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Investigating the Effective Marketing Strategies from the Perspective of Counter-strike 2 and Valorant

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Abstract:

Esports clubs operate at the intersection of performance, media, and sponsorship markets, where marketing effectiveness is tightly coupled to on-server results and to the institutional design of each title's ecosystem. This paper compares Counter-Strike 2 (CS2) and Valorant—two tactical FPS titles with contiguous audiences but divergent governance models—through a Porter's five-forces audit and a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative indicators (e.g., audience peaks, engagement programs, loyalty metrics). This study finds rivalry is structurally high; barriers to entry are shaped less by code than by coordinated community, broadcast, and creator layers; buyer power is amplified by multi-screen habits; and supplier influence tracks stack ownership (client, storefront, events, IP). Effective, widely adopted strategies include influencer-led distribution, professionalized owned media, cross-platform IMC, and first-party data/loyalty systems (e.g., programs reporting thousands of sign-ups, >100 interactions per user, and meaningful per-member revenue). Ineffective approaches include undifferentiated advertising, weak merchandise design, and over-reliance on unstructured player channels. CS2's open circuit rewards discovery-driven narratives and entrepreneurial partnerships, while Valorant's publisher-run leagues favor polished, season-long storytelling and brand-safe inventory. Opportunities lie in AI-enabled segmentation and creative optimization, automated highlights, immersive/interactive formats, and direct-to-consumer subscriptions integrated with live-service economies. The study contributes title-specific, actionable implications for club marketers and outlines a framework for aligning channel mix, timing, and partner architecture with ecosystem governance.

Keywords: Esports marketing; Counter-Strike 2; Valorant; Porter's Five Forces; Integrated marketing Communications;

1. Introduction

Alongside the dot-com boom, online gaming has expanded rapidly and, in doing so, helped incubate and institutionalise the contemporary esports market [1, 2]. As competitive structures professionalised, the surrounding media ecosystem—broadcast formats, creator networks, and social platforms—grew in tandem, reinforcing demand and legitimising esports as a cultural product comparable in some respects to traditional sports [3]. In this environment, targeted marketing strategies are central to sustaining club competitiveness and building brand equity, with digital touchpoints (e.g., social media, influencer collaborations, and event-based activations) translating competitive performance into awareness, engagement, and ultimately commercial value [4-6]. Effective marketing thus supports both short-run revenue outcomes and longer-run reputation effects [7].

Counter-Strike 2 (CS2) and Valorant illustrate how two superficially similar products—both first-person 5v5 tactical shooters operating under an MR12 format—can inhabit distinct business environments. CS2's esports scene is predominantly open, with third-party tournament organisers and sponsors shaping the calendar, whereas Valorant is anchored in publisher-run, league-like circuits [8, 9]. These different institutional choices condition how narratives form, which assets brands can buy, and how clubs plan their season—open circuits privilege decentralised storylines and entrepreneurial partnerships; publisher leagues privilege stable properties and tightly produced broadcasts [10]. The consequence for marketers is non-trivial: channel mix, campaign timing, and partnership architecture must be tailored to the competitive format and governance model of each title [11].

Given these structural contrasts—rulesets, governance, and audience demographics—clubs must differentiate along multiple fronts (player sourcing, talent development, content strategy, sponsorship portfolio) to create value and defend position against both incumbents and new entrants. In open ecosystems, discovery, community participation, and creator alignment often yield outsized returns; in league ecosystems, consistency, brand safety, and season-long storytelling tend to command a premium [12].

Early marketing scholarship in esports has foregrounded qualitative assessments of social media utilisation—evaluating how effectively organisations inform, engage, and convert fan communities—thereby mapping relationships between enterprise and audience across platforms. Yet qualitative indicators do not always reveal causal effectiveness, and empirical work is frequently constrained by data availability: many clubs are privately held, disclosures are uneven, and comparable financials (beyond headline earnings or prize payouts) can be scarce [2]. Moreover, a substantial share of prior research treats "esports" at a high level, emphasising market size, revenue segmentation, and broadly useful digital tools, while bracketing differences among genres and titles [1, 2].

