



BUILD BACK BOLD

**KEYS FOR
ENTERTAINMENT
FRANCHISE
GROWTH IN '21**

**CONSUMERS' MESSAGE TO
ENTERTAINMENT MARKETERS:**

**BE
BOLD**

Anticipating the finish line of 2020, consumers are sending a strong message to creators and marketers that they're ready for bold, inspiring and thought-provoking stories. And with new and delayed franchise installments on the horizon for 2021, consumers will be grading these properties not simply on their ability to deliver what audiences love and expect from them, but also on their ability to boldly reflect and speak truth to how times have changed.

Despite a tumultuous public health, economic and political climate, consumers are not limiting their content consumption to just lighthearted escapist fare. Instead, consumers are seeking experiences that expand their horizons and challenge the status quo. They expect content to take risks, provide a comfortable space to trial new ideas, and tell diverse stories. And with renewed optimism for 2021—in response to greater political certainty and an increasingly positive vaccine outlook—we anticipate even greater demand for franchise content that pushes the cultural conversation forward.

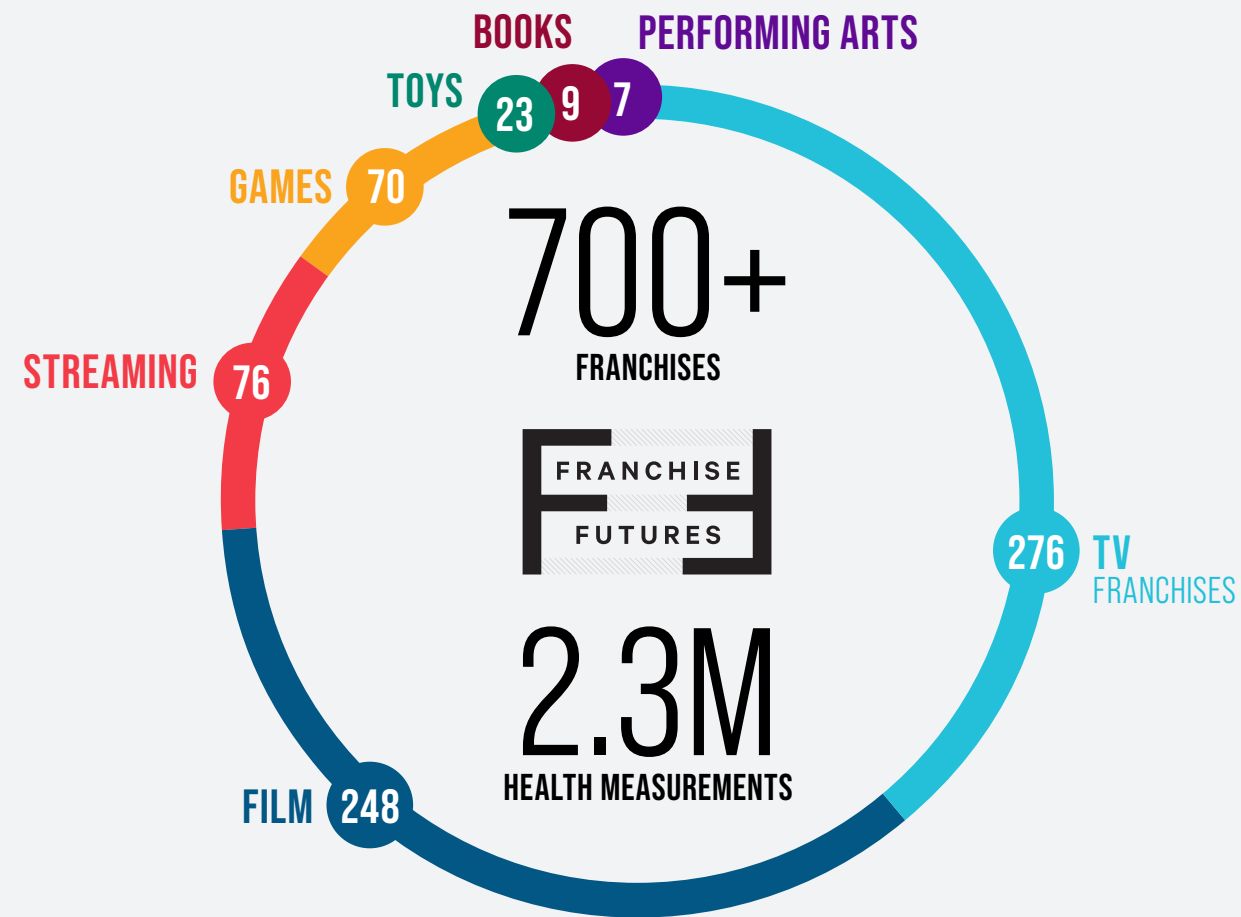
This report spotlights franchises that are increasingly able to embrace where the pulse of culture is moving, by fusing a bold and inclusive new dimension to their content and marketing strategies. Each article draws upon different thought leaders at National Research Group (NRG) to share insight into how winning franchises across categories, genres and audiences are reacting to these trends. In addition to sharing insight into how the franchise ecosystem is evolving in 2020, we make bold predictions about what's to come in 2021.

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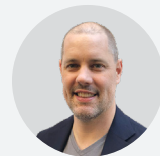
Consumers are ready for entertainment franchises to lean into important cultural conversations and create a new reality—one in which optimism, diversity and curiosity unite rather than divide us.”



JON PENN, CEO



**TEAM
STRATEGY**



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METHODOLOGY

Since January 2019, NRG has conducted over 350,000 interviews with consumers in the US to develop a robust analysis of franchises across the entire entertainment ecosystem. This analysis is built on the foundational data from NRG's syndicated contextual franchise engine, Franchise Futures. A holistic measurement solution for entertainment brands across all platforms and mediums, Franchise Futures is designed to serve as a universal common currency for understanding franchise value.

Powerful entertainment franchises—from *James Bond* to *Star Wars*—endure the test of time by continuing to evolve and reinvent themselves, all while directing their global networks of fans to a seemingly endless supply of content and product touchpoints. Our extensive and ongoing research across 700 entertainment franchises—spanning film, TV, streaming, gaming, toys and books—reveals key insights into what makes certain brands primed for enduring success.

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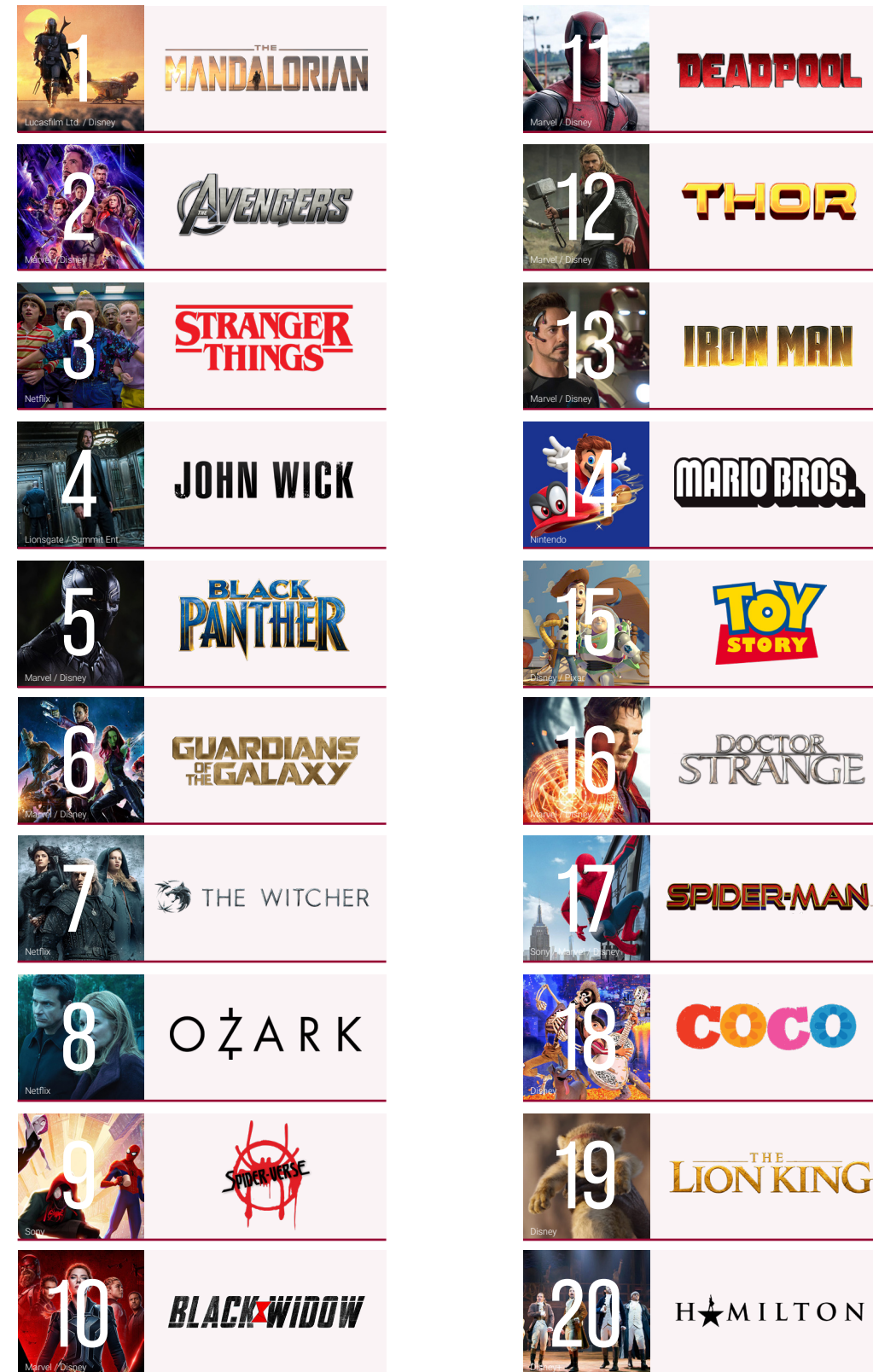
IN WITH THE BOLD

