVE THEIR OWN IDEAS OF WHAT THE JAPANESE IP SHOULD BE, INSTEAD OF ACTUALLY STEPPING BACK AND LISTENING”

MARK BAYLISS

The gap is closing, the gatekeepers remain

The Western audience is shifting generationally.

In the old days it took hard work to make Japanese language and culture understandable, which angered purists, but the world has evolved, and you can now stay close to the original, use Japanese words and be more literal, because the younger generation understands far more about Asia than its predecessor.

That narrowing gap between purist and casual fan makes the marketer's job easier. The counter-force is a vocal Western fandom, people raised outside Asia who identify intensely with anime and act as cultural gatekeepers, loud online and at conventions, sometimes arriving with fixed ideas of how an IP should be, especially in cosplay.

“Make sure you've got your game plan 100% in your head, and know exactly, try and think about what questions you and answers you're going to get from the Japanese side.”

MARK BAYLISS



Kids, and a new confidence

Two newer forces are reshaping the field.

The first is children: kids as young as six or seven now watch anime that was niche only a few years ago, and they bring pester power, wanting the pyjamas, the bedding, the lunchbox, opening real monetisation for IP owners. Crucially kids do not care whether anime comes from Japan, Korea or China, which lets markets not historically known for it bypass cautious broadcasters and go direct to YouTube.

The second is a new cultural confidence: where Chinese companies once styled themselves to read as Japanese because those brands travelled better, recent hits now move proudly as Chinese without hiding their origin, a shift rooted in cultural pride and a desire to be seen.

**“THEY HAVE PESTER
POWER, THEY WANT THE
PYJAMAS, THE BEDDING,
THE LUNCHBOX, THE
WATER BOTTLE”**

JIELLA ESMAT



“Working with different cultures, one thing is to realise that, bringing a new IP to a different market isn't just doing the translation.”

MINGZHEN LI

Takeaways

THE RULES THAT DON'T TRAVEL

Japanese IP owners apply home-market rules abroad, and deals are built on dinners not documents. What protects the content at home can throttle it overseas.

COPY-PASTE IS NOT A STRATEGY

A home-market playbook translated word for word fails abroad. China's performance-led launch spikes hard then dies without the long-term community the West

THE GAP IS CLOSING, THE GATEKEEPERS REMAIN

A younger Western audience now understands Asia well enough that literal localisation works. Self-appointed gatekeepers still complicate how campaigns land.

KIDS, AND A NEW CONFIDENCE

Children are the new on-ramp, watching anime young and wanting the pyjamas and lunchbox. And Chinese IP now travels proudly as itself rather than disguised as Japanese.

CROSSING BORDERS WITH IP IS CULTURAL ADAPTATION, NOT TRANSLATION, SO SET EXPECTATIONS EARLY, BUILD A MULTICULTURAL TEAM, AND RESOURCE THE LONG-TERM COMMUNITY RATHER THAN BETTING EVERYTHING ON THE LAUNCH.



MODERATOR
Clare Bateman-King
Founder
CBK Creative

PANELLIST
Luiz Ferreira
Sales Director
Fanattik Collectibles

PANELLIST
Dustin Hardy
Events Director
RSVLTS

PANELLIST
Peter Jenkinson
Founder
The Kidults



CULTURE SHOCK



“It's like success is a bad thing to some early adopters, it's like you were mine and now you belong to everyone else.”

CLARE BATEMAN-KING

Culture Shock closed the panel programme on what happens when a niche fandom goes mainstream, and how to scale an IP without losing the community that built it.

The panel came from where that tension bites hardest: collectibles, nostalgia events and community-led apparel. Clare Bateman-King, founder of CBK Creative, moderated, joined by Peter Jenkinson, founder of The Kidults, on collectibles; Luiz Ferreira, Sales Director at Fanattik Collectibles, on licensed product; and Dustin Hardy, Events Director at RSVLTS, on the community-led brand. Their starting position was whose signal to trust as a niche scales, and the answer was the fans: the people who actually buy are the truest read on what will land. From there the conversation moved through authenticity, product quality and protecting the core while growing.

“A LOT OF THE THINGS WE DO IS TOTALLY FOCUSED ON THE FANS, BECAUSE WE DON'T DO ANY LABEL SLAPPING”

LUIZ FERREIRA

Fan signal is the truest read

When a fandom goes mainstream, the surest guide to what will actually sell is the fans themselves.

The panel was clear that the companies who scale an IP cleanly build their read from the community first, staffing teams with genuine anime and games fans, listening to chatter and lived experience, and grounding decisions in what the people who actually buy are telling them.

