

THE FUTURE OF SPORTS FANDOM

**HOW BRANDS CAN ENGAGE SPORTS
FANS IN 2022 & BEYOND**

JUNE 2022



STATE *OF* PLAY



With news of Gen Z being less interested in sports than their predecessors, attention spans dwindling and long-term trends showing a decline in TV ratings for sports, much of the industry finds itself concerned about its future. Understandable when we hear statements by senior leaders like “you have to make them a fan by the time they’re 18, or you’ll lose them forever.” The disquiet is justified, but the solutions on how to guarantee sport’s future are less clear.

Many industry insiders feel like the very nature of sport itself, the competition, needs a complete overhaul. At We Are Social Sport we disagree. We believe sport finds itself at this juncture due to a failure of creativity in marketing. When sports marketers have responded to shifting attitudes and behaviours, audiences have taken to sports as they always have. Formula 1’s docuseries Drive To Survive is a shining example of this, with its approach of honing into audiences’ desire for emotional, human-led, plot-driven storytelling paying dividends. A report from Nielsen found that the docuseries brought in younger fans, with 46% of those that tuned into both Drive To Survive and Formula 1 being aged 34 and younger. This breathed life into a sport that had lost 200 million fans between 2008 and 2016.

And despite being at an inflection point, sport itself is becoming a broader church. From purpose, to culture, to activism and creativity, sport today is all encompassing. Whether it be Naomi Osaka advocating for more conversation and action around mental health, or Marcus Rashford fighting against child food poverty, more and more athletes are using their platform to promote their values and interests beyond performance. Sports has always been a crucible for our values, but today it shapes our lives in a multitude of ways, through both expected and unexpected avenues, be it fashion, music, film or technology. All this ladders up to sport’s cultural impact being bigger than ever.

By combining compelling creative with a real understanding of how audiences are changing, sports marketing will continue to entertain, inspire and ultimately drive fandom. With this in mind, we’ve detailed the five key shifts we’re seeing among fans that’ll keep sports marketers at the top of their game.



GAME CHANGING

***CULTURAL SHIFTS SHAPING THE
FUTURE OF SPORTS MARKETING***

GAME ON

THE WORLDS OF SOCIAL AND GAMING ARE COALESCING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF SPORTS FANS

Since the pandemic, much more of our lives have moved online. It's within this context that the role of gaming universes has taken on greater significance for younger audiences. These virtual worlds fulfil their emotional and social needs, with recent research concluding that avatar communication can effectively compensate for a lack of social resources in real life. Indeed, gaming platform Roblox's monthly active users increased from 35 to 150 million between 2017 and 2020. It's well established that the sport industry has a challenge on its hands when it comes to attracting the next generation, with a report finding only 23% of Gen Z consider themselves avid sports fans, compared to 42% of millennials. This puts an added pressure on sports marketers to meet them on the platforms where they are finding emotional benefit and spending more of their time, rather than expecting audiences to enter their ecosystem as they might have done previously.

Leading sport entities are becoming wise to this, and responding accordingly. Take the NFL Tycoon experience on Roblox. It taps into platform-native behaviours of creativity and play, educating players on what it'd be like to be a team owner, allowing them to develop custom stadiums, build teams, trade cards and compete in a leaderboard that unlocks additional in-experience rewards. Similarly, UEFA won plaudits with their Women's Euros 2022 Roblox experience that aimed to promote the tournament and drive participation of girls in football. The experience included the release of three virtual mascots who each had a different footballing skill, in-game obstacle courses, as well as team jerseys and boots that you could dress your avatar with. We've even seen a sports match being streamed live in one of these spaces, with Serie A broadcasting AC Milan vs Fiorentina in the Middle East and North Africa on The Nemesis, described as "the next generation metaverse".

