



Reflections on the future of play

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MediaCom's global experts assess the role of play in their markets and how brands can use the power of playfulness to drive brand affinity.

Last month MediaCom China published a ground-breaking report on the [Future of Play](#). They unpacked macro trends and consumer motivations that identified the full range of needs that play satisfies. The report identified five key strategic approaches that brands could use to enhance the consumer journey through play.

These insights were particularly relevant at a time when social distancing and lockdowns have brought online gaming and virtual 'cloud' entertainment into the mainstream. Mobile games and short video content have become essential methods to combat loneliness.

Many of the behaviours seen in China during the pandemic are now flipping from short-term adaptations into longer-term habits as a greater number of consumers choose to spend more of their time on playful activities.

This unique report inspired us to ask some of our experts to review the role of play in their markets:

Wendy Siew, Head of Digital, on how Play has become big in Japan

Japan is known for its culture of politeness and etiquette. Yet amidst the seriousness, it also incorporates a sense of playfulness. This is the home of Hello Kitty, Cosplay and “Kawaii” (AKA cute) culture.

Japan’s number one social media app, LINE, enables users to playfully express an array of emotions – from exuberance to sadness to surprise through stickers.

Public service announcements are frequently delivered through caricatures. For example, Tokyo’s Metropolitan Police Department has its own cute mascot: Pepo-Kun – complete with its own theme song and pledge (“never play alone, don’t follow people you don’t know, don’t get into strange cars, scream if someone tries to pull you somewhere, tell mommy where you’ll be going, and always tell the police your name, address, and phone number”).

Playfulness can even find a role in life’s darker moment. During the pandemic, the Japan Red Cross released a [video](#) in the form of a cartoon that identified “misinformation and speculation” as the true virus. The video has more than 2.3 million views.

Play has also impacted sports in Japan, with many teams pivoting to virtual play with the help of AR and esports this year. High school soccer teams in west Japan geared up for virtual matches in an [esports tournament](#) instead of on the field while Japan’s softball team turned to [virtual reality](#) to prepare for the delayed Olympics.

Play is well established in Japan’s gaming scene, where it often intertwines with Japanese

traditions and culture. Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* features familiar scenes and themes such as cherry blossoms and animal folklore. To promote *Paper Mario™: The Origami King*, Nintendo released an [origami paper fold](#). Seemingly “low tech”, it not only encapsulates the Japanese origins of play but brings the game, which features a paper landscape, to life.

To tap into Japan's play economy, brands need to participate or build a presence during occasions when people are naturally engaged in play. Halloween is a great example, not least because it taps into Cosplay and dressing up.

However, brands should also be mindful of the overarching Japanese culture of respect and other local nuances. Play should always be authentic, timely and in the right context.

Mark Egan, Managing Director, West Coast, on Play's rising presence in the everyday in the US

Play is growing fast in the US and there's a huge opportunity for brands. It's not something to dip in and out of, but rather a fundamental shift that's been necessary to stay relevant.

Success requires defining where and when to be playful and to have a clear idea of territories to actively play. Consider how the world of play can be a media opportunity. Can you afford not to have this reach?

To make the right choices, however, brands need to understand why Play is growing across the US.

Firstly, there's decreasing engagement with traditional sports: organized youth sports has become extremely time-consuming and competitive. Seventy per cent of kids now drop out of organized sport before the age of 13 because of bullying, costs and lack of confidence.

Secondly, virtual sports are becoming legitimized: traditional athletes are backing the rise of virtual play environments. Basketball player Josh Hart even brings [Fortnite moves into on-court celebrations](#). Sixty-three colleges and universities now have esports varsity teams.

Thirdly, play is being boosted by technology: console makers like PlayStation are embarking on a new product cycle, offering more vivid, immersive and amazing experiences than ever. Playfulness is also expanding through new forms, from lenses to short videos, enhanced by everything from gifs to augmented reality. It's changing the way we communicate, every day.

Fourthly, play is visual: Whether it's flipping through TikTok dances or watching others play a video game on Twitch, engaging with play-based experiences is becoming a much bigger part of our everyday.

In what has generally been a year to forget, it's worth remembering that play has been a necessary comfort. Gaming and environments such as social media are associated with escapism and who could blame people for wanting to take a break, take a peek, or even fully inhabit new worlds with new people?

Axel Aldana, Creative Head MBA, on Play's calming impact for Mexicans

Mexico is a [stressed country](#) and the help we need could be play. We were already stressed before the pandemic but during lockdown we found ways to cope.

There has been 25m downloads of TikTok and a 46% increase in the time dedicated to video games – 75 million Mexicans are now gamers.

Nintendo's *Animal Crossing New Horizons* has been a platform for many to escape from the pandemic, enabling a connection with friends and giving players a mental relaxation from reality. In the first six weeks, 13.4 million games were sold.

E-sports have also been recognised as an official sport, aided by the establishment of the FEMSE, The Mexican Federation of E-Sports, in 2019. This has encouraged high-profile media networks such as TV Azteca in Mexico to invest [millions of dollars](#) to promote this kind of play.

All of this is hugely encouraging given that institutions such as The American Psychological Association has [declared](#) that games and play have vital social, learning, and health benefits.

The opportunities extend well beyond stress relief, however. Tech such as virtual reality and immersive experiences are activating more innovative ways for kids to learn. Pharamaton released [Kiddi World](#) in Mexico, which is an interactive story designed to detect signs of dyslexia, dysgraphia, and colour blindness in children.

For brands in Mexico, the “Play economy” is a huge opportunity, creating a network of new contact points that should be explored when building communication strategies.

Play will be good for Mexico, not just for brands but for society as a whole.

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