Fan conversation is the clearest signal of whether something will land, and the brands that grow well treat it as primary research rather than a nice-to-have, testing every idea against real enthusiasm before they commit.

The instinct across the room was the same: start with the fans and let their signal lead.

**“THE TRUE
FANS, WOULD
KNOW IF WE
WERE
WINGING IT”**


LUIZ FERREIRA

Authenticity is a detector, not a virtue

In these communities credibility cannot be bought, only demonstrated, and fans detect a brand winging it instantly. The panel drew a hard line between slapping a licensed label on a generic product and making the things fans genuinely want, the in-game objects, the details that reward knowledge, the items people actively collect.

Meeting the quality the nostalgia deserves matters as much as the licence itself, because a shortcut reads as contempt and is punished in public. The most reliable safeguard is to be staffed by real fans, so the work is sense-checked from the inside before it ever reaches the community.

Authenticity here is not a tone of voice, it is doing the work properly and knowing the source material well enough not to get caught out.

A man wearing a yellow hard hat with a logo, safety glasses, and a patterned shirt is speaking into a microphone. The background is a colorful, stylized wall with a large yellow arrow pointing right and a sign that says "ADMIT ONE".

“We listen to the things that our own staff like to do, and what we have fun working on, because if we're not having fun with it, it's gonna look that way.”

DUSTIN HARDY

**“WE'RE VERY MUCH
DROP CULTURE BASED,
SO TUESDAYS AND
THURSDAYS OUR
STUFF COMES OUT,
AND WHEN IT'S GONE,
IT'S GONE”**

DUSTIN HARDY

Scarcity is the scaling engine

Counter-intuitively, the same mechanic that builds hype is the one that scales the brand.

Drop culture, limited runs and numbered editions create urgency, turn products into something closer to investments, and pull both customers and partners in. Releases that sell out in seconds generate the demand signal and the cultural heat that larger collaborations are built on. The discipline it demands is operational rather than creative: the brands that win can rebuild stock and meet the surge without breaking the scarcity that made the thing desirable in the first place.

Managed well, scarcity is not a limit on growth, it is the engine of it, provided the supply chain can keep pace with the appetite the model creates.

YS

“One pound in every three spent by an adult is buying stuff for themselves or for other adults not a child.”

PETER JENKINSON



Bring the early adopters with you


The emotional core of scaling any fandom is the day-one community, the people who were there first and can feel left behind the moment something they loved belongs to everyone else.

The panel recognised the parasocial sting of that shift, the sense of you were mine that turns to resentment when an IP or an artist breaks through. The answer is not to slow growth but to keep the original fans inside it: give them the meetups, the loyalty tier, the direct line, the feeling of ownership that turns them from the aggrieved into the advocates.

A community heard, good feedback and bad, stays loyal through scale, and those earliest members become the most credible voices a growing brand has.

**“BEWARE THE WRATH OF
THEM WHEN YOU TAP INTO
AND BRING BACK THE
ICONIC TOUCH POINTS
FROM THEIR YOUTH”**

PETER JENKINSON



“It creates that urgency when it is limited, people really want that item very quickly.”

LUIZ FERREIRA

Takeaways

FAN SIGNAL IS THE TRUEST READ

A niche going mainstream is won or lost on its founding community, so lead with fan signal, honour the quality nostalgia deserves, and keep early adopters as advocates.

AUTHENTICITY BEATS LABEL-SLAPPING

Real fans spot a brand winging it instantly. Don't slap a label on a product, make the things fans actually want and meet the quality the nostalgia deserves.

SCARCITY IS THE SCALING ENGINE

Drop culture, limited runs and numbered editions create urgency and turn products into investments. The model that builds hype is the same one that scales the brand.

BRING THE EARLY ADOPTERS WITH YOU

Growth makes day-one fans feel left behind. Win them back by making them part of it, the meetups, the loyalty tier, the direct line, so they become your advocates.

A NICHE GOING MAINSTREAM IS WON OR LOST ON THE FOUNDING COMMUNITY, SO WEIGH FAN SIGNAL OVER STUDIO SPEND, HONOUR THE QUALIT NOSTALGIA DESERVES, AND BRING YOUR EARLY ADOPTERS BACK INTO THE FOLD AS ADVOCATES.



CHLOE COMBI

Gen Alpha & Future Entertainment Audiences



Parasocial: The Biggest + Most Influential
structure in the World.

Combi closed the summit with a data-led portrait of Generation Alpha (roughly 2-16) and what they want from culture.