INCLUSIVITY > TOXICITY

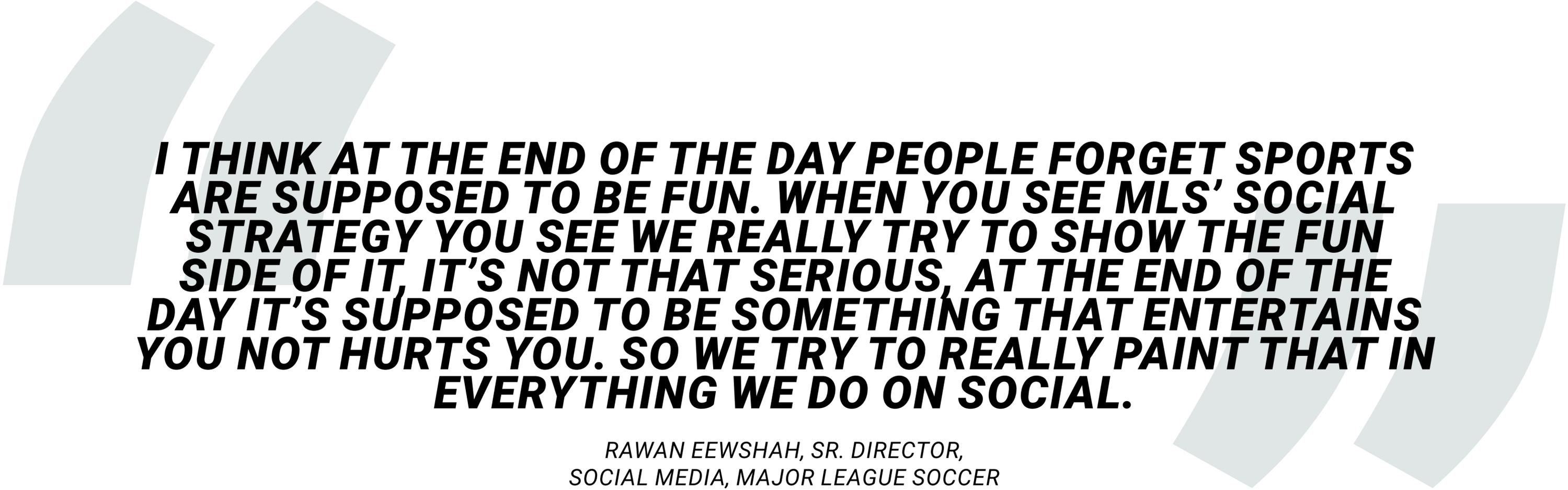
SPORTING AUDIENCES ARE PRIORITISING ONLINE SPACES WHICH FOSTER INCLUSIVITY AND POSITIVITY

Tired of platforms that can cultivate conflict and hate, sporting audiences are moving in droves to inclusive online spaces that are free from toxicity, whether it be apps that create positive social interactions through functionality, or apps that encourage support for important causes. Abuse on social media isn't a new problem, but in the last year it's become more and more pertinent to sports fandom. In a survey conducted after last year's European Championships, 1 in 4 ethnic minority football fans reported that they've been the subject of racist abuse on social media. The World Athletics Body also conducted research following the Tokyo Olympics which found "disturbing levels of abuse of athletes, including sexist, racist, transphobic and homophobic posts, and unfounded doping accusations" on Twitter.

As social media platforms come under fire for not doing enough to tackle hate speech, platforms like Strava and adidas' running app are seeing spikes in usage by creating an encouraging, social environment through the positive community that is nurtured there. Strava's social functionality, which allows peers to praise one another through kudos, comments and clubs, is part of why the app has grown to the degree that it has, with 189,000 new clubs created in 2021 and 38% more activities recorded, totalling 37 million uploads a week during 2021 and amounting to 1.8 billion across the whole year. But it's not only the in-built social functionality that's driving people to these platforms, it's also inclusive campaigns which allow people to support causes that they care about, like environmental sustainability. Indeed, adidas' Run For The Oceans challenge demonstrates the enthusiasm there is for inclusive online initiatives. Accessible on their running app, adidas have partnered with Parley (an organisation that addresses the plastic pollution of oceans) and committed to cleaning up 1 bottle from beaches and

coastal communities for every 10 minutes participants run. Everyone is able to participate, whether you're a wheelchair user or a non-disabled person. As it stands, there are 1,273,386 participants registered.

The rise of creators on TikTok that prioritise inclusivity also illustrates this shift we're seeing. Kadeena Cox, with her 209,000 followers, exemplifies this. The parasport athlete uses her channel to tell her story of being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis to becoming an Olympic champion, sending a message of optimism and hope via social media to individuals that are often excluded from sport. Another creator that's fostering inclusivity is Erik Shoji, an American volleyball player who uses TikTok to celebrate a previously unheralded sport with his playful and educational content, to the tune of 394,000 followers. And of course there's Tom Daley, who uses his TikTok to show off his knitting skills, challenging outdated ideas of masculinity and showing that you can be a successful athlete and still be yourself.