Entertainment supersystems, or the powerhouse brands that we commonly think of when we hear the term franchise, have withstood the test of time by offering unique content across a wide variety of media outlets and merchandise. Since January 2019, NRG has conducted over 350,000 interviews with consumers to develop a robust analysis of 700 franchises across the entire entertainment ecosystem. Built on the foundational data from NRG’s syndicated contextual franchise engine, Franchise Futures, the analysis reveals key insights into what makes certain brands primed for enduring success.

Our franchise research provides a snapshot of the **Top 20 Most Powerful Franchises in 2020**, and a pulse on pop culture’s leading brands. The key ingredients for determining franchise health are presented across two dimensions: Popularity (knowledge and passion) and Power (future potential, quality, distinctiveness, relevance). However, it is the Power lever that is the most important for understanding the future direction of a franchise—is it on the way up or on the way down? Does it have the ingredients that help distinguish it from the pack and create a deeper connection with its core fans? All the brands featured in our Top 20 overindex on key drivers of franchise Power.

The brands that comprise this list reflect key market developments, and support the popular notion that we’re living in Hollywood’s Comic Book Age—a global obsession shared by hundreds of millions of fans. Disney and Marvel properties reign supreme, dominating 70% of the list. While fourteen of the top twenty power brands are movie franchises, we see that studios are increasingly facing new franchise competition. Netflix properties now make up three of the top ten franchises, driven by the strong critical acclaim and developing fandom surrounding *Stranger Things*, *The Witcher* and *Ozark*. Notably, three in four of the streaming franchises on our list belong to Netflix, with the exception of *The Mandalorian* (#1 on our list) on Disney+. It is increasingly important for entertainment brand marketers to think beyond the big screen; the majority of the top franchises have enhanced brand power and appeal because they stretch across more than three categories (e.g. movies, streaming, toys, books), reinforcing the benefit of multiple touchpoints to developing a successful franchise ecosystem.

TOP 20 POWER BRANDS



CORE FEATURES THAT DEFINE GREAT ENTERTAINMENT FRANCHISES

In addition to exhibiting key correlations with Power (future potential, quality, distinctiveness, relevance), top entertainment franchises share a core DNA, comprised of great *storytelling*; deep, relatable *characters*; the ability to *transport audiences to a different world*, among other key elements:

Great storytelling: The most successful franchises capitalize on the design principle of MAYA (Raymond Loewy’s principle of *Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable*), which argues that consumers must manage two opposing desires: a desire for originality and a fear of anything too different. To appease this tension, strong franchises leverage stories that are both bold and surprising, yet quickly recognizable as a means of sustaining brand power over time.

Characters I care about: Franchises distinguish themselves within the crowded content landscape with strong casts of central and supporting characters that people truly care about. People gravitate toward characters that exhibit attractive qualities such as physical beauty, social competency, and/or mastery of a desirable skill. Consumers enjoy characters that they perceive as sharing qualities with members of their own families and social groups. However, there is also value in characters we love to hate. The contradictory emotions that morally compromised characters (think Simba, The Child, Miles Morales) instill in viewers have been found to increase audience engagement and enjoyment.

Transports me to a different world: At the heart of every great franchise, is a dynamic and immersive narrative world, characterized by a distinct and easily identifiable visual style that can be replicated for a sense of continuity across multiple media offerings. Creators of franchises must think in terms of accessibility and *world sharing*: the extent to which the world of a franchise can be experienced across different media touch-points. Critically, each point of entry into the narrative world should instill in audiences a sense of curiosity, wonder, and a desire to keep exploring; one touch-point should never give away the entire story.

THE 20'S WILL CALL UPON CREATIVITY LIKE NEVER BEFORE

Over the past few years, these core attributes have held significant sway over the relative strength of franchises across the spectrum. However, in 2020 and as we look to the future, these traditional metrics have needed to make room for some upstarts that have become much more important. **Our research finds that beyond the core Power metrics, the most dynamic indicators of future potential for franchises in 2021 hinge on Boldness (their ability to be bold, inclusive and make consumers think) and Relevance (word-of-mouth).**

Indeed, when we look at **audiences across ethnicities**, we see the rising importance of inclusivity to mainstream appeal, with each group prioritizing franchises whose characters and storylines reflect their cultures.

When developing concepts for new creative projects, exploring potential acquisitions, or managing the health of an established franchise, it will be important to consider whether or not a piece of creative IP exhibits these features or can be adapted to include them.