The spine: this is a generation that trusts stories far more than institutions (92% versus 37%), a faith forged in Covid when entertainment was the respite. Where Gen Z's decade was dystopia, Gen Alpha reach for hope and old-fashioned, character-led storytelling. They distrust AI as a job and creativity threat yet use it intimately every day, a split about autonomy. They co-author culture, prescribing their own endings and craving non-starry, weird, projectable stories. Parasocial communities have rewritten the rules of popularity so anyone can belong. And against the worst youth gender division she has seen, she argued culture showing boys and girls allied is the best antidote. She closed on creators' responsibility, and a crystal-ball set of predictions: female rage, eat-the-rich, competence, religion, eco-horror and manifesting.

Gen Alpha & the Future of Entertainment Audiences

CHLOE COMBI

They trust stories, not institutions

Combi closed the summit with a data-led portrait of Generation Alpha, roughly two to sixteen, and their divergent relationship with the world.


The defining figure: around 37% trust government and institutions against 92% who trust their favourite culture and entertainment, with 72% reporting loneliness in real life at least weekly.

She traced that faith to Covid, arguing the one good legacy is that when the tech bros and the government did not save us, our favourite stories did, games, comics, TV, streaming, often shared with parents, and that defining respite shaped the generation's deep investment in culture.

Where Gen Z's decade was defined by dystopia, 1984, Judge Dredd, The Handmaid's Tale, Gen Alpha, having arrived in something like dystopia already, are reaching instead for hope.

**“CULTURE AND
ENTERTAINMENT IS
LEANING INTO A NEED FOR
KIND OF HOPEFUL
STORYLINES”**

CHLOE COMBI

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red dress and a purple top, is standing on a red carpet. She is holding a microphone and has a blue name tag around her neck. The background is a blue wall with white and red Star Wars-themed graphics, including a rocket ship and a character's head. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“They referred to the 2000s as the olden days”