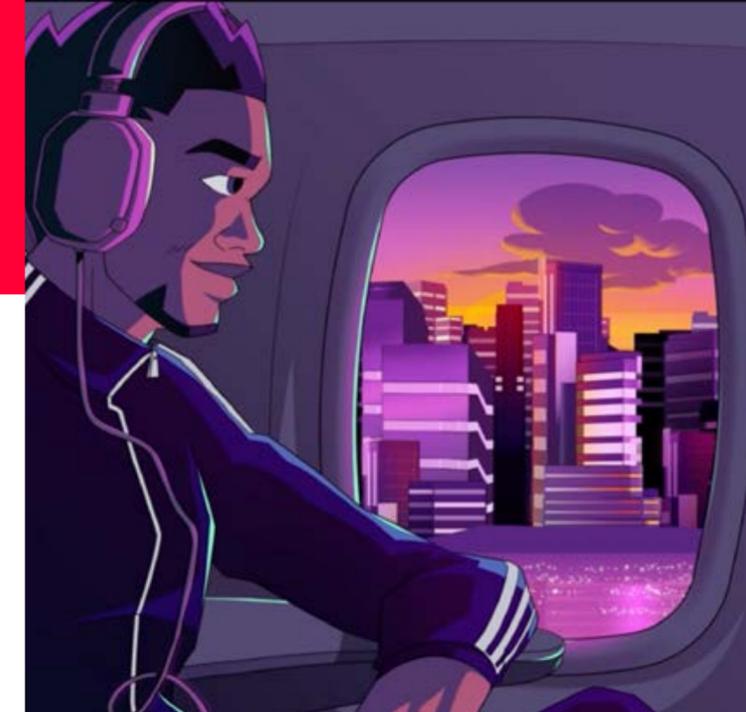


I THINK AT THE END OF THE DAY PEOPLE FORGET SPORTS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE FUN. WHEN YOU SEE MLS' SOCIAL STRATEGY YOU SEE WE REALLY TRY TO SHOW THE FUN SIDE OF IT, IT'S NOT THAT SERIOUS, AT THE END OF THE DAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE SOMETHING THAT ENTERTAINS YOU NOT HURTS YOU. SO WE TRY TO REALLY PAINT THAT IN EVERYTHING WE DO ON SOCIAL.

*RAWAN EEWSHAH, SR. DIRECTOR,
SOCIAL MEDIA, MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER*



UNDER THE SKIN



SPORTS FANS HAVE A HUNGER FOR DEEPER, EMOTIONAL, HUMAN-LED STORYTELLING.

In a more saturated entertainment space, the level of storytelling available to audiences is increasing in quality. Amidst this growing competition expectations are higher, and as a result, audiences today seek stronger affinities with sports. In fact, when it comes to global fans, 39% will watch content that's unrelated to a live event, highlighting that they want more compelling ways to engage.

It's why Netflix continues to invest in content franchises like Last Chance U, Cheer and Sunderland Til I Die that build deep connections with viewers through intimate, human-led storytelling that brings them closer to sport. It's also why programmes like LeBron James' 'The Shop' garners millions

of views. Featuring stars from across the entertainment landscape like Naomi Osaka, Jay-Z and Megan Rapinoe, the show is not set in a stadium or arena but in a barbershop, where LeBron and his business partner Maverick Carter invite guests to speak about issues personal to them, whether it be activism, their journey to success or what motivates them. And it's why we collaborated with superstar sprinter Noah Lyle in a recent adidas Running campaign, to showcase the athlete's personal love of anime, bringing his immense character and personality to the fore – something that, historically, we would never have the chance to see off the track.

**WE GREW UP WITH THE ATHLETES WHO HAD THE PERFECTLY
CANNED MEDIA RESPONSE. BUT GEN Z REALLY RESONATES
WITH THE NAOMI OSAKAS, THE MARCUS RASHFORDS –
PEOPLE WHO COME OUT AND STAND FOR SOMETHING OR ARE
WILLING TO BE VULNERABLE – AND THAT’S EVEN A GREAT
OPPORTUNITY IN ITSELF, HOW DO WE SHOW MORE OF OUR
ATHLETES TO BRING IN THIS GENERATION**

JAS DHAMI, DIRECTOR OF SPORT,
WE ARE SOCIAL US

PEER-DRIVEN ASPIRATION

RATHER THAN SUPERSTARS, GEN Z ARE BEING WON OVER BY ATHLETES LIKE THEMSELVES.