From a broader perspective, case-led analyses of prominent organisations offer useful strategic vignettes, but they rarely drill down into genre- or title-specific dynamics [1, 10]. Consequently, there remains a gap for focused comparison between CS2 and Valorant that integrates institutional context with marketing execution. The present study addresses that gap by examining how clubs in these two ecosystems have managed their marketing strategies historically and at present, and by outlining likely challenges and emergent trends. To this end, this paper combined qualitative assessment (content cadence, partnership design, brand architecture) with quantitative indicators where available (audience metrics, engagement ratios), with the aim of drawing title-specific, actionable implications [3-5].

There is no difference between traditional sports and esport, where the Marketing effectiveness is stranglehold with the club's performance itself. Thus, promoting brand value should not only be within the field of increasing fan base, but also within the strategy of accounting and marketing the sustainability of club's competitiveness [1, 9]. As stated before, there is a difference in the tournament types, organizers and all else for the two games, which reflects that there could be different approaches in terms of Marketing [2, 10].

In the nature of more animated and cyber-like style for Valorant, the customer base is more towards younger people and even towards juvenile. On the opposite side, Counter Strike preserves more realism in terms of the game itself and the background it is suited to. In spite of this, the different environments may result in different fan bases, from the perspective of demographic and the quantity of it [2, 5].

2. Marketing Environment for CS2 and Valorant

To analyze the marketing environment, this paper uses Porter's five forces to audit and compare the two different industries [8]. In the tactical-FPS arena, Counter-Strike 2 and Valorant confront one another like closely matched city-states: contiguous audiences, overlapping creator economies, and sponsors who benchmark returns across titles. Rivalry is therefore structurally high [2]. In esports, the way a scene is organized—its broadcast grammar, competitive calendar, and the roles played by teams, creators and tournament operators—shapes the stories fans follow and the assets brands can buy [2]. Where an ecosystem emphasizes community creation, highlighting

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moments and merchandisable aesthetics, marketers are advised to orchestrate around digital touchpoints, influencers and social video, because these channels convert competitive drama into repeatable engagement [3, 4]. At the same time, differences in institutional design—how clubs, leagues and development pathways are structured—alter both audience expectations and sponsor propositions, reinforcing intense head-to-head competition for attention between leading titles [2, 10].

The threat of entry is muted less by code than by coordination. New tactical shooters must not only deliver credible moment-to-moment play but also a scaffold of meaning: fair play systems, a content cadence, and a media layer that renders skill legible to spectators [2]. Building those layers requires long-cycle investment in communities and creator networks; digital marketing in esports hinges on persistent, dialogic engagement rather than one-off launches [3]. Brand formation inside scenes is path-dependent—trust, symbolism and partnership portfolios accumulate over time—so new entrants face uphill work to secure salience and sponsorship at scale [4]. Institutional choices around pathways and governance further harden these moats by stabilizing narratives and partner relationships [10].

Buyers—players, viewers, and sponsors—exert meaningful power because switching is easy and attention is finite. Esports consumers navigate multi-screen, always-on media environments, sampling content while chatting, scrolling and second-screening; this fragmentation increases the need for consistent, platform-native storytelling and rewards publishers who can synch gameplay, broadcast and social drops [2]. In that context, effective digital marketing stresses creator collaborations, timely content beats and personalized community touchpoints to curb churn [3, 5]. For brands, the calculus is similarly fluid: they will reallocate spend toward titles that translate visibility into equity via coherent visuals, fan identity and activation fit [4]. Where institutional architectures are clearer—predictable tiers, recognizable properties—buyers perceive lower execution risk, which can strengthen or soften their negotiating leverage depending on the scarcity of premium inventory [2, 10].

Supplier power is uneven and often invisible to fans. Platforms, broadcast partners, event operators and creative labor (teams, talent, influencers) act as upstream providers of distribution and cultural meaning [2]. Titles that own more of their stack—client, storefront, events, narrative IP—can internalize margins and time campaigns to product rhythm; where ecosystems rely more on external partners, certification windows, programming slots and third-party incentives become gating factors for go-to-market [2, 10]. Sponsorship intermediaries and branding frameworks also matter: well-aligned brand architectures help standardize deliverables and stabilize CPM/CPE expectations, tempering supplier leverage by making value legible across packages [4].

Substitutes are everywhere. Within games, adjacent shooters and seasonal sensations constantly tempt players to reallocate hours; outside games, short-form video and mainstream streaming compete for the same leisure windows. Literature on esports marketing suggests the counter is cadence—rhythmic releases, eventization, creator-led narrative arcs—and the translation of competitive play into social currency that fans can express through identity markers and participatory content [3, 4]. Institutional and developmental structures can further buffer substitution by anchoring fandom to pathways (academies, semi-pro circuits, scholastic ties) that bind play and viewing to community [10].

Read through Porter's lens, the two titles arrive at the same contest by different roads. One leverages openness and community volatility, letting markets, mods and moments generate oxygen; the other leans into orchestration and design coherence, offering brands and fans a dependable stage. Barriers to entry arise from media and organizational complexity, buyer power is amplified by multi-screen habits and brand comparability, supplier influence tracks how much of the stack each title owns, and substitutes keep everyone shipping, streaming and storytelling without pause. For marketers, the implication is practical: in Counter-Strike 2, speak the language of discovery, collection and underdog arcs; in Valorant, lean into polished narratives, style-as-identity and integrated cross-media beats—two strategies, one market for the next hour of attention.

3. Marketing Strategies for CS2 and Valorant

3.1 Past and Existing Strategies

CS:GO's pre-2021 expansion was driven by organizer-led circuits (e.g., ESL) that treated tournaments as media properties and sponsor platforms; the Intel–ESL partnership exemplified co-created event equity [2]. Digital channels consistently outperformed in-arena signage, pushing activation toward streaming, social content, and native segments [3]. Non-endemic brands entered via tailored title/programmatic deals (e.g., Mountain Dew with ESL/ESEA), legitimizing esports in mainstream media plans [1, 3]. Scale underwrote these investments: by 2015–2018 CS:GO exceeded 40 million unit sales and sustained ~400,000 daily active players.

Clubs that professionalized digital brand architectures—integrated websites foregrounding partners, multi-platform funnels, and loyalty devices such as Team Liquid's "Liquid+" converting engagement into measurable CRM assets—captured superior sponsor value [3, 4]. Event design reinforced broadcast appeal: "game refinement" metrics show stochastic rounds (ELEAGUE 2017–2018 GRrsa≈0.15–0.16) alongside highly skill-weighted gameplay, balancing suspense and mastery for exposure [7]. Conversely, opaque influencer-led skin-gambling promotions (FTC's 2017 CSGO Lotto case) eroded trust and spotlighted compliance risks around gambling-adjacent activations. Overall, success rested on digitally native sponsorships and club-run brand systems that converted persistent streaming audiences into partner value; failures clustered around non-transparent, high-risk influencer tactics [1, 5].

Relative to CS:GO's event-centric sponsorship playbook, CS2 marketing pivots to integrated, platform-native IMC that foregrounds direct-to-fan ecosystems and first-party data [3, 6]. Team-run apps and membership/reward layers (e.g., Liquid+) convert social interactions into measurable engagement and merchandise redemption, while club websites/apps act as content and partner hubs; in 2021–2022, top-team audiences showed measurable growth (e.g., OG +45% Facebook, +43% YouTube over five months).