Size of logos and proximity to center indicates higher ranking

BIGGEST MOVERS DRIVING FRANCHISE POWER FROM 2019 TO 2020

+15 Is Inclusive

+7 Makes Me Think

+6 Smart

+6 Bold

+5 Dramatic

+3 Intense

+2 Comforting

+1 Scary

+1 Controversial

+1 Raunchy

+0 Cool

+0 Transports Me To A Different World

+0 Violent

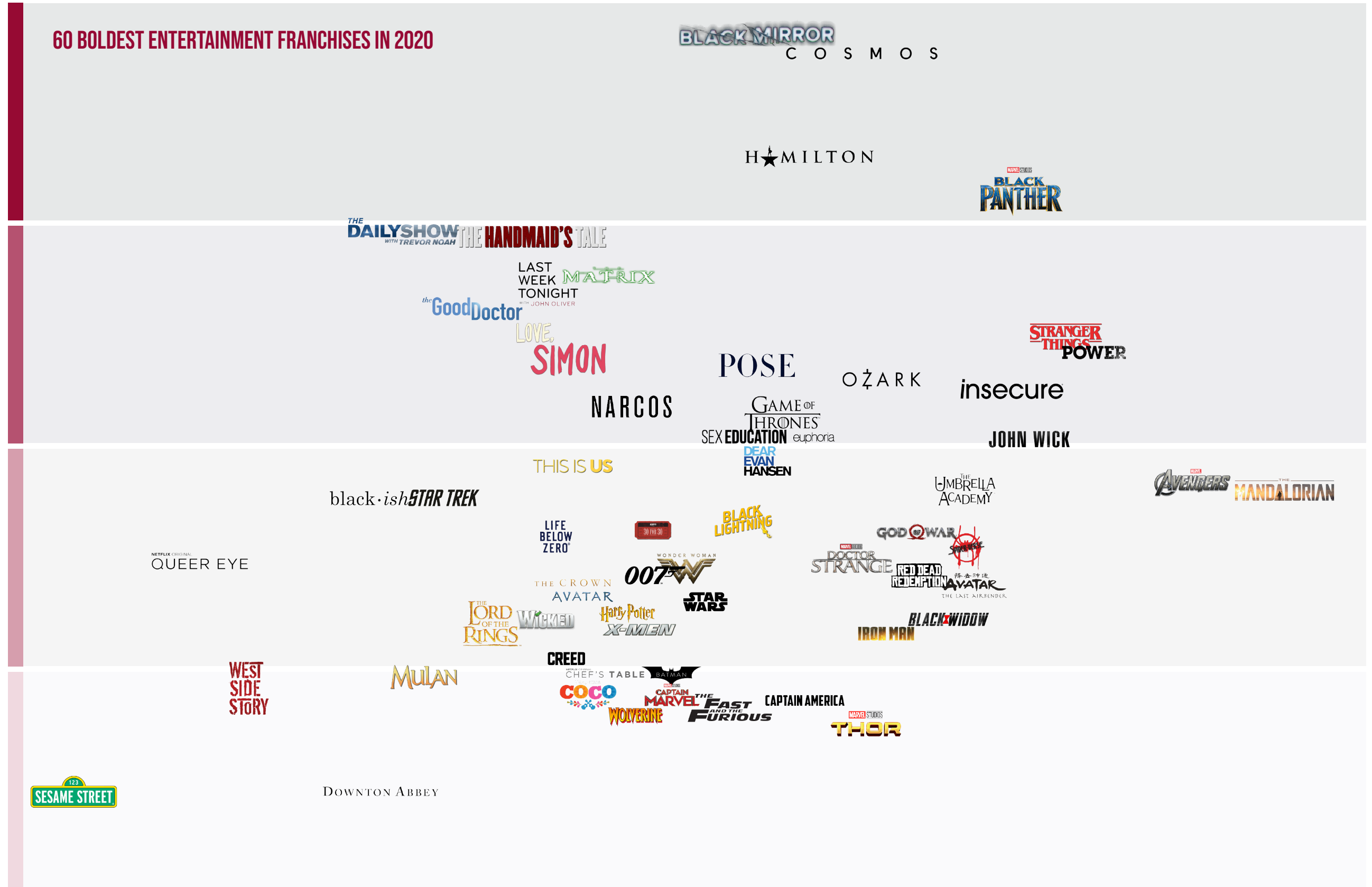
+0 Dark

BOLD BRANDS SHAPING THE ZEITGEIST

To help entertainment marketers maximize the Relevance and future potential of their upcoming content slate, our **60 Boldest Entertainment Franchises in 2020** provides insight into the measures that matter most, and the brands performing best against these measures.

We looked at the three key dimensions of **Boldness** that moved dramatically year-over-year (**bold, inclusive and makes me think**), and designed a model that illuminates the relationship between franchises with high marks on Boldness attributes, and the perceived **Relevance** or social currency (**word-of-mouth**) they create with audiences. We find a positive relationship between Boldness and Relevance attributes: the more bold an entertainment franchise is, the more people appear to be talking about it, or find it relevant and cool, a leading indicator for future franchise demand and excitement.

FRANCHISE BOLDNESS



FRANCHISE CONVERSATION

WHAT OUR 60 BOLDEST BRANDS TELL US ABOUT CONSUMER TASTES

The brands that are most effectively maximizing their brand power bring to life what Boldness really means to consumers

Boldness inspires more inclusive and accessible stories

Black Panther signaled the potential of out-of-the-box genres, such as Superhero, Sci/Fi and Fantasy to bring Black stories to the masses, inspiring audiences to relate to Black characters in a new way. Across our cultural insights research, we find that a majority of audiences agree that “characters should be characters first and ethnicities second,” suggesting opportunities for franchise leaders to create more nuanced positive portrayals of minority groups. Further, the marketers behind *Black Panther* leaned into its historicity by premiering during Black History Month and teaming up with Black artists to create a unique musical album and build even more hype around the film as a cultural phenomenon. Chadwick Boseman’s death in August has reignited passion for *Black Panther* in recent months as audiences seek to understand how this beloved franchise will adapt to losing such a critical piece while retaining what they love about the film and charting a new path forward.

Hamilton was not only inclusive in its diverse casting; it also made Broadway theater accessible to fans across all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds through the power of social media, music and streaming. Take for example its signature #Ham4Ham fan-building campaign. When its 2015 musical premiere received an unprecedented turnout with over 700 fans showing up outside hoping to win lottery tickets for the show, Lin-Manuel Miranda began bringing Broadway stars into the streets to give short performances for the hundreds of fans before the show. This quickly went viral on social media and was one of the first major strides in *Hamilton*’s continued strategy to innovate by being as inclusive and accessible as possible. And its Disney+ launch really brought Broadway to the masses and gave audiences everywhere something inspiring during a difficult year.

Boldness is about expanding how audiences think

Black Mirror has surprised many critics by continuing to thrive in a year that resembles the sci-fi series all too closely. Its creator, Charlie Brooker, has put the series on pause for the time-being due to the dystopian state of the world around us. Yet audiences’ anticipation of the franchise’s critical spin on the events of 2020 continues to boost its Boldness and Relevance, and the franchise overindexes most significantly on excitement for future content. Kanye’s gift to Kim Kardashian of a hologram of her father, or San Francisco’s recent Orange Skies Day (much like the purple sky in the series) are only a couple examples of real-life exchanges that provoke viewers to come up with their own theories of how episodes are reflecting our present and future.

Cosmos reveals heightened demand for stories that unite us through curiosity and optimism for the future. In recent years, there has been a growing divide between us and them when it comes to a culture that holds science in high regard, or not. Neil deGrasse Tyson, host of *Cosmos*, boldly brings the urgency of this issue to life when he says, “We are in the middle of a big experiment. The experiment is, will people finally listen to scientists?” Since its first thirteen episodes aired in 1980, *Cosmos* has proposed an audacious alternative: an evolutionary adventure over billions of years, that unites audiences through its exploration of mankind’s potential for change. *Cosmos* not only tells us that science matters; it also inspires the passion and curiosity that spur personal growth, discovery and the pursuit of a common understanding.

Critically, all brands on this list are genre, medium, vertical and audience agnostic. The diversity of franchises featured suggests that all brands can aspire to be culturally relevant and embolden consumers to create a better future in ways that are appropriate and reinforce what they represent. Take for example, *Sesame Street*, one of our rising bold brands, that partnered with CNN throughout 2020 to remind kids how they can protect themselves during the coronavirus pandemic, how to make sense of this new reality, and answer their questions. Or how *Euphoria* so effectively captures the dark mood of Gen Z adolescence, that its unique aesthetic and makeup has become a sort of social currency in itself. Many young creators turn to TikTok to boldly express themselves through their own *Euphoria* lens, and the hashtag #euphoria has amassed 3.5 billion views on TikTok.

Our full report presents a deeper understanding of how franchises across the entire entertainment ecosystem are responding to changing expectations and shaping where culture is moving, and boldly predicts what’s next.



YOUNG ADULT

**TEENAGE WASTELAND
OR BATTLEGROUND FOR
PERSONAL GROWTH?**

YOUNG ADULT

TEENAGE WASTELAND OR BATTLEGROUND FOR PERSONAL GROWTH?



JOSHUA HACK, SVP, NRG

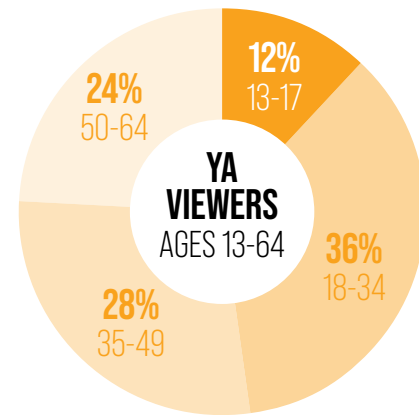
The world of Young Adult (or “YA”) entertainment is dynamic and ever-changing, continually evolving to reflect the current generation of teen consumers. While the health of YA has softened theatrically even pre-COVID, business is booming on the small screen, driven by streaming YA films and series.

Despite the abundance of YA media available at the click of a button, or perhaps because of it, the YA space is filled with myths and misconceptions, driven by two key factors. First, the definition of YA has constantly been in flux and subject to much disagreement and debate. While YA literature is somewhat easier to classify, it’s increasingly unclear what films and TV shows “count” as YA. Secondly, due to its association with young people, YA entertainment has been continually trivialized and denigrated, leading to assumptions and stereotypes that are hard to shake off.

Here we’ll examine and dispel a few of the most enduring YA myths in an effort to better understand how YA is far more than a teenage wasteland. On the contrary, the success of YA today is directly tied to its ability to instill valuable lessons of transformation and personal growth.

Myth: The YA audience is teens

While YA viewership peaks among teens (97% watch YA content), the audience for YA is significantly broader than teens alone. Indeed, over 9 in 10 adults aged 18 to 64 (92%) watch some form of YA content, and more than 7 in 10 (73%) consider themselves a fan of at least one YA genre. And when we look at the total audience who consumes YA films and series, 18 to 44-year-olds make up a whopping 58% of YA viewers, compared to just 13% for 13 to 17-year-olds. And therein lies one of the chief ironies of YA and the difficulty of defining it as a category: it is entertainment designed for and



targeted at teenagers, yet the overwhelming majority of viewers (and fans) today are adults.

