

badvertising

e-Sportswashing

How big polluters are gaming
a new sport sponsorship market





Finding pathways for rapid transition to a fair economy that thrives within planetary ecological boundaries.

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Summary



The world of esports is big and growing, and major polluters have spotted an opportunity to use them as a billboard to promote heavily polluting products and lifestyles. Esports' community is young and predominantly male, and set to shape norms and ideas around sport for generations to come. With over three billion players and an audience of more than another 500 million, major polluters ranging from oil companies to petro states, car makers and airlines, afraid of losing public acceptability, have spotted the trend and are investing heavily to 'eSportswash' themselves.

Since just 2017, at least 33 significant deals have been struck between the esports industry and high-carbon polluters. Of these, 27 have been deals with car manufacturers, five with major fossil fuel companies and two with the armed forces of the United States. Petrostates, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are also increasingly moving into the esports sector. Examples include:

- Saudi Arabia launched the Saudi Esports Federation (SEF) with the nation's oil company, Aramco, as a prominent sponsor. Aramco has also regularly partnered with Gamers8, serving as the SIM Arena name sponsor,¹ with Gamers8 replaced in 2024 by the Esports World Cup.² Funded by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, it will feature a \$60 million prize pool.³

1 Gamers8, n.d., 'Aramco Sim Arena', <https://gamers8.gg/en/festival/aramco-sim-arena>

2 Reuters, 2023, 'Saudi Arabia launches Esports World Cup – statement', <https://www.reuters.com/sports/saudi-arabia-announces-esports-world-cup-statement-2023-10-23/>

3 <https://www.esportsworldcup.com/en>

- Both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have followed. In UAE, Dubai's launched its own esports tournament, Dubai Esports and Gaming Festival, with a prize fund of \$2m in 2022.⁴ Quest Esports, in partnership with Qatar, recently agreed a joint ownership deal with French football club PSG's esports department for its team that competes in Dota 2 tournaments.⁵ As part of this arrangement, Qatar Airways, a state-owned airline and PSG's shirt sponsor, will also be a shirt sponsor for Quest.⁶
- Oil company Shell partnered with Fortnite, one of the world's most popular online games, launching its 'ultimate road trips' promotion to advertise its new V-Power® NiTRO+ Premium Gasoline. Players explore a Shell-branded island where they fill up virtual vehicles at interactive Shell gas stations and are encouraged to post screenshots online with the hashtag #Shellroadtrips for a chance to be featured by popular gamers.⁷ Fortnite's audience is notably young compared to other popular esports games, with about 53% of players aged 10-25.⁸



4 Gulf News, 2022, '\$2 million prize money at Dubai Esports Festival 2022, event concludes on a high note', <https://gulfnews.com/sport/uae-sport/2-million-prize-money-at-dubai-esports-festival-2022-event-concludes-on-a-high-note-1.1669099195970>

5 Esports Insider, 2023, 'PSG announces Dota 2 partnership with Quest Esports, creates PSG Quest', <https://esportsinsider.com/2023/10/psg-quest-esports-dota-2-psg-quest>

6 <https://esports.gg/news/dota-2/psg-partners-with-quest-esports-dota/>

7 Shell, n.d., 'Shell Ultimate Road Trips', <https://www.shell.us/motorist/shell-ultimate-road-trips-sweepstakes.html>

8 Demand Sage, 2024, 'Fortnite Statistics 2024', <https://www.demandsage.com/fortnite-statistics/>

- ExxonMobil's engine oil brand, Mobil 1, partnered with esports organisation Gen.G and entered teams into Rocket League competitions across North America, some of which Mobil 1 already sponsors.⁹ While Chevron recently became the 'Official Fuel Partner' of esports team Evil Geniuses.¹⁰
- Car makers ranging from Mercedes, to BMW, Kia, Ford, Honda, Nissan, and Lexus also sponsor esports.

António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations (UN) recently called out the fossil fuel industry for showing "relentless zeal for obstructing progress" on climate action, and spending billions of dollars on "distorting the truth, deceiving the public and sowing doubt". The UN secretary general highlighted the fossil fuel industry's use of 'massive ad campaigns' alongside their use of lobbying and legal threats. Sponsorship too, in the worlds of culture and sport, is part of how fossil fuel companies advertise and buy social acceptability. He called on "every country to ban advertising from fossil fuel companies," and for "news media and tech companies to stop taking fossil fuel advertising."¹¹ In this context, esports teams and governing bodies need to align commercial strategies with a liveable future and drop sponsorship from major climate polluters.

esports teams and governing bodies need to align commercial strategies with a liveable future and drop sponsorship from major climate polluters.