At last year's Olympics in Tokyo, it wasn't a gold medallist who was the most engaged with athlete on social media. It wasn't a silver or bronze medallist either. It was Ilona Maher, a member of the USA's rugby union team. She earned 22 million interactions and 126 million video views over the Olympics with content that spoke to her audience on their level through adopting creator and TikTok-first behaviours, whether it be sharing the community's sense of humour and joking about 'tryna smash' a fellow athlete or using popular sounds to accompany relatable comedy skits. Rather than being an anomaly, Maher is one of many athletes on TikTok who is winning over fans with a peer-driven approach. Take Jadan Raymond, the 18 year old Crystal Palace academy player who boasts 430,000 followers on the platform despite not playing a professional game yet, or Sedona Prince, the college hooper who has 3.1 million followers. All these athletes treat their role of creator as seriously as their sporting career, and Gen Z is responding accordingly, following athletes like themselves

who they can relate to, and live vicariously through. It's not only athletes who are responding to Gen Z's desire for athletes they can relate to, we're seeing media empires being built off the back of it too. Overtime started as a digital media company that existed predominantly on Instagram where Gen Zers could watch clips of themselves and expanded into creating a league called Overtime Elite that featured 16-18 year olds, providing them with a new path to pro basketball. As of May 2022, the league has over 1 million followers on TikTok, giving viewers an insight into the personalities that make the league what it is, showcasing BTS clips of them hitting the griddy, picking their favoured sneaker alongside content of highlight reel-worthy slam dunks.

With the NCAA loosening rules around commercial deals for student-athletes, this move towards peer-driven aspiration is just getting started.

IT'S A FANS WORLD

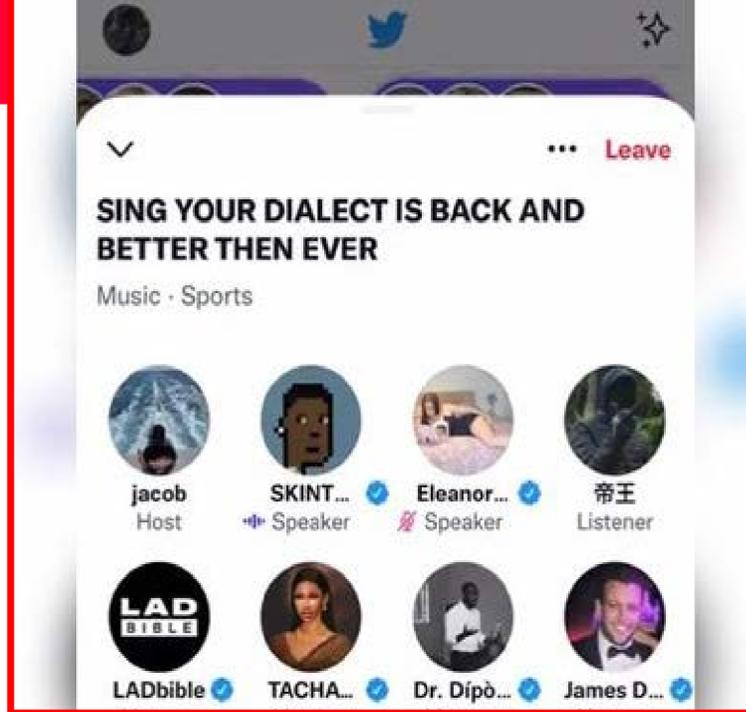


Image: Sing Your Dialect

FANS WANT TO OWN, DRIVE AND DEFINE THE GAMES THEY LOVE, NOT JUST SIT IN THE STANDS

In the last couple of years, words like blockchain and DAO may have entered your lexicon as conversation around web3 increases. Central to this are ideas around decentralisation and a democratisation of influence, with 69% of people globally feeling brands should involve creators and communities in more decisions related to their communications, image and products. Sport is not divorced from this, and as fans become more established in their role of creator, they want to have a greater involvement in driving sporting culture forward.