Why is this the case? Some have credited the blockbuster success of the Harry Potter and Twilight franchises with helping to “age up” the YA audience. And these crossover hits did play a role—in fact the YA genres that are most

successful in appealing to adults today are YA fantasy and YA sci-fi. However, the mainstreaming of YA has been in progress for quite a while. Media scholars were already observing in the late 1970s that television was blurring many of the traditional barriers between children and adults. This blurring has only accelerated with the proliferation of digital and online media, increasing childrens’ access to stories that were once the domain of adults, and adults’ access to stories that were once the domain of younger audiences. And when

stories of youth and adolescence are brought to life in streaming content, they become even more accessible and less stigmatized than they were in other forms of media.

While teen audiences seek out YA to find commonality and support from shared experiences they are currently living, non-teens, particularly 18-34s, have the opportunity to approach these characters and stories differently. Through the benefit of hindsight into their own teenage experiences, YA content provides a contemplative framework to revisit familiar moments and situations from their not-so-distant past, with all the perspective of having come out the other side. For young adults, who are still very much learning about the larger world, they can take satisfaction in knowing how these particular stories and characters will play out even as they remain uncertain about their own next steps.

Myth: YA thrives on romance

Romantic relationships (or “ships”) are a popular theme in YA entertainment. So much so that the “love triangle” has become one of the most overused tropes in YA. The trope is popular quite simply because it works—love triangles are an effective way to increase viewer investment and also serve as a “story engine” to drive the plot forward, which is especially important in franchises that span multiple seasons or films. However, while romance can be an asset within YA, there’s another type of relationship that is even more important in driving long-term appeal: friendships. Across eight of the most popular YA genres, the “friendships” rank 5th overall on a list of reasons why people enjoy watching them, while “romance” comes in at 10th. It’s the friendship bonds between characters that are the more consistent driver of interest and engagement. Teens relate to the friendships in YA entertainment

in an aspirational way—looking for the types of friends and connections that will help them become more independent and develop their own identities. Adults, on the other hand, relate to YA friendships in a more nostalgic fashion, connecting to a time in their life when it was easier to make new friends, and devote time to those relationships.

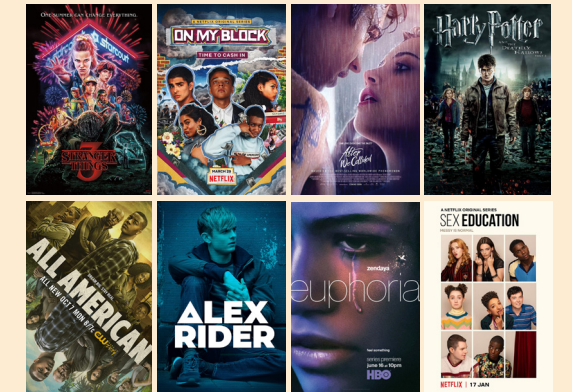
Myth: YA is escapist entertainment

One of the most enduring and perhaps damaging misconceptions about YA is that viewers consume YA to “escape” the challenges and complexities of everyday life. Baked into this myth is the belief that YA is more “trivial” or “frivolous” than other types of entertainment. And while some YA certainly trades in escapism, the most powerful YA franchises today also challenge viewers to think deeply, engaging with issues and subject matter that are far from escapist in nature. Four of the top five attributes that correlate most strongly to YA franchise power are “inclusive,” “smart,” “makes me think,” and “bold”—reflecting an audience driven less by escapism and more by a desire to be challenged and provoked by content in this space. It’s precisely these attributes we see rising in importance in ‘21 that are contributing to the mainstream success of YA among a diverse audience. Even the YA franchises wrapped up in fantasy or sci-fi have effectively engaged in topics like racism, classism, death, war, drug abuse, mental health, sexual and gender identity, etc. And while we often meet the heroes of YA in their more naïve or youthful stage of development, one of the defining features of YA is *transformation*. It’s therefore no surprise that some of the most successful YA franchises have allowed viewers to watch the characters age and grow over time, transforming both physically and emotionally as they face the very real challenges of impending adulthood.

What 2021 signals for YA: accessible stories to spur personal growth

The breadth of today’s top *Power* YA franchises is indicative of how YA is in reality, one of the most diverse content categories, united by its accessibility and ability to spur personal growth among its audiences.

TOP “POWER” YA FRANCHISES

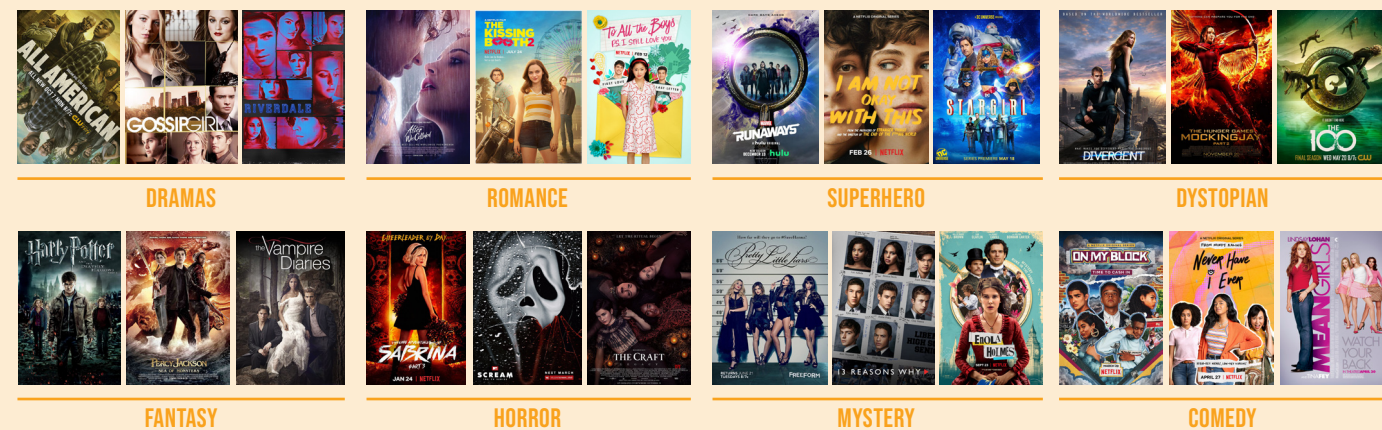


As we look ahead to 2021, the YA streaming slate shows no signs of slowing down. Netflix will release the final installments of its two YA RomCom trilogies: *The Kissing Booth* and *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, along with adaptations of *Fear Street* and *Shadow and Bone*. Meanwhile, HBO Max is prepping reboots of *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*, Amazon is releasing *Panic* and *The Wilds* while developing an *I Know What You Did Last Summer* series, and Disney+ is releasing reboots of *Doogie Howser, M.D.* and *The Mighty Ducks*. And that’s barely scratching the surface of what’s to come.

With much of the upcoming YA slate leveraging nostalgic franchises or IP, it becomes more important than ever to understand both the teen and adult audiences for this content. Nostalgia is a powerful drug, but with YA today, it’s not enough on its own. Rather than seeking out YA entertainment to relive or escape into their teen years, adult viewers are using this content to access the boldness of the adolescent experience and carry that into how they navigate their lives today. Teens have always used YA to help make sense of the dysfunctional reality of adulthood—in a way, adults are now doing the same.

Myth: YA is a genre

Despite how it’s often described, YA is not really a genre. It’s more of a category of entertainment, generally defined as content about teenagers and for teenagers, though as we’ll discuss a bit later, even that definition probably needs updating. The YA category spans a wide variety of genres and sub-genres:





BLACK AUDIENCES

**RISING DEMAND FOR
INCLUSIVE STORIES**

BLACK AUDIENCES

RISING DEMAND FOR INCLUSIVE STORIES



CINDI SMITH, VP, NRG

Why does representation matter? For many, portrayals in the media do not only impact how others see them; these portrayals also impact how they see themselves.

Two in three Americans across political ideologies and ethnicities feel there is a need for greater representation of all minority groups. And when we ask consumers what types of media need the most improvement, Film & TV leads the pack at 81% (ahead of Advertising at 76%). Media is supposed to reflect the values of the society around it, and the vast majority of Americans (led by 97% of Black Gen Z) believe media has the power to influence society and incite change.

There has been a big push in Hollywood for diversity in recent years, yet two in three Black Americans say they don't see themselves or their culture represented on screen. TV has led the way in integrating diverse stories and characters into programming, and while representation in film has increased in recent years across a few experiential genres, more needs to be done to promote diversity.