Operationally, CS2 campaigns deploy AI-assisted segmentation, cross-platform activation (Twitch/YouTube/Discord/TikTok), and a structured IMC stack spanning advertising, PR, digital/social, sponsorship activation, and audience-engagement mechanics—codifying real-time, analytics-led decision-making accelerated by the pandemic [2, 6, 12]. At the same time, influencer-led distribution—more central than in CS:GO—raises transparency and youth-protection concerns, prompting compliance-oriented PR [1, 5]. CS2's live-service item economy further multiplies touchpoints (market value >$4.3 billion, Mar 2025), reinforcing creator campaigns, brand tie-ins, and retention loops around in-game assets. This marks a shift from episodic event exposure to always-on, data-driven relationship marketing [3].

Valorant clubs converged on influencer-led, live-stream distribution and reward mechanics because Riot's launch demonstrated outsized yield: closed-beta "Twitch Drops" coupled with top FPS streamers drove ≈1.7 million concurrent viewers and prolonged watch time via scarcity/FOMO loops. This choice matches audience media habits: survey data show 66.7% of respondents prefer live streams; a majority consumes 6–15+ hours of gaming content weekly—conditions under which interactive, two-way influencer formats outperform one-way ads [2, 3, 5]. Clubs also professionalized owned channels as partner hubs: site audits of top teams document cross-platform funnels, prominent sponsor placement, and loyalty/points ecosystems (e.g., Liquid+ connects social actions to redeemable rewards and merch), converting engagement to measurable CRM assets [3, 4]. OG's website further illustrates integrated merchandising, Discord community widgets, and sponsor showcases alongside a Valorant roster, evidencing transmedia brand architecture that clubs replicated. Finally, sponsorship persists as a core revenue logic: Nielsen-reported benchmarks (≈$3 media value per $1 invested) rationalize structured partner activations within club properties [1].

Clubs also receive failures from certain strategies. Three patterns recur. First, "spray-and-pray" traditional advertising underperforms relative to influencer formats that audiences perceive as authentic, dialogic, and trustworthy; clubs that relied on one-way ads forfeited engagement and persuasion advantages [1, 5]. Second, weak merchandise strategy depresses conversion: interview evidence shows purchase intent is highly sensitive to design quality and licensing cues—poorly designed apparel suppresses sales even among committed fans [4]. Third, delegating club reach to players' unprofessionalized channels yields inconsistency: audits note irregular streaming schedules, minimal identity work, and limited fan interaction—conditions that erode steady audience growth [2,10].

Furthermore, there are numerous differences with Valorant and CS2 where it leads to different strategies from the two games. Structural governance is decisive. In the "Riot model," the publisher exercises comprehensive control over competition organization, licensing, and rules; by contrast, Valve's looser model delegates exploitation to third-party organizers [2,10]. Consequently, Valorant clubs operate in a more standardized, brand-safe environment that privileges compliance-aligned IMC (publisher-approved events, storylines, and assets) and concentrates value capture in owned platforms, cross-platform social, and measured sponsor integrations. Twitch's centrality and "always-on" temporality reinforce this emphasis, encouraging systematic transmedia planning rather than fragmented tournament-led exposure typical of CS ecosystems [2].

3.2 Current Challenges and Prospects

Marketing outcomes are tightly coupled to on-server results—a form of systematic risk. Players are clubs' most valuable assets and the engine of fan and sponsor demand; follower growth and partnership credibility depend on visible performance and compelling player narratives [1, 9]. In longitudinal team data, social metrics fluctuate with roster moves and tournament outcomes, underscoring exposure to competitive volatility; dynastic peaks (e.g., Astralis' CS:GO era) and subsequent regressions illustrate how brand equity and engagement soften when results fade. That exposure is amplified in CS, where outcome variance is strongly skill-driven, making results—and thus marketing reach—especially sensitive to player form [7].