9 The Business of Esports, 2022, 'ExxonMobil Brand Teams Up With Esports Org In Unique Partnership', <https://thebusinessofesports.com/2022/10/16/exxonmobil-brand-teams-up-with-esports-org-in-unique-partnership/>

10 Fragster, 2023, 'EG announces partnership with oil company Chevron', <https://www.fragster.com/eg-announces-partnership-with-oil-company-chevron/>

11 The Ecologist, 2024, 'Stop Mad Men fuelling madness' <https://theecologist.org/2024/jun/05/stop-mad-men-fuelling-madness>

1. Gaming the climate



Esports are new and rapidly developing, but already they are being targeted by some of the world's largest polluters to expand their use of sport as an advertising billboard. High carbon companies and petro-states alike promote goods and services with disproportionately large climate and environmental impacts, while exploiting the collective joy, caché, cultural significance and mass audiences of sport.

Like the tobacco industry before them, companies and even whole countries can substantially improve their reputations, international standing, and 'brand' by ingratiating themselves with much-loved sports and their devoted fans. Sponsoring sports events is repeatedly listed as one of the arenas in which advertising is most trusted.¹² By hijacking the spectacle of sport, these companies and countries can distract attention from any negative or controversial activities they are responsible for, and any damage they cause to people and planet.¹³ This is a phenomenon more widely known as 'sportswashing'.

Whether fossil fuel companies, car manufacturers, airlines, or petrostates with egregious human rights records, commercial sponsorship partnerships are now ubiquitous at every level of sport – from deals with individual athletes and naming rights on iconic stadiums, to headline sponsors of elite-level international tournaments.

¹² Nielsen, 2022, Sports sponsorships are raising more than just brand awareness', <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2022/sports-sponsorships-are-raising-more-than-just-brand-awareness/>

¹³ Hill et al., 2021, 'The Roar of the Crowd: How Interaction Ritual Chains Create Social Atmospheres', Journal of Marketing, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00222429211023355>

Amidst a climate and ecological crisis, where concern amongst athletes, fans, and the wider public remains high, sportswashing partnerships look increasingly bizarre. Now, a backlash is palpable, with concerned sports fans and climate campaigners successfully getting sports organisers to drop polluting sponsors or commercial partners that do align with their values and climate policies.¹⁴ Sports organisations are also proactively turning down fossil fuel sponsors due to potential backlash from athletes and the wider public.¹⁵

The risks posed to sports organisations will only increase as the impacts of climate breakdown become more frequent and severe, and the role polluting companies and petro-states continue to play in the unfolding crisis becomes impossible to ignore.

A new frontier?

Esports, short for electronic sports, is booming. In fact, it is the fastest growing sport in the world.¹⁶ As a truly modern sport, emerging in the 21st century, esports is quickly gaining traction, outgrowing the dimly lit bedrooms of teenagers and taking centre stage at sold-out events in stadiums around the globe.

Given its meteoric rise and ballooning popularity, businesses are increasingly eager to tap into the power, reach and culture of esports as a means to both advertise their products and strategically align with this growing and exceedingly youthful audience through commercial partnerships. Polluting companies – fossil fuel firms, airlines and car manufacturers – and petrostates are all getting in on the virtual action.

¹⁴ Badvertising, 2023, 'How to screen-out polluting sponsors: a low-carbon toolkit for sports organisations', https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ebd0080238e863d04911b51/t/650abf4a556c5610652e8b58/1695203148058/Sports_Toolkit+-+How+to+screen-out+polluting+sponsors+-+Badvertising.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Included VC, 2021, 'The Explosive Growth of Esports: Will This Sector Take Over?', <https://medium.com/included-vc/the-explosive-growth-of-esports-will-this-sector-take-over-6a9ee903523c>

In the last few years, fossil fuel giants like Shell, major car manufacturers like Mercedes Benz, and petrostates like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar have all made substantial moves into the esports sector. For polluting companies and petro-states, esports offers something unique:

A young and loyal fanbase:

Followers of esports around the world are overwhelmingly young, which offers polluting companies a historically under-engaged audience for bolstering their brand. In the UK, over 50% of esports fans are aged between 18 and 34, with 83% identifying as male.¹⁷ In China, in 2022, 66% of esports fans were under the age of 35, with just 8% over the age of 44.¹⁸ Globally, in 2021, more than six in every ten internet users watching esports are aged between 16 and 35 years old.¹⁹ For context, only one-in-four 'die hard' football fans globally are between 25 and 34 years old.²⁰ There is no other sport that boasts such a large and youthful fanbase, whose futures will undoubtedly be shaped by the unfolding ecological and climate crisis.

Growing reach, influence and ecosystem:

The esports industry is a sleeping giant and is expected to grow at a breakneck speed, projected to reach a value of \$11.94 billion by 2030, with an annual growth rate of over 27%.²¹ For perspective, this exceeds the projected value of

17 GSI Esports Insiders, 2023, 'The Story Mob and UKIE report analyses UK esports audiences and growth', <https://esportsinsider.com/2023/09/story-mob-ukie-uk-esports-report>

18 Statista, 2020, 'Share of eSports users in China in 2022, by age group', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1019069/china-esports-game-user-share-by-age-group/>

19 Infront, 2021, 'Opportunities for brands and rights holders from a growing esports audience', <https://www.infront.sport/blog/sports-sponsorship/esports-audience-growth>

20 Deloitte, 2023, 'Football Fan Experience', <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/it/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/2023-football-fan-experience-eng.pdf>

21 Vantage Market Research, 2022, 'Esports Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report by 2030', <https://www.vantagemarketresearch.com/esports-market-2334/>

the global football market in 2030.²² Roughly half of esports revenue could be generated by sponsorship deals.²³ Around specific games, such as League of Legends or FIFA, there is a flourishing infrastructure of streaming sites, like Twitch, notable influencers and celebrities, such as NOtail and JerAx, and a vibrant sporting culture with its own memes and language. Esports have an estimate global audience of over 500 million and rising rapidly,²⁴ but the number of players claimed by the industry, people who are also targets of sponsorship messaging, is far higher, at around 3.3 billion.²⁵ This is an ecosystem increasingly tapped into by polluting sponsors.