Of equal importance, creators must consider how Black Americans are represented in content. Until recently, Black stories and Black voices were often underrepresented or laden with negative stereotypes. Additionally, there is an abundance of both contemporary and historical stories



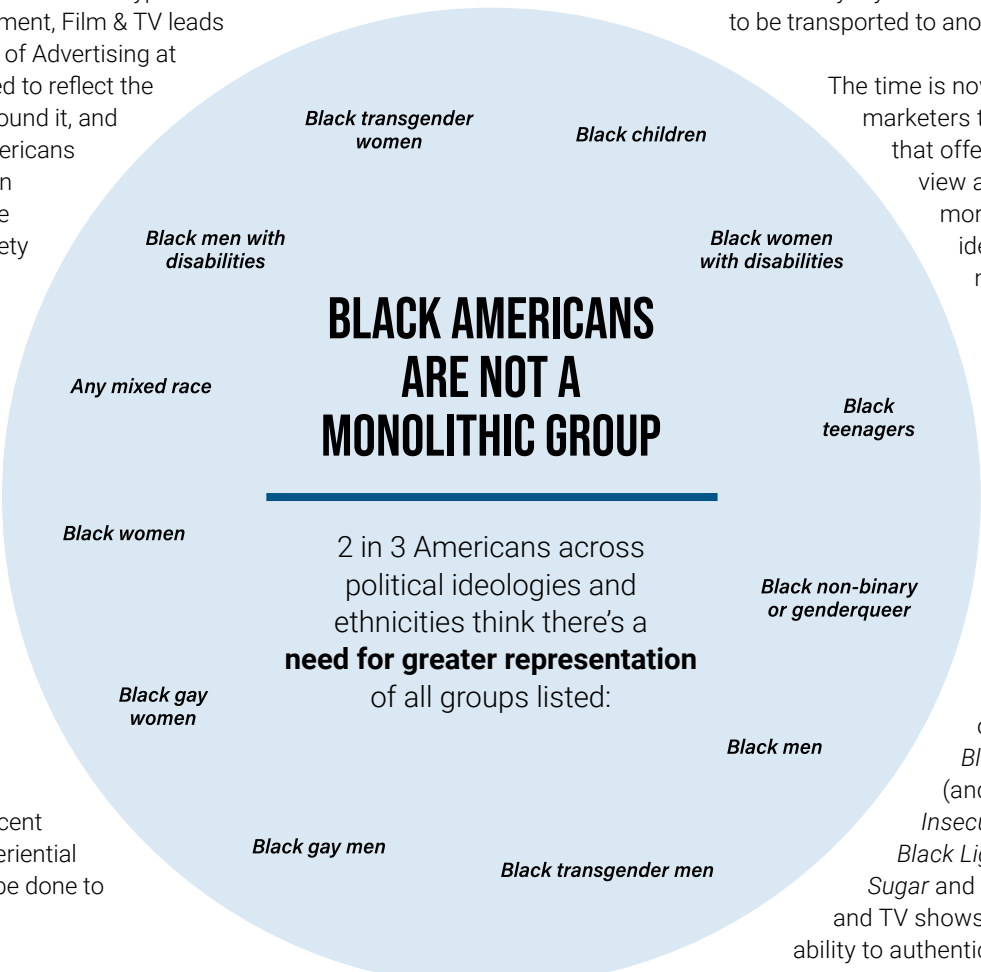
Click to find out more in our recent thought leadership, #RepresentationMatters

about the struggles of the lived Black experience, and while these stories are important, they shouldn't be the only options for engaging with Black audiences. Our research shows how critical it is that the dominant content narrative is not limited to Black struggle and pain. Viewers want authentic, relatable characters and stories that span a variety of genres and subject matter, from stories about everyday life to stories that allow viewers to be transported to another world.

The time is now for creators and marketers to get behind stories that offer a fresh point of view and bring to light more multi-faceted identities. Diversity is not only a draw for Black Americans—3 in 4 Americans say that content being representative of different cultures or people is a key factor when choosing what to watch.

Diverse entertainment franchises are finally on the rise, such as *Black Panther*, *Black-ish* (and its related spin-offs), *Insecure*, *Empire*, *Atlanta*, *Black Lightning*, *Power*, *Queen Sugar* and *Get Out*. These movies

and TV shows are united by their ability to authentically represent the Black experience. They treat inclusion as a priority both on- and off-screen, feature relatable characters, and speak to the shared human experience. They inspire viewers to be the better part of ourselves and to become the heroes of our own stories.



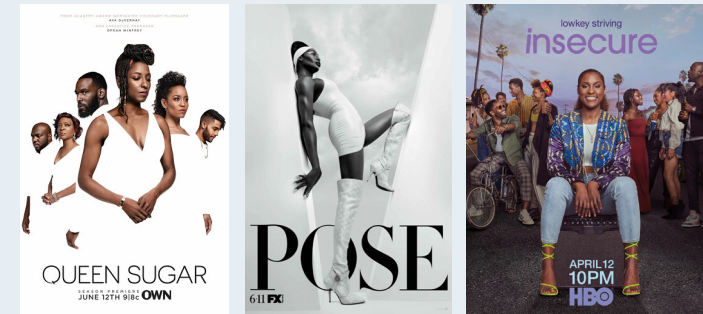
BLACK AMERICANS ARE NOT A MONOLITHIC GROUP

2 in 3 Americans across political ideologies and ethnicities think there's a need for greater representation of all groups listed:

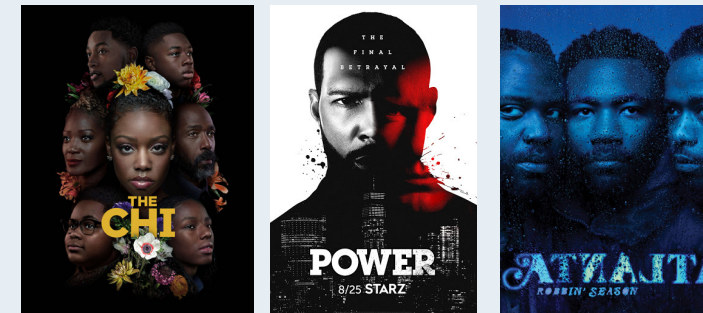
A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT'S WORKING IN REPRESENTATION TODAY *Strong brands for Power, Popularity and Relevance*



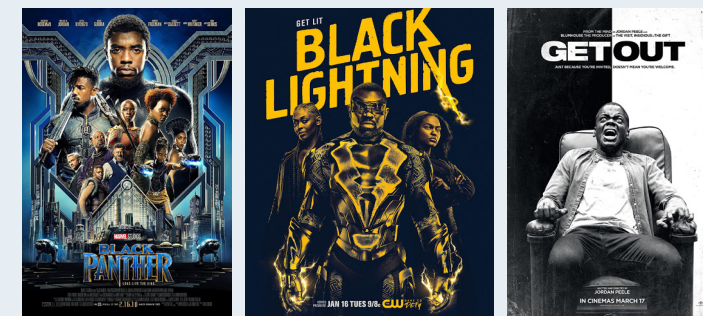
Black-ish is a broadly appealing comedy that is not afraid to reflect our current reality even when it skews political and risks mainstream appeal. Recurring themes have included racism, the n-word, LGBTQ issues, police brutality, the election of Donald Trump, and most recently, the devastating effects of COVID-19. The appeal of this series has led to two successful spin-offs (**Mixed-ish** and **Grown-ish** which address subject matters young adults of today can relate to), with another series in development (*Old-ish*).



Queen Sugar features strong families and friendships, **Pose** focuses on people of color and the LGBTQ community, and **Insecure** is a relatable comedy that explores the relationships and careers of four friends while putting Black women and their complexities at the forefront.



The Chi, **Power** and the award-winning **Atlanta** each offer a vivid portrait of urban life in major cities in America. Lena Waithe, the creator of the coming-of-age drama *The Chi*, forces audiences to see beyond the crime statistics and headlines by bringing a much-needed human touch to the gang violence and murders that plague Chicago, while *Atlanta* features a relatable cast of characters that have a knack for turning some of the most ordinary moments into larger conversations about social issues.



Black Panther and **Black Lightning** have successfully expanded the sci-fi and superhero genres to be more inclusive, while *Get Out* boldly expanded the horror genre to be more representative; all genres that typically do not feature Black characters in leading roles.

Across all audiences, there is a strong interest in diverse stories about real people in everyday life situations, as well as overcoming challenging circumstances. The shared human experience, as a story engine, can bridge inclusive stories with mainstream appeal.