CHLOE COMBI

**“YOUNG PEOPLE SEE
AND BELIEVE THAT AI IS
STRIPPING AWAY LOTS
OF THEIR JOBS”**

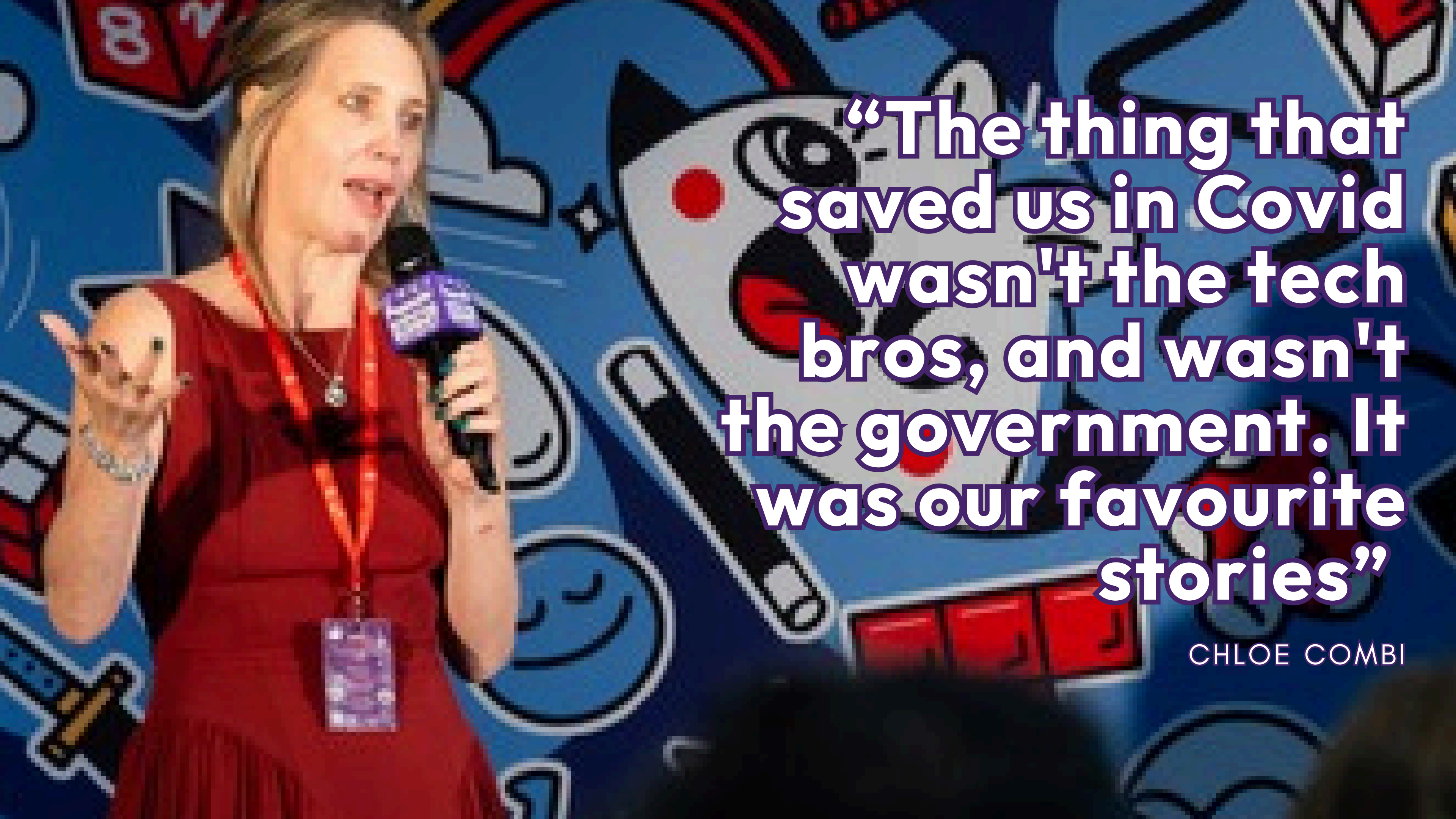
CHLOE COMBI

They hate AI, and use it constantly

Combi identified AI as the cultural shaper for Gen Alpha that social media was for Gen Z, and punctured the assumption that the young are pro-AI.

She had never seen a brand tank with young people the way AI has in two or three years, for clear reasons: a belief that it is stripping entry-level jobs across industries, and that it is hollowing out creativity, originality and organic entertainment. The custodians do not help, the Musks and Altmans squabbling in court over trillions are not good avatars, and real work is needed to restore faith.

The paradox is that the same young people use AI intimately every day, with 72% of 13 to 16 year-olds already daily users rising toward 95%, for friends, therapy and often erotic purposes.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red dress and a lanyard with a badge, is holding a small, light-colored dog. She is standing in front of a wall decorated with a Star Wars theme, featuring a large, stylized image of Chewbacca's head. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“The thing that saved us in Covid wasn't the tech bros, and wasn't the government. It was our favourite stories”

CHLOE COMBI

Audiences write their own endings

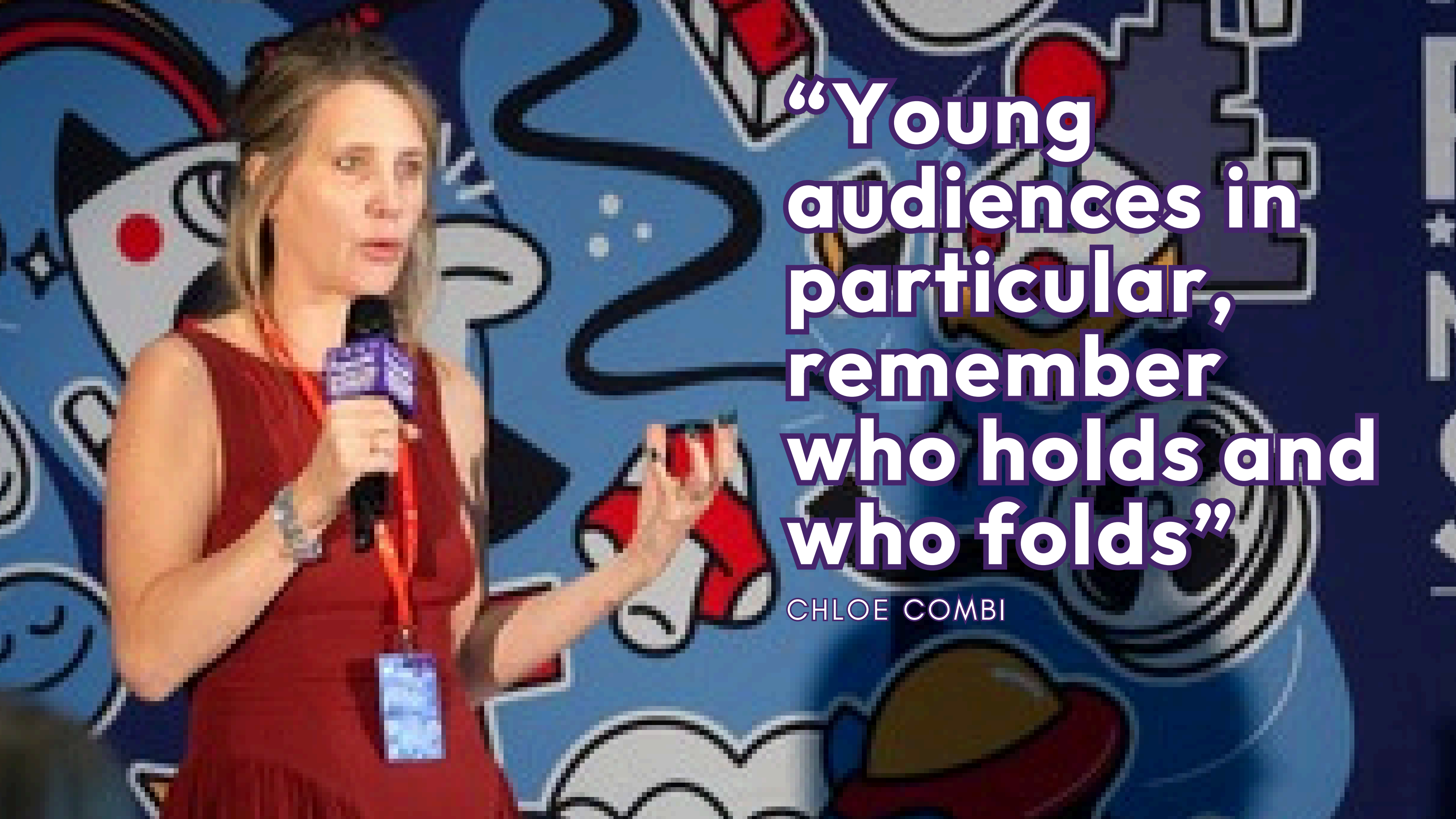
Combi argued that Gen Alpha actively co-author the culture they love, creating their own endings for almost everything, a quantum sense of multiple possible conclusions even Gen Z did not share.