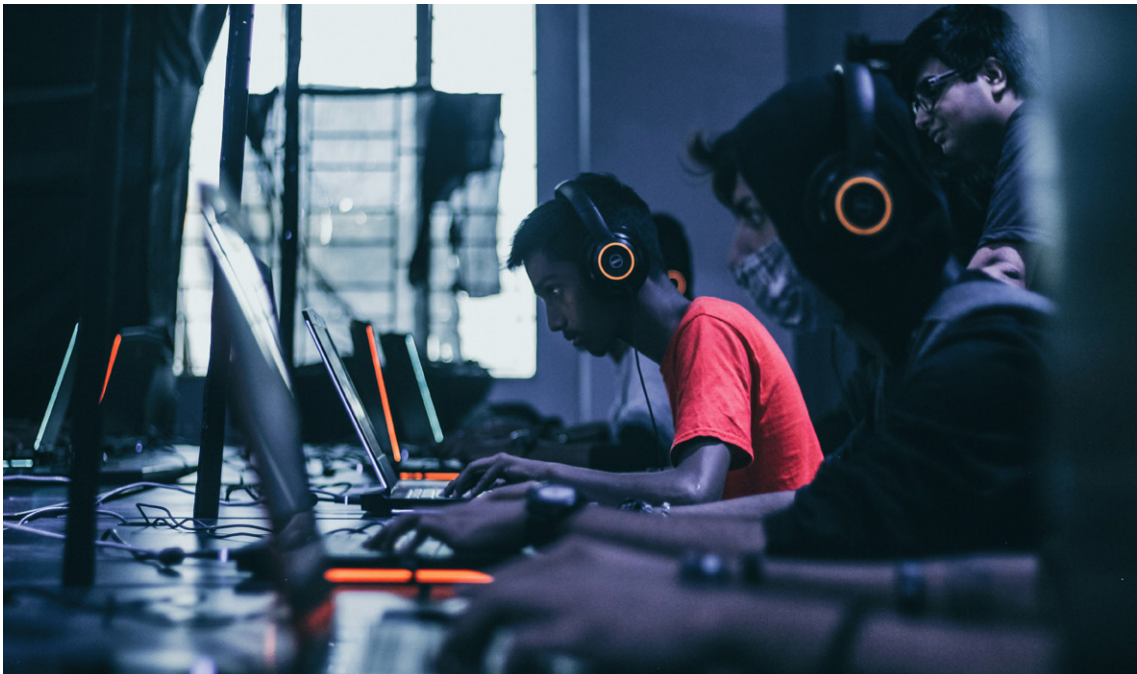


Photo by Fredrick Tendong on Unsplash

22 <https://www.reanin.com/report-store/sports-and-leisure/sports/football/global-football-market>

23 Included VC, 2021, 'The Explosive Growth of Esports: Will This Sector Take Over?', <https://medium.com/included-vc/the-explosive-growth-of-esports-will-this-sector-take-over-6a9ee903523c>

24 DemandSage, eSports Statistics In 2024 (Viewers, Growth & Forecast) <https://www.demandsage.com/esports-statistics/>

25 World Football Summit, Discovering the new frontiers of the eSports industry <https://worldfootballsummit.com/esports-industry-insights/>

Novel and immersive ways to advertise and promote high-carbon lifestyles:

Esports, twinned with advances in technology, offers polluting companies a new channel to advertise to young audiences around the world in more immersive and engaging ways. Often the lines between what is an advert and what is game-play can quickly become blurred. For instance, fossil fuel giant Shell was called out in 2023 for encouraging players to fill up their cars at Shell's virtual petrol stations within the game Fortnite as part of its V-Power Nitro+ advertising campaign.²⁶

Often the lines between what is an advert and what is game-play can quickly become blurred.

Free rein to mislead and confuse young adults over the energy transition:

Advertising regulation in places like the UK is currently reactive, industry-led, and unable to deal with the sheer quantity of adverts containing misleading environmental claims and greenwash. While some regulators, like the UK's Advertising Standards Agency (ASA), have issued guidance on in-game advertising,²⁷ advertising campaigns in esports and the gaming industry more broadly are developing and expanding far quicker than regulators can keep up.

26 The Guardian, 2023, 'Shell called out for promoting fossil fuels to youth via Fortnite game', <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/oct/06/shell-fortnite-game-youth-marketing-campaign-fossil-fuels>

27 ASA, 2021, 'Entertainment: Video Games and Mobile Games', <https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/entertainment-video-games-and-mobile-games.html>

The rise of e-sportswashing is a growing concern, but is not prominent in campaigns challenging the social licence of polluting companies within sport and wider society. Campaigners and advocacy groups must acknowledge this pernicious form of sportswashing and greenwashing. In particular, how it targets a demographic whose futures will be most impacted by global heating and environmental degradation. This briefing from Badvertising seeks to raise awareness of e-sportswashing as an emerging phenomenon, identify key trends and stakeholders to help campaigns better incorporate this burgeoning sports industry into their work.

Our recommendations are:

- Esports teams and governing bodies must align their commercial partnerships with their values, duty of care to players and audiences, and policies for a liveable future and thriving environment to protect athletes, gamers and fans around the world.
- Esports athletes and streamers should be encouraged, supported and protected when speaking out on matters of climate change, sportswashing and problematic sponsorship.

2. Critical hit: from bedrooms to the big leagues



In 2023, the first-of-its-kind Olympic Esports Week took place in Singapore as part of the Olympic Esports Series 2023, organised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). This is only the tip of the iceberg. There are roughly 300 esports tournaments around the world with prizes of \$100,000 or more, and the physical esports events sell thousands of tickets to adoring fans – sometimes in a matter of hours.²⁸

Buoyed by an online ecosystem of streaming platforms and advancements in gaming technologies, esports has emerged as a multi-billion pound sports industry. And its growth shows no sign of slowing. The audience for this emerging sub-sector of the global sports industry is relatively untapped. Potential esports' audiences are predicted to be in the region of 500 million,²⁹ and could grow by up to 100 million per year due to rising popularity in China, the USA, and Brazil. As these fan figures are still a slither of the purported 3.3 billion gamers around the world,³⁰ the potential for growth is humungous.