NFL team Detroit Lions realised this when they temporarily changed their logo on TikTok and made some t-shirts off the back of a shoddy redesign by Emily Zugay, a creator who broke the internet with her ironic redesigns of famous brand logos. Content made off the back of this stunt won over the TikTok community, generating millions of views. But it's not only on TikTok where fans are driving sporting culture and professional entities are participating. Sing Your Dialect was a Twitter Space started among football fans in the UK which

professional footballers and clubs got involved in. A digital karaoke session, fans were asked to "rate or slate" each other singing karaoke songs in regional British accents. England international Declan Rice got involved with a rendition of Vanilla Ice's "Ice, Ice Baby", with Premier League teams Brighton, Watford and West Ham tuning in too.

Fans wanting to own, drive and define the game they love extends to innovations around collectibles. Fans have always had their own ways of owning a slice of their passions, be that through purchasing jerseys or trading cards. But this is moving online, as sports fans find as much value in virtual goods as digital goods. NBA Top Shot, an officially licensed marketplace selling officially-licensed NFT video clips of key shots and moments epitomises this, with over a million users as of September 2021 and a total of nearly \$1 billion exchanged since its inception. Its popularity has extended to the WNBA too, with transactions and sales of league's digital collectibles been doubling every week since 1st March.

OVER TIME WE'VE SEEN A GROWING DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE PEOPLE RUNNING SPORT, AND THE FANS ENJOYING OR PLAYING IT. IT'S BECOME INCREASINGLY EASY FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT TO SAY " OH THE GAMES GONE" "ITS JUST NOT THE SAME" "PEOPLE ARE TURNING OFF" BUT THAT'S CLOSED, NARROW MINDED THINKING AND LEADS TO POOR DECISION MAKING.

WHEN YOU REALLY LOOK CLOSELY, IN THE RIGHT PLACES, THERE'S A WHOLE GENERATION OUT THERE REJECTING THAT NARRATIVE. EMPOWERED BY NEW MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS THEY'RE TAKING THE GAME OR SPORT THEY LOVE AND PACKAGING IT UP IN A WAY THAT FITS FOR THEM, THEIR FRIENDS, OR THE AUDIENCE OR COMMUNITY THEY'VE CULTIVATED ONLINE. HERE AT WE ARE SOCIAL SPORT WE BELIEVE YOU NEED TO LEAN IN, BE INSPIRED BY THIS OPTIMISM AS IT WILL LEAD TO STRONGER, CREATIVE WORK AND ULTIMATELY BENEFIT SPORT AS A WHOLE.

JOE WESTON, HEAD OF SPORT,
WE ARE SOCIAL UK



KEY PRINCIPLES
***FOR BRANDS LOOKING TO
CHANGE THE GAME***

WITH THE LANDSCAPE CONSTANTLY SHIFTING, THERE'S AMPLE OPPORTUNITY FOR SPORTS MARKETING WHICH FUTURE-PROOFS SPORT FOR NEXT-GEN AUDIENCE, CLOSES THE GAP BETWEEN BRANDS AND COMMUNITIES AND HARNESSSES THE VIBRANT CULTURE AROUND SPORT. BELOW ARE THREE PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER IN ORDER TO CONNECT MEANINGFULLY WITH SPORT AUDIENCES.

BRING FAN CREATIVITY

IN HOUSE AND PARTICIPATE



Rather than treating fan culture as distinct from the professional game, participate in it. Take inspiration from the MLB, whose Creator Class programme invites TikTokers to be brand ambassadors, creating content for the league, with the league placing itself at the heart of Gen Z culture as a result. This is about marketing with communities, not at them.

EMBRACE CULTURE

Rather than limiting expression as we saw the FIA do when it implemented a ban on jewellery that appeared to directly target Lewis Hamilton, the influence of wider culture should be embraced. Athlete personalities are one of the strongest assets the industry has when it comes to game changing sports marketing. This isn't about reflecting culture, it's about being there to create it. It's about baking it into all your creative solutions to make your ideas as relevant as possible.



GET CLOSER TO THE ACTION:

***EXPLORE BURGEONING PLATFORMS
WHERE TODAY'S AUDIENCES LIVE***

Whether it be platforms that blur the lines between social and gaming, or spaces that prioritise community and inclusivity, think of how you can show up in the places that today's audiences live. Place consumer behaviour, technology and cultural trends at the forefront of your thinking.



We Are Social Sport are a team of sport obsessed digital researchers, strategists, creatives and producers launched to answer some of the most pressing challenges facing the sports marketing world. We understand how culture, technology and consumer behaviour interlink around your sport to produce award winning creative solutions, and call this Game Changing Sports Marketing.

Get in touch with us: sport@wearesocial.net