Bold, inclusive stories are among the most quickly rising drivers of franchise importance among teens and Gen Z, whose social values extend beyond politics and into the content and media they enjoy. 84% of Gen Z say that racial equality in America needs a lot of improvement, compared to only 3 in 4 Millennials and Gen X who feel the same way. And while all audiences agree that better distribution opportunities and more funding for Black creators

are the most important industry actions, Gen Z most strongly advocates for the importance of these initiatives. As we look to '21, demands for change on screen will continue in lockstep with demand for change in the real world. Entertainment brands will need to define, on the fly, what more inclusive representation looks like across hiring strategies, their content slate and choices when speaking out on social and racial issues.



UNSCRIPTED

THE POWER OF EVERYDAY HEROES

UNSCRIPTED

THE POWER OF EVERYDAY HEROES



AMBER MCBENTTEZ, SVP, NRG ALEX SINK, MGR, NRG

All is not just about glitter and gold, unless you're competing for it.

For years 'reality TV' has been synonymous with over-the-top lifestyles of the rich and famous. But after a sobering year, many appear to be tired of series focused exclusively on glamorous celebrities squaring off in dramatic confrontations (a la *The Real Housewives* and *The Bachelor*). Instead, millions of Americans are turning to series highlighting average, everyday people competing for their shot at fame and fortune.

In Q4 of 2020, the top performing unscripted franchises in terms of power and popularity were all long-standing broadcast reality competition series:



Innovation is at the heart of the most successful franchises.

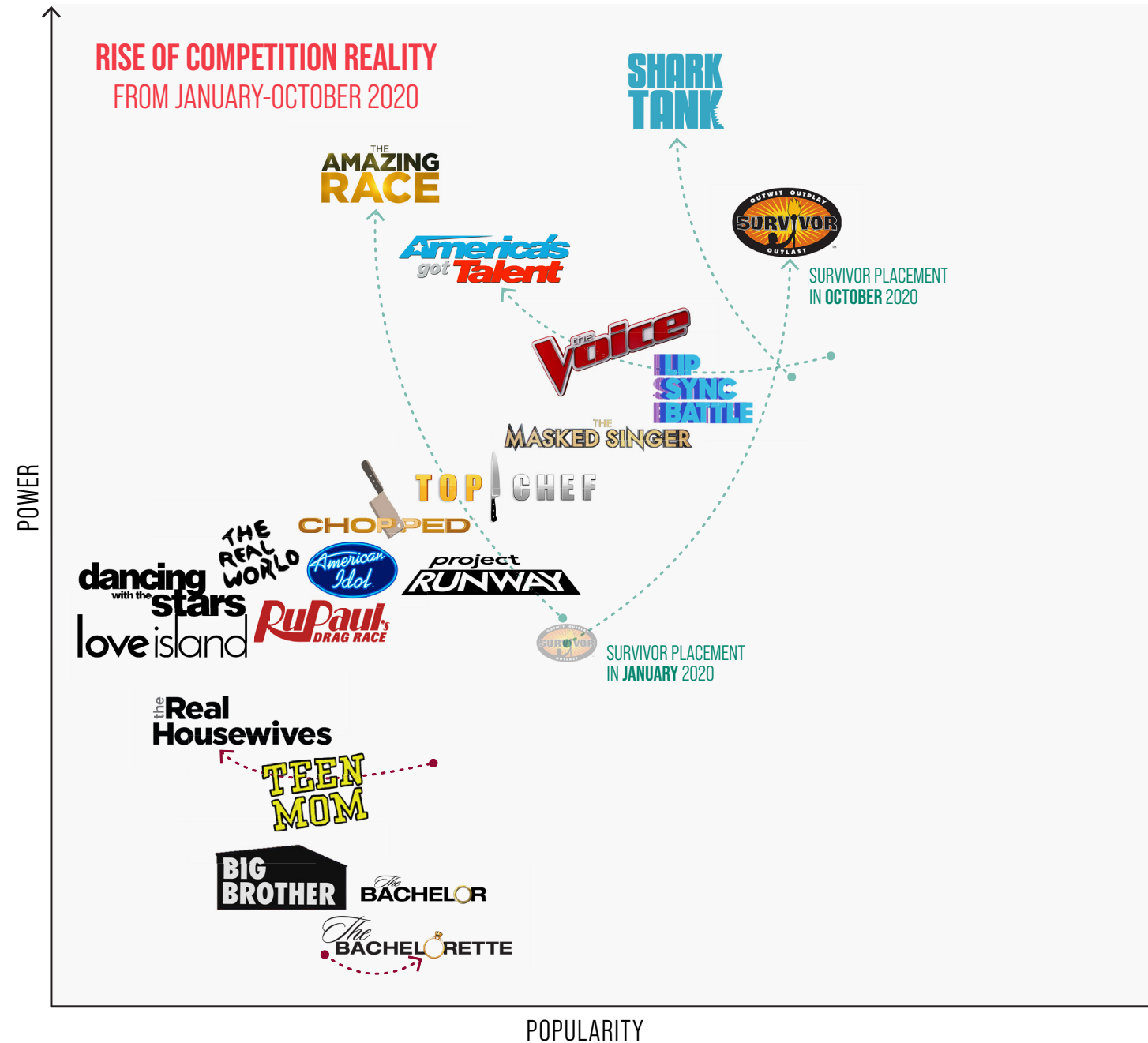
These top competition reality franchises have remained relevant through the test of time by constantly innovating and offering viewers something "new" and fresh every season. The most enduring series center on a simple but unique premise that can be slightly altered with a new twist each season to shake up gameplay. Being bold and taking chances shouldn't be at odds with long running franchises, however, strategic changes are more effective when new elements retain the key aspects of the franchise's branded experience.

TOP DRIVERS FOR FAVORITE REALITY COMPETITION FRANCHISE

Every new season of this series offers something fresh/new (42%)

This series has a unique premise (34%)

I enjoy when contestants/personalities appear across multiple seasons (33%)



The strategic competition series *Survivor*—which averaged 7.6 million viewers a week in its landmark 40th all winners season earlier this year and leads all reality franchises in power and popularity—is a textbook case study of innovation in action. Premiering in the year 2000, *Survivor* captivated audiences by documenting what happens when sixteen strangers are marooned on a deserted island and forced to compete with the elements as well as each other. The classic premise of voting someone off the island each episode has endured, but new twists, casting themes, and hidden advantages keep a loyal fanbase coming back for more each season.

More straightforward music competition series like *American Idol* (ABC), *The Voice* (NBC), and *The Masked Singer* (FOX) have less passionate fanbases as there's less room to innovate structurally.

Everyday heroes trump celebrity appeal.

As with scripted series, prioritizing ways to develop deep character investment over time versus relying on pure celebrity appeal is crucial to the longevity and power of an unscripted franchise—and differentiates the top tier series from the rest.

Over time, high profile celebrity judges and contestants have become less of a draw because consumers now have constant access to these personalities through social media. It's also becoming increasingly difficult for viewers to feel invested in a "pop star maker" competition when each year's winner fades into obscurity more quickly than the last. Instead, audiences are rallying behind everyday contestants who captivate through talents that feel accessible—like strategic gameplay and social maneuvering.

It's important to note that there's work to be done to make the "heroes" or the talent in reality programming even more representative of everyday viewers. This November, CBS announced a new diversity pledge to make all future casts of its reality shows 50% Black, indigenous and people of color. This move sets an exciting new precedent for the industry's inclusiveness, and promises to bring audiences even closer to unscripted competition reality, through characters they both identify with and care about.

Furthermore, audience tastes have shifted toward longer form storytelling in reality TV, and fans of reality competition delight at seeing familiar faces' stories evolve across multiple seasons (and in some cases, across multiple franchises). *Survivor* again excels here, as the series was one of the first to invite fan favorite players back to compete as repeat contestants, and more recently, even serve as coaches.

Interactivity may be key to appealing to future audiences.

The top reality competition desire among teens is more opportunities to vote on activities or contestants in reality competition shows using their phones moving forward. These engagement techniques encourage audiences to actively shape the direction of the series. Strategy-based games like *Survivor* don't generally allow voting on the winner, but have innovated by allowing fans to vote on which players they'd like to see come back for a second chance.

As we look to the future, successful creators in the competition reality space must continue to design innovative engagement strategies to bring audiences even closer to their everyday heroes.



GEN Z

**WHAT MAKES AN
ENTERTAINMENT
BRAND MEMEWORTHY?**

GEN Z

WHAT MAKES AN ENTERTAINMENT BRAND MEMEWORTHY?



PERRI FEINSILBER, DIR, NRG

Urban Dictionary defines Gen Z as the memeiest generation in history, spanning from 1995-2009, who typically has a nihilistic outlook on life.

We all know that meme culture dominates Gen Z life. New sensations are birthed through memes and TikToks, especially in quarantine when there's little else to do (think the explosion of Among Us memes) and we're left with a shortage of content, leaving space for things of the past to become new again (think the sudden popularity boost to Fleetwood Mac's Dreams). Memes are the way Gen Zs communicate, using snapshots of life to capture a thought, feeling or mood.

Entertainment franchises are at the epicenter of meme culture. Some of these franchises have lived on because of meme culture—and not just lived on, but solidified their spots as the most loved entertainment properties among the elusive, highly sought after 13-24 year old audience. Take for example how *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Shrek* are respectively the agreed upon #1 and #2 brands that "have the best memes or videos online" according to this age group—and they are among the top 5 most beloved. *Shrek* surprisingly makes the cut without any new feature films from the franchise since 2010.

Shrek was cheesy, which makes everything about it ironic. - M 13-17

SpongeBob is a kids show but the jokes are for adults.

- F 13-17

When we talk to Gen Z about the content they like most, it's really about what's *funny* (+17% above Total), *playful* (+14% above total), *childish* (13% above total), *cheesy* (7% above total) and *nostalgic* (6% above total). Meanwhile, more mature audiences, ages 25 and above, are more likely to describe their favorite content as *thrilling*, *dramatic*, *intense* and *adventurous*. This tells us that humor is a defining characteristic of Gen Z taste.

What makes an entertainment brand ripe for meme culture?

So what makes these two brands ripe for meme culture? Compared to all 700 entertainment brands tested, *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Shrek* most strongly overindex on measures that correlate with talkability and shareability among Gen Z, such as *funny*, *playful*, *imaginative*, *iconic*, *nostalgic*, and *has characters I care about*. Both these brands, and other stand-out meme-able franchises are classified as:

Funny/Playful ('Creating Generations of Content')

These brands not only are known for their humor—but a unique brand of humor, easily detected and remembered. The ripest content for memes has an absurdist and irreverent humor, and often capitalizes on adult humor infused into content for kids. This allows each generation to find something in it for them, while

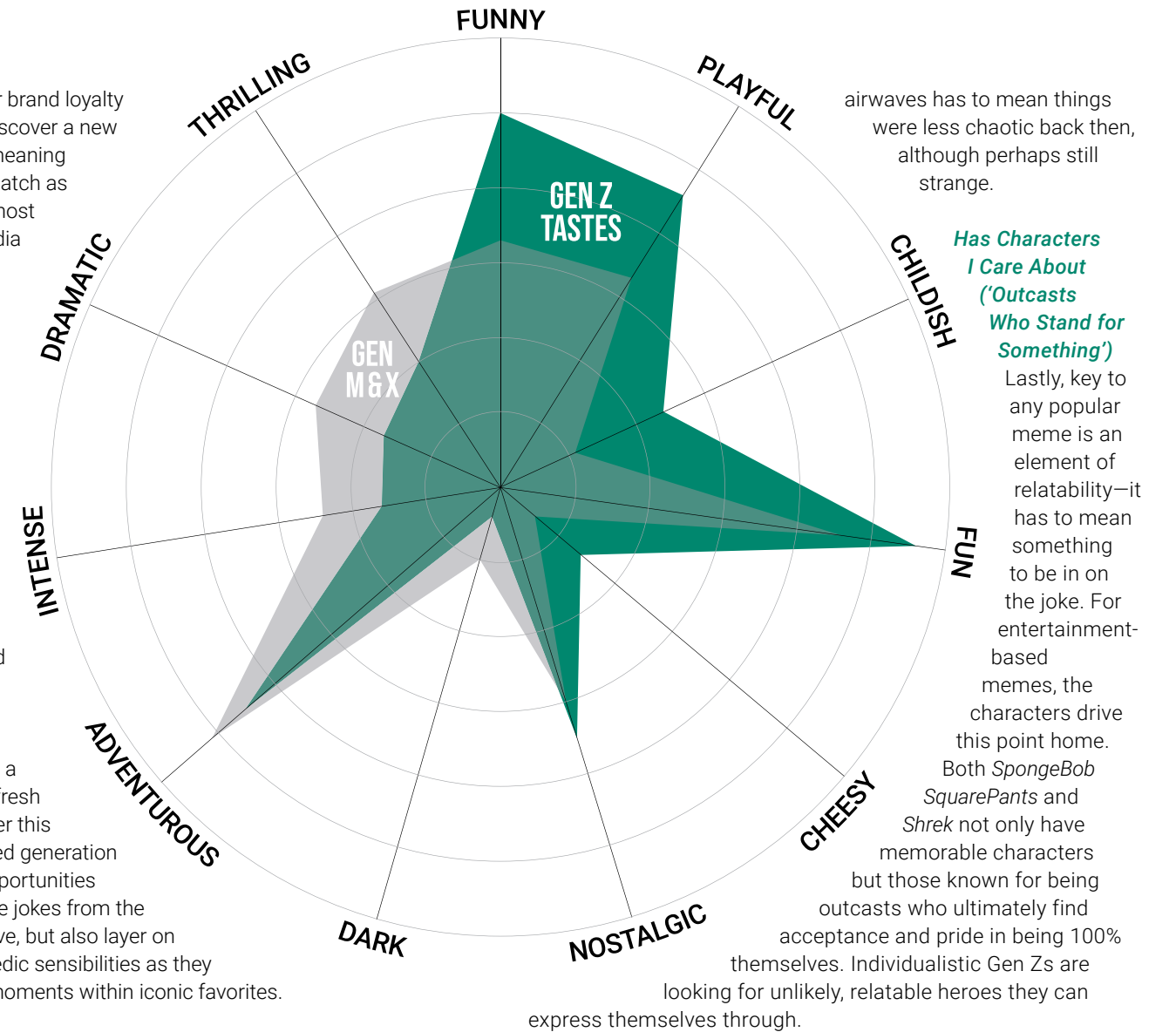
creating deeper brand loyalty as Gen Z-ers discover a new joke or a new meaning upon each re-watch as they age. The most successful media franchises are able to extend their appeal over time by positioning their content to multiple generations of consumers, and thoughtfully considering how nostalgia plays into brand loyalty and how a younger generation will continue to see a franchise with fresh eyes. No wonder this humor-obsessed generation has endless opportunities to not just share jokes from the content they love, but also layer on their own comedic sensibilities as they discover new moments within iconic favorites.

Imaginative ('Content That Knows No Bounds')

An obvious, but perhaps overlooked connection between *SpongeBob* and *Shrek*, and memeworthy entertainment more broadly, is that their central characters aren't human and even come from strange, otherworldly places (e.g., the swamp). Their non-humanness gives them a certain flexibility to adapt to any situation, setting, mood or joke that is communicated through a meme. On top of their imaginative characters, these properties take their characters' on unpredictable and wild adventures that, especially in the case of *SpongeBob*, bends all traditional rules.

Iconic/Nostalgic ('Comfort Food Content')

What fuels the digital shelf-lives of *SpongeBob* and *Shrek* is also their elevated iconic status. They were created in a 'nostalgic' time for this audience, the turn of the century (1999-2001), before the rise of social media. Oftentimes when Gen Z consumers re-purpose their favorite nostalgic content through memes, they're expressing their feelings or reactions to events both big and small through the perspective of a younger, more innocent version of themselves. A time when Smash Mouth's "All Star" flooded the

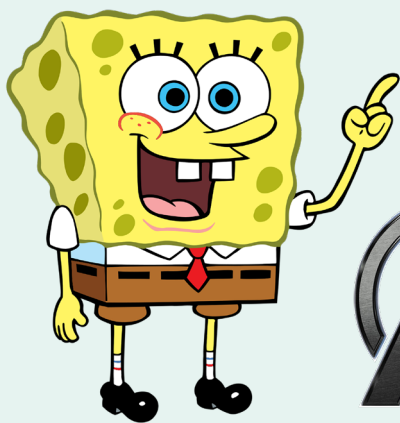


Keys to capturing the hearts and memes of the masses

Even though brands have little control over what gets memed, hacked or repurposed for cultural currency, resonating with Gen Z can actually be pretty simple. Success lies in absurd, nostalgic stories with relatable, unlikely heroes that are just like them (even if they are sea creatures).

As we look to '21 it's critical to remember that Gen Z culture is not defined by how or what they meme, but rather why they meme. Oftentimes the sole purpose of memes, TikToks, and user-generated content is humor (#1 reason to make a meme/TikTok is because 'it's funny'). Other times, Gen Zs meme to make sense of a complicated world. For bold consumers, memes act as both a medicine to cope with anxiety through humor and escape, and a tool for connecting, sharing and amplifying their lived experience to the world. In the wake of a cultural reset, we can only anticipate more memes that help make sense and come to terms with changes in the world around us. Don't underestimate the power of play in turning mainstream culture on its head.