They project their own wishes onto Stranger Things and the like, and the rise of manifesting, the belief you can will outcomes into being, now extends to audiences shaping storylines and conclusions through their own desires.

She saw a ripe revival ahead for choose-your-own-adventure formats, the OG version of this instinct most of them have never encountered. Alongside this runs a strong taste for non-starry vehicles: without a major Hollywood face, young viewers project themselves onto a character and say that is me, which a Ryan Gosling vehicle prevents.

**“AUDIENCES SHAPING THE
STORYLINES AND
PARTICULARLY THE
CONCLUSIONS VIA THEIR
OWN WISHES, DREAMS AND
DESIRES”**

CHLOE COMBI

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red dress and a purple sash, stands on a red carpet. The background is a stylized, pixelated illustration of a Star Wars spaceship, likely the Millennium Falcon, in blue and white with red accents. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“Young audiences in particular, remember who holds and who folds”

CHLOE COMBI

**“I GO HOME AND I TALK
TO MY ONLINE
COMMUNITY, AND THE
WORLD IS OKAY,
BECAUSE I HAVE ALL
THESE FRIENDS, I HAVE
A WHOLE UNIVERSE
AROUND ME”**

CHLOE COMBI

Parasocial fandom rewrote popularity

Building on a thread from the earlier panels, Combi called the parasocial structure one of the defining characteristics of how Gen Alpha consume culture.

Intense fandoms are not new, but the parasocial model has reshaped the traditional fan hierarchy into something more egalitarian and communal: a leader they gather around, whether K-pop, BTS or Marvel, but a genuine community and circle beneath.

Its most powerful effect is on popularity itself. Where the pre-internet 80s and 90s rewarded a narrow set of signifiers, good-looking, straight, tall, athletic, wealthy, able-bodied, online parasocial structures have shattered that, so a young person who is neurodivergent or gender fluid or anything else can build not just a community but real status and following.

Culture can heal the gender divide

Combi's most urgent theme was gender. Gen Alpha are growing up in the worst gender relations she has seen, driven by the online world, influencers and algorithms, with schools and universities visibly divided, boys on one side, girls on the other, deep suspicion between them, and almost all culture refracted through a manosphere or femosphere lens and judged misogynistic or man-hating.

She traced the tipping point to 2016, the Ghostbusters and Gamergate hysteria, worsening yearly since. Adults can keep a healthy distance, but growing up inside it is formative, and the gender views of 13 to 15 year-olds are genuinely shocking against those of most people in the room.

**“GEN A ARE
GROWING UP IN THE
WORST GENDER
RELATIONS I HAVE
EVER SEEN”**

CHLOE COMBI

Predictions

Chloe Combi closed by forecasting the cultural currents she expects to define the next decade of entertainment

Female Rage – stories of women's fury and reckoning move from subtext to centre stage, witches and revenge as the defining archetypes.