With growth has come formalisation. Professional esports teams now boast expanding rosters of gamers on substantial salaries. Team Liquid, for instance, has a team that covers over 15 esports games with around 25 million dedicated fans.³¹ Existing governing bodies in sport are keen not to get left behind. At the 2022 Asian Games, for instance, there were eight esports disciplines covered during proceedings.³² National

28 Boston Consulting Group, 2023, 'Let the Game Begin: How Esports Is Shaping the Future of Live Entertainment', <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/how-esports-will-become-future-of-entertainment>

29 Intenta Digital, n.d., 'The Future of Esports', <https://intenta.digital/esports/future-of-esports/>

30 Exploding Topics, 2024, 'How Many Gamers Are there?', <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/number-of-gamers>

31 Boston Consulting Group, 2023, 'Let the Game Begin: How Esports Is Shaping the Future of Live Entertainment', <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/how-esports-will-become-future-of-entertainment>

32 Ibid.

governments are recognising this burgeoning industry too. In France, legislators recently recognised esports as a professional sport and esports competitors as athletes.³³

Much like other sports, the global influence of esports provides an opportunity for companies that would like to clean up their image and reach new and growing audiences. High-carbon polluters in particular have much to gain from aligning their brand with esports due to its young audiences. The British Medical Journal has documented a similar trend of unhealthy food and beverage companies targeting younger audiences with adverts.³⁴ Advertising to young people can be incredibly effective for companies and it is why some countries control or exclude several kinds of advertising to young people. The marketing industry knows that it is easier to shape future buyers than it is to persuade an existing buyer to change entrenched behaviours.³⁵ Young audiences also hold significant power of influence over family members. In a study by the National Retail Federation, it was found that 87% of US parents surveyed said that their children influence their purchase decisions.

By targeting younger audiences, polluting industries are following the tobacco industry's playbook. Like 'Big Tobacco' before them, high-carbon industries and petrostates aim to position their brands in close proximity to young people and their passions. For the tobacco industry, this was epitomised most famously by the kid-friendly smoking cartoon character, Joe Camel.³⁶ These ads would run between TV shows popular amongst young audiences, so that the lines between Joe Camel and GI Joe became increasingly blurred. Even today, tobacco products target children in low-regulation countries

33 Esports Insider, 2023, 'Esports Around The World: France', <https://esportsinsider.com/2023/09/esports-around-the-world-france>

34 BMJ, March 2024, 'Content analysis of food and beverage marketing in global esports: sponsorships of the premier events, leagues, teams and players', <https://bmjpublichealth.bmj.com/content/2/1/e000095>

35 CSP Global, 'Marketing to Children: Tips, Tactics, and Taboos', <https://online.csp.edu/resources/article/marketing-to-children/>

36 Stanford: Research into the impact of Tobacco Advertising, 'Collection: Joe Camel Cartoons', <https://tobacco.stanford.edu/cigarettes/cartoons/joe-camel-cartoons/>

by advertising at a lower eye-level near sweet sections, and usually in shops with schools or colleges nearby.³⁷ By advertising within esports, polluting industries have simply switched shops with computer screens and sweets with dopamine-inducing in-game rewards.

This demographic also poses an existential threat to the fossil fuel economy. In the UK, age is the strongest determinant of attitudes towards fossil fuel companies, with the youngest demographic groups most likely to hold strong unfavourable views of the industry.³⁸ By placing their brand identity in and around the tournaments and platforms loved by esports fans, polluting companies aim to reverse the negative perceptions audiences have of them – especially amongst younger audiences that might be conscious of climate change and its impacts.



Photo by Alex Haney on Unsplash

37 BMJ: Tobacco Control, May 2022, 'Spinning a global web: tactics used by Big Tobacco to attract children at tobacco points-of-sale'<https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/32/5/645>

38 YouGov, n.d., 'How Brits feel about the oil, gas, mining and extraction industries', <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/consumer/trackers/how-brits-feel-about-the-oil-gas-mining-and-extraction-industries>

3. Cheat codes: the polluters betting big on esports



In recent years, high-carbon sponsorship within esports has been growing (see table below). This is visible across the types of companies that are sponsoring esports teams, tournaments, teams and individual players, as well as the types of nationstates that are also investing heavily in esports, most notably those that are also heavily invested in the continued dominance of fossil fuels within the global economy.