GEN Z'S MOST LOVED FRANCHISES



THE LION KING

TOY STORY



GAMES

**THIRD SPACES RIPE
FOR TAKING RISKS**

GAMES

THIRD SPACES RIPE FOR TAKING RISKS



MOE KOMACHI, DIR, NRG

Gaming is now a mainstream pastime (or obsession): 54% of American entertainment consumers play video games, for an average of ~1.5 hours daily. An additional 31% of American entertainment consumers watch video games for ~70 minutes daily.

In 2020, a number of gaming franchises were able to quickly recognize and capitalize on changing audience desires for social connection. Audiences are increasingly turning to games as safe spaces where they can take risks, play and be themselves.

The gaming titles experiencing the most momentum today (*Fall Guys*, *Among Us*, *Animal Crossing*) are the bold, unexpected trailblazers that flip (multiplayer) gaming on its head. In fact, *Animal Crossing* is one of the top five franchises experiencing the most momentum in 2020, when compared to all 700 entertainment brands tested.



No rich story? No problem! No next-gen graphics? No problem! No prior gaming experience? No problem!

What do the “unsung heroes” of quarantimes (*Fall Guys*, *Among Us*, *Animal Crossing*) have in common, and how do they diverge from traditional core multiplayer games (think *Call of Duty*, *Overwatch*, *Halo*)? Consumers find the *Fall Guys*, *Among Us* and *Animal Crossing* trifecta to be more accessible for all ages, fun, funny, comforting and good at bringing people together. They’re not intimidating to noobs and veterans alike—unlike their more intense, bold, thrilling or violent counterparts (*Call of Duty*, *Overwatch*, *Halo*).

HOURS SPENT DAILY ON DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT ACTIVITIES

WATCHING TV OR VIDEOS

5.8

SOCIAL MEDIA

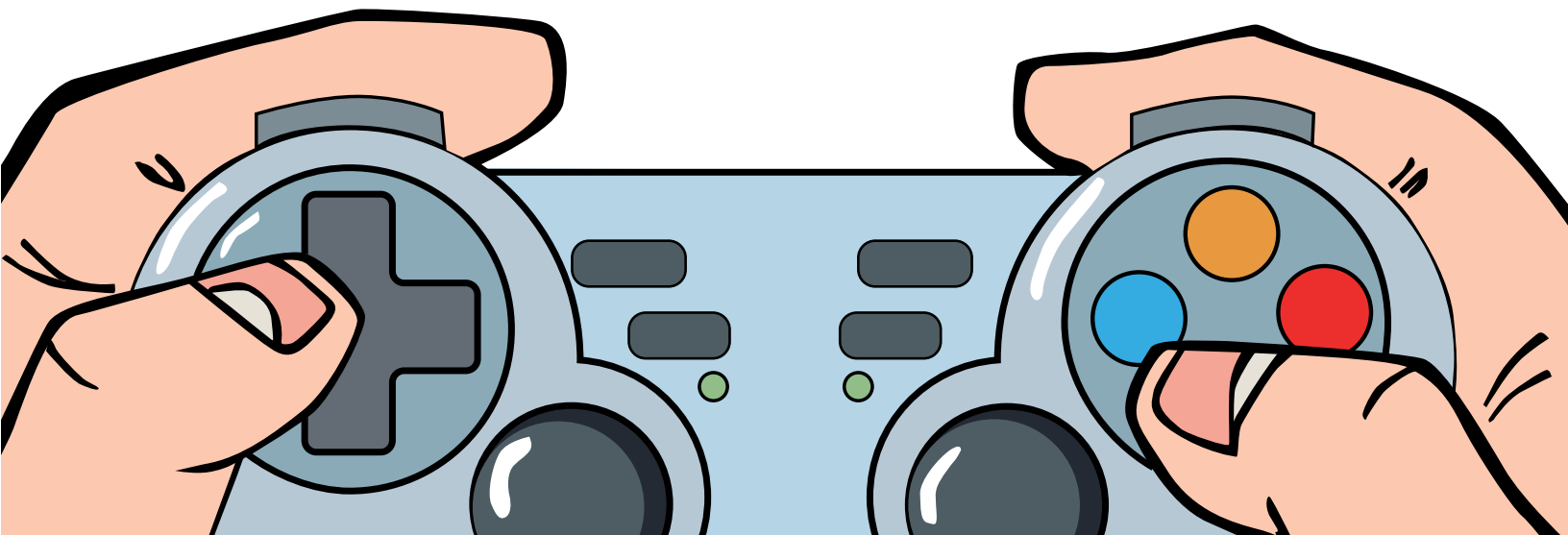
1.9

PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

1.5

STREAMING MUSIC

1.3



TOP GAMING FRANCHISE ATTRIBUTES

APPEALS TO ALL AGES



FUN



BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER



COMFORTING



FUNNY



PLAYFUL



INTENSE



THRILLING



VIOLENT



Despite these stark differences, winning gaming experiences are united by their ability to transport audiences to a different world (*Animal Crossing* scores 24% vs. *Halo* at 26%). The “unsung heroes” are particularly well positioned to transport audiences to the type of world they are craving in this unique moment: a place where it is safe to take risks, and where goals feel attainable and within reach.

Transporting us to bold, imaginative and creative third spaces.

From the abundance of graduation ceremonies that took place virtually in *Animal Crossing* this year, to virtual concerts in *Fortnite* and *Roblox*, emerging gaming experiences prove that digital life can be just as vibrant, ephemeral and meaningful as lived experience. These spaces are free from consequence, and present few barriers to entry.

Audiences are turning to these next-generation experiences to feel like they’re part of something bigger than themselves: ~4

in 10 want to feel connected to friends who are gamers, and 17% want to feel connected to friends who aren’t gamers, too. Many are frequenting these spaces to fuel their desire for social connection, experimentation and self-expression. And audiences go head-to-head when describing an experience like *Animal Crossing*—40% define it as a game, while 37% define it as a creative space.

For many years, traditional “gamers” have been making avatars and spending their free time in digital worlds while carrying out many unexpected goals. Now it’s mainstream to participate in and enjoy these activities via *Animal Crossing*, *Fall Guys* or *Among Us* as they seek out things to do or attend events once planned for the real world. Increasingly, we’re all finding our sense of place in a virtual world, not the physical one. And it’s in these games, or creative spaces, where many (unexpected) audiences are discovering and asserting who they are.



BOLD PREDICTIONS

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT FOR '21

BOLD PREDICTIONS

1

Responsiveness to changing expectations

While each entertainment franchise has its core elements which are title specific, larger trends in what audiences are looking for in their favorite or next favorite franchises do change over time and reflect the broader world that surrounds audiences. The franchises that can adapt to those shifting attitudes, while delivering what audiences have long known and loved about them, will be best positioned to enhance both brand power and popularity.

2

Delayed but not the same

Many franchises hit the pause button on new releases. Marketers can't just dust off materials from early 2020 and redeploy for 2021—things are different. Some franchises may already be set up to exploit this desire for boldness and now have the opportunity to really lean in. Others will need to work harder to reposition themselves to highlight elements of their franchises that speak to these drivers.

3

Renewed optimism and readiness for a bolder future

The weight of 2020 across various fronts, and the limited opportunities to disconnect from our difficult reality, has reinforced a desire among consumers to be bold and break free. On the cusp of 2021, our data illuminates an uptick in consumer optimism and readiness for the future. It will be increasingly important for creators and marketers to meet that sense of hope with stories that tackle global challenges, push humanity forward, and ultimately embolden consumers.

4

Theatrical can reestablish itself as an entertainment franchise engine

In the wake of COVID-19, 2020 has been the most devastating year in box office history with nearly every major release delayed to 2021 and beyond or pushed straight to homes. Yet with a COVID vaccine in sight, 2021 offers an opportunity for the theatrical experience to prove its power once again. As consumers continually tell us, theatrical movies are the best way to build franchises that entertain for years across the entire entertainment ecosystem. In fact, 27 of the top 30 most popular franchises today are primarily theatrical franchises. However, only 17 of the top 30 most powerful franchises are theatrically driven as streaming and gaming properties have grown in power this past year.

On the bright side, 2021 is filled with massive franchises both old (*Fast and Furious*, *James Bond*, *Ghostbusters*, *Top Gun*, *The Matrix*, *Minions*) and relatively new (*Black Widow*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *The Eternals*, *Venom*, *A Quiet Place*) launching theatrically. If these films can meet the new formula for franchise success that challenges consumers rather than playing down to them, the box office can continue to be a franchise engine of the future.