Clubs also face structural constraints. Sponsors disproportionately prefer top-ranked organizations, intensifying a "winner-takes-most" contest for brand income; revenue

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mixes remain concentrated in media rights and sponsorships, heightening sensitivity to audience cycles and partner selection [1]. Attention capacity is finite: ad-blocking erodes paid reach; content saturation fragments viewership; and shifting platform preferences force costly, agile channel strategies [2]. Measurement and compliance add friction: standard KPIs often miss esports' interactive engagement patterns, and privacy frameworks (e.g., GDPR) constrain data-driven personalization [3, 12]. Finally, publisher governance shapes risk asymmetrically across the two ecosystems: Riot's more closed model (Valorant) centralizes decision-rights, while Valve's more open, relegation-friendly model (CS2) distributes power—differences that condition calendar access, storytelling levers, and partner inventory, and can create bottlenecks or bargaining power imbalances for clubs [2, 10].

These dynamics mean that even sophisticated activation—community apps, integrated IMC, and loyalty programs—must continuously overcome performance swings and market frictions to sustain engagement and monetization. Moreover, esports' platform-native intimacy (live chat, co-streams) heightens the salience of short-run results for fan affect, further tightening the linkage between competitive form and brand outcomes [2].

Continuous opportunities concentrate on integrated marketing communications (IMC), owned-media professionalization, and first-party data. IMC frameworks emphasize unified cross-platform storytelling, sponsorship activation, and data-driven personalization; machine-learning segmentation improves targeting and conversion [3, 6, 12]. Clubs can scale loyalty programs that convert engagement into revenue and insight: MCES' "Ultra" rewards attracted ~6,000 sign-ups in six months, averaging >100 interactions and €10–15 incremental revenue per active member. Fashion and premium co-brands broaden reach and credibility (e.g., Fnatic–Gucci; Team Liquid–Alienware), while hybrid event portfolios (virtual/hybrid tournaments; behind-the-scenes access) sustain global touchpoints beyond venues [1, 2]. Influencer programs remain efficient if designed for trust and fit, reinforcing purchase intent and word-of-mouth [1, 5].

New initiatives are anchored in AI, immersive media, and in-game ecosystems. AI can realistically (i) predict churn and upsell propensity to trigger personalized offers, (ii) optimize media placements and creative variants, (iii) automate highlights, social copy, and A/B tests, and (iv) power chatbots for multilingual, 24/7 fan service—capabilities already identified as emergent esports practice [2, 3, 12]. Metaverse/AR/VR layers create premium experiences (virtual meet-and-greets, AR stats overlays) and new inventory (digital collectibles), complementing traditional sponsorship [2]. Expanding direct-to-consumer models—subscriptions, exclusive content, and in-game branding/microtransactions—can deepen loyalty and diversify revenue [2].

Strategic adaptation should reflect ecosystem governance. Publisher/organizer roles and assets shape feasible channels: value-chain analyses underscore the centrality of publishers and competition organizers in allocating media and partner inventory, conditioning club playbooks in Riot's franchised VALORANT versus Valve's more open CS2 circuits [2, 10]. Finally, continuous investment in knowledge-management and real-time analytics (aided by 5G/IoT) supports faster experimentation and response to shifting audience preferences [2, 9].

4. Conclusion

This paper compared CS2 and Valorant as adjacent but institutionally distinct esports ecosystems. Using a five-forces audit and title-specific marketing evidence, this paper shows rivalry is structurally high and marketing outcomes are systematically exposed to competitive performance. Clubs succeed when they professionalize owned media, integrate influencer distribution, and convert first-party data into loyalty and sponsorship value; they falter with undifferentiated ads, weak merchandise, and unstructured player-led communication. Governance differences—open circuits in CS2 versus publisher-run leagues in Valorant—shape feasible channel mixes, storytelling cadence, and partner inventory. Emerging opportunities include AI-assisted segmentation, automated highlight and creative workflows, immersive activations, and direct-to-consumer memberships layered onto in-game economies. Managers should tailor playbooks to calendar control and compliance constraints while investing in resilient brand architectures that buffer performance volatility.

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