Eat The Rich – billionaires become the villains of the cultural moment, with wealth itself the thing audiences want to see torn down.

Young People Fixing It – narratives hand the next generation the job of solving the problems an older one left behind.

Religion – faith and ritual return as cultural territory, mined for meaning, aesthetics and conflict alike.

Competence-Core – audiences crave characters who are simply good at things, mastery and capability as the new aspirational fantasy.

Manifesting And Wishes – magical thinking goes mainstream, desire and intention treated as forces that shape reality.

Eco-Horrors – climate dread takes monstrous form, the natural world turned into the thing to fear.

Road Movies – the journey returns as the story, escape and the open road answering a stuck, weary moment.

Gen A Character Studies – intimate, close-up portraits of the youngest generation, understood on their own terms rather than older ones'.

Takeaways

THEY TRUST STORIES, NOT INSTITUTIONS

Gen Alpha trust their favourite culture far more than government, a faith forged in Covid when stories were the respite. They are reaching for hope and old-fashioned, character-led storytelling.

THEY HATE AI, AND USE IT CONSTANTLY

No brand has tanked with the young like AI, blamed for stripping jobs & hollowing out creativity. Yet they use it intimately every day. The split is really about autonomy.

CULTURE CAN HEAL THE GENDER DIVIDE

Gen Alpha face the worst gender relations Combi has seen, refracted through manosphere and femosphere algorithms. Stories showing boys and girls allied are the best antidote to the toxicity.

PARASOCIAL FANDOM REWROTE POPULARITY

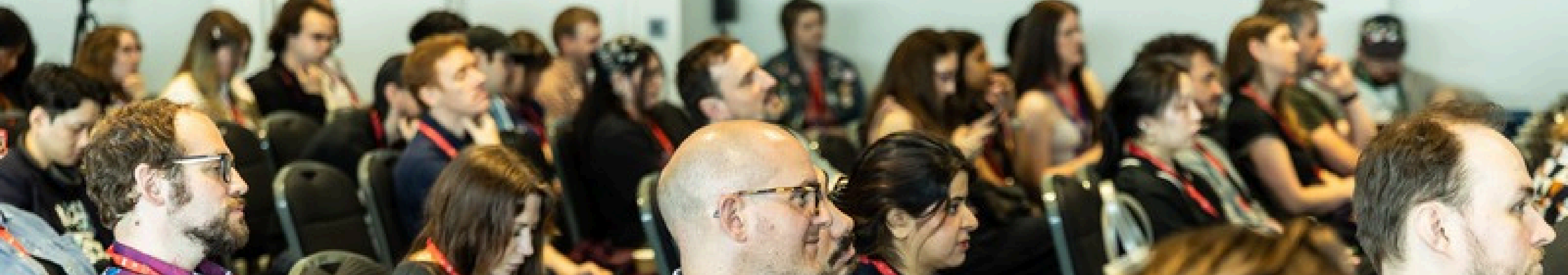
The parasocial model flattened the old fan hierarchy into something communal, & shattered the narrow rules of who gets to be popular, so anyone can build real status and belonging.

GEN ALPHA PUT THEIR FAITH IN STORIES WHERE INSTITUTIONS FAILED THEM, SO THE BRANDS AND CREATORS WHO TELL BRAVE, HOPEFUL, HUMAN STORIES, AND HOLD THEIR NERVE UNDER PRESSURE, WILL EARN THE DEEPEST TRUST OF ALL.



THE FANDOM ADVANTAGE

Five Shifts That Should Change How You Work



The Fandom Advantage: **Five** **Shifts That** **Should Change** **How You Work**

Read across a full day of pop culture marketing, from football to publishing, games to tabletop, anime to licensing, the same five shifts kept surfacing from completely different corners.

They are not trends to watch. They are changes that have already happened, and each one quietly rewrites a rule most marketing teams still operate by. Ranked here by how much they should change what you do next.

Takeaways

1. Hand over control: fans are partners, not an audience

2. Reach is dead, relevance and belonging win

3. Authenticity is a detector, not a virtue

4. Protect the core while you scale

5. AI is the backdrop, human taste is the answer

HAND OVER CONTROL: FANS ARE PARTNERS, NOT AN AUDIENCE

The brands winning in fandom are the ones giving up control, on purpose.

For decades the job was to own the message. Now the most powerful marketing a brand gets is made by people it does not employ and cannot direct, and the instinct to manage that is precisely what kills it.

The move is to treat fans as colleagues rather than targets. Bring the committed ones in as paid consultants. Give creators something close to free rein and the access to use it. Map the different kinds of fan, the world-builders who extend your IP unprompted, the lore-keepers who explain it to everyone else, the amplifiers who spike attention and move on, and resource each differently.

Control was never the asset. Trust is, and you can only get it by giving something real away first in a fair exchange.

“IT'S NOT TRYING TO CONTROL IT, AND IT'S EMBRACING FANDOM, EMBRACING COMMUNITY, AND WORKING WITH THEM ON YOUR CAMPAIGNS”

SARAH JEFFCOAT,
SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER,
SIMON & SCHUSTER UK

Takeaways

Put fans on the payroll

Put fans on the payroll, not just the mailing list: bring your most committed community members in as paid consultants and brief them like professionals.

Give a remit, then let go

Give creators a remit and real access, then resist the urge to approve every frame, the control you keep is the authenticity you lose.

Map the fanbase, don't lump it as one

Map your fans by type, world-builders, lore-keepers, amplifiers, and resource each one differently instead of treating the community as a single block. Look adjacent as well as direct fandom

REACH IS DEAD: RELEVANCE AND BELONGING WIN

Reach measures how many people a thing was put in front of, not how many felt anything.

That gap used to be a technicality; in a market this crowded it is the whole point.

Being seen by millions who feel nothing is worth less than being meaningful to thousands who feel seen.

The shift is from broadcasting at an audience to belonging within one, and it changes everything: who you target, what you make, how you judge whether it worked. Stop asking how many people we reached; start asking did the right people feel this was for them.

The brands that get it move budget from impressions to belonging, and find the reach follows anyway.

**“THE QUESTION ISN'T
NECESSARILY ABOUT REACH,
IT'S MORE ABOUT
RELEVANCE”**

MICHAEL URBAN

Takeaways

Change the question

Stop measuring how many did we reach and start measuring did the right people feel this was for them.

Move budget to presence

Shift spend from impressions toward showing up consistently inside one community rather than fleetingly across all of them.

Bank depth, not breadth

Treat depth as the compounding asset, a smaller audience that feels seen carries you further than a larger one that felt nothing.

Authenticity is a detector, not a value

Authenticity is the most overused word in marketing and the most misunderstood. It is not a quality you claim; it is a test your audience runs before they will engage at all, and they run it in seconds.

Fans can smell a brand that has not done the work, and the penalty is not indifference but rejection. The practical version is sharper than the slogan: the most polished, most expensive, most boardroom-approved content often performs worst, because effort spent on gloss reads as effort not spent on understanding.

The only reliable way to pass the test is to know the thing as well as the fans do, or to have people who do inside the room before anything ships. Ask of every piece of work one question the audience is already asking: does this give us something, or is it just taking our attention.

**“THE ONE THING THAT US
NERDS CAN SNIFF OUT IS
SOMEONE WHO'S NOT DONE
THE RESEARCH”**

LOUISE SUGDEN,
CONTENT CREATOR & FOUNDER,
ROGUE HOBBIES

Takeaways

Run the audience's test

Before anything ships, ask the question the audience is already asking, does this give them something, or just take their attention.

Get a real fan in the room

Bring someone who genuinely knows the fandom in early, credibility cannot be added in the edit.

Polish is not quality

Stop equating production value with quality, over-produced work signals effort spent on gloss rather than understanding, and fans read the difference instantly.

PROTECT THE CORE WHILE YOU SCALE

Growth is the goal and the threat at the same time.

The community that makes something worth scaling is the community most easily lost in the scaling, and the moment the people who were there first feel it now belongs to everyone, resentment replaces advocacy. The discipline is to grow without making your earliest fans feel evicted from something that was theirs.

That means bringing them with you deliberately, the direct line, the loyalty tier, the sense of ownership, so they become the credible voices vouching for you rather than the loudest critics mourning what changed. It also means resisting the over-exposure that feels like success and reads as sell-out, because ubiquity is the fastest way to turn a beloved thing into wallpaper.

Scale carelessly and you inherit a bigger audience that cares less. Scale with the core and they carry you.

**“THEY FOUND SOMETHING
THAT'S THEIRS, THAT MADE
THEM COMFORTABLE, THAT
MADE THEM FEEL GOOD”**

DUSTIN HARDY,
EVENTS DIRECTOR,
RSVLTS

Takeaways

Give early fans somewhere to stay

Growth can make day-one fans feel left behind, so give them somewhere to belong as you scale, the meetups, the loyalty tier, the direct line, and they stay as advocates.

Treat ubiquity as a risk

Watch for over-exposure, being everywhere is the fastest way to turn a beloved thing into wallpaper.

Scarcity protects the core

Limited runs and numbered editions keep a thing desirable as it grows, the model that builds the hype is the same one that guards its value.

AI is the backdrop: taste and the human are the answer

AI is now the condition every brand works inside and the temptation is either to panic or to flood the world with cheap output. Both are mistakes.

The clearest way to think about it: AI produces the average of everything that already exists, plausible recombinations of the done-before. That is only a threat if average is your business, and it should not be.

The value that cannot be automated is taste, the judgement to know what is worth making, and the human signal audiences increasingly seek out precisely because so much is now synthetic. Expect a backlash against slop and a renewed premium on craft, deliberate imperfection, and proof of a human hand.

The opportunity is counterintuitive: as the cost of generic content falls to zero, the worth of genuinely human work rises. Compete on the things a machine averages out.

**“I HAVE NEVER SEEN, A
KIND OF A BRAND, IF YOU
CAN CALL AI A BRAND
TANK SO MUCH, SO
QUICKLY”**

CHLOE COMBI

Takeaways

Compete on what AI averages out

Lean into taste, judgement and the human hand, the things a machine cannot reach.

Position for the slop backlash

Expect a reaction against generic AI output and prepare for it now, deliberate imperfection and visible craft will read as premium.

Use AI to free the humans

Let AI clear the generic work so your people spend their time on what only humans can do, rather than flooding the world with more average.



THE FANDOM ADVANTAGE

IN DEPTH INSIGHTS

Reach or depth.

The first and biggest false choice. Reach is easy to prove, you can put a number on it and take it to internal or client sign off, so it wins the argument even as it stops working. Depth is harder to count, so it gets professed and then sacrificed the moment the pressure comes. That is why authenticity is the most repeated and least honoured word in marketing: everyone claims it, then trades it for a reach figure they find easier to defend. The shift already underway is the quiet retreat from proof of reach toward proof of depth, because reach without belonging has stopped converting into anything that lasts.

The Lowdown:

The teams that pull ahead will be the ones who learn to measure belonging the way the industry currently measures impressions, and hold their nerve when the depth number looks smaller. Whoever cracks that measurement problem stops having to defend the wrong metric

Launch or Long Game

Most teams are fluent in the spike or the slow build, and nervous about the other. But attention with nothing behind it evaporates, the launch peak that vanishes the moment the spend stops, and belonging no one has heard of never gets off the ground. The sophisticated move is to plan them together: a launch that seeds a community rather than just a number, and a fanbase strong enough to earn a moment of mass attention when it counts.

The Lowdown:

The launch and the long game stop being owned by different teams with different budgets, and start being designed as one motion, the spike feeding the base, the base earning the spike.

Digital or live.

The third, and the one the whole day kept circling. The value of digital has fallen, and the scarce thing, the thing that actually moves people, is the real, human moment that cannot be faked, scaled or generated. Culture Shock made it concrete with scarcity as a tool, the limited drop, the numbered edition, the thing that sells out in seconds and has everyone talking. That is where attention and belonging actually meet: the room a feed cannot fake but can carry. Live is not the opposite of digital reach, it is how you earn it.

The Lowdown:

The brands that win will build for the room first and let the feed carry what happened there, treating live as the centre of the plan rather than a line item, while everyone still optimising the feed wonders why it feels hollow.

Thanks

TO ALL THE CONTRIBUTORS:

Tom Goodwin, Chloe Combi, Calvin Innes, Becky Jones, Ben Woods, Dr Rebecca Williams, Amber Taylor, Alice Johnson, Dani Rayner, Lee Willett, Emma Lowe, Georgia Henry, Joel Rochester, Sarah Jeffcoate, Joe Talboys, George Willard, Michael Urban, Trevor Poulsum, Jasmin Sangha, Simon Rogers, Louise Sugden, Maddie Cullen, James Gates, Stu Levy, Jiella Esmat, Mingzhen Li, Mark Bayliss, Clare Bateman-King, Peter Jenkinson, Luiz Ferreira & Dustin Hardy

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Ex12 team: Tariq Shaded, John Bibby & Jared Pepall. The MCM Team: Dan Jones, Kahlil Schweitzer and all the team. Ian Senior, & Ana Goncalves from ExCel London. Amber O'Dell on the socials, Nick Andrews for the photography, GeoLaw for the amazing graphics, Nathan Edmonds and the Get In team for the hype video, Jack Woodhams at Posterspy for art direction. Huge shoutout to the Hire Frequencies team both off and onsite for the tech support.

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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