These sponsorship deals are not isolated events. Since just 2017, there have been 33 notable deals between the esports industry and high-carbon polluters. Of these, 27 have been deals with car manufacturers, five with major fossil fuel companies and two with the armed forces of the United States.

While this briefing does not seek to provide an exhaustive list of the sectors, companies and states betting big on esports, it attempts to identify key actors and trends within this burgeoning sports sector. There are three prominent actors that are analysed in turn:

3.1 Petrostates (and their high-carbon companies)

States heavily reliant on fossil fuel revenues and committed to their continued global use have a longstanding tradition of leveraging sports to enhance their international standing. Today, many are directing some of their attention towards esports, alongside more 'traditional' global sports such as football and golf.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has already made substantial and far-reaching investments into global sport,³⁹ has also launched a number of initiatives within esports. The petrostate set up the Saudi Esports Federation (SEF) as part of its 'Vision 2030' strategy, claiming it as part of the state's programme to diversify the economy away from oil. Despite this proclaimed goal, the nation's oil company, Aramco, has been a prominent sponsor across sports and esports, leading many to question whether the programme's intended goal is to shift perceptions around the country's poor environmental and human rights records.⁴⁰ More recently, the Aramco CEO, pronounced at a corporate energy conference that "we should abandon the fantasy of phasing out oil and gas and instead invest in them".⁴¹

In esports, SEF has already organised Gamers Without Borders and Gamers8. Gamers Without Borders has been presented as the 'world's biggest esports charity event', with a prize fund of \$10m for charity organisations. Saudi Aramco has been a 'strategic partner' for the event since its inception, alongside charity partners such as the International Medical Corps, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and UNHCR.

Additionally, Saudi Aramco has regularly partnered with Gamers8, serving as the SIM Arena name sponsor.⁴² With a \$45 million prize pool, Gamers8 has established itself as the largest tournament in esports, attracting the industry's top teams and stars. To further solidify its leadership in the industry, SEF announced that Gamers8 will be replaced in 2024 by the Esports

39 Play the Game, 2023, 'Sports power relations in Saudi Arabia', <https://www.playthegame.org/projects/power-relations-in-international-sport/dataset-on-sports-power-relations-in-saudi-arabia/>

40 Impakter, 2023, 'How Two Oil Rich Middle Eastern Countries Are Stepping Up – With a Difference', <https://impakter.com/uae-greenwashing-fossil-fuels-saudi-arabia-sportswashing-human-rights/>

41 CNBC, 2024, 'Saudi Aramco CEO says energy transition is failing, world should abandon 'fantasy' of phasing out oil', <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/03/18/saudi-aramco-ceo-says-energy-transition-is-failing-give-up-fantasy-of-phasing-out-oil.html>

42 Gamers8, n.d., 'Aramco Sim Arena', <https://gamers8.gg/en/festival/aramco-sim-arena>

World Cup.⁴³ This new tournament, funded by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, will feature a \$60 million prize pool,⁴⁴ the largest in esports history.⁴⁵ However, Saudi Arabia's growing involvement in esports has faced backlash from fans⁴⁶ due to the country's poor human rights record.⁴⁷



Photo by Leonardo.ai

43 Reuters, 2023, 'Saudi Arabia launches Esports World Cup – statement', <https://www.reuters.com/sports/saudi-arabia-announces-esports-world-cup-statement-2023-10-23/>

44 <https://www.esportsworldcup.com/en>

45 https://www.esportsearnings.com/tournaments?utm_content=cmp=true

46 <https://youtu.be/GliID9qAzeA?si=2EZq113nugTulB3p>

47 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/saudi-arabia-human-rights-raif-badawi-king-salman>

Saudi Arabia is not the only petrostate seeking to establish itself in the esports industry; both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have followed its lead in recent years. In UAE, Dubai's Department of Economy and Tourism has launched its own esports tournament, Dubai Esports and Gaming Festival, which in 2022 featured a prize fund of \$2m.⁴⁸ Although the prize fund for 2024 has not yet been announced, sponsors and partners include UAE-owned commercial airline, Emirates.⁴⁹ UAE's other state-owned airline has also been a longtime sponsor of major esports team, Nigma.⁵⁰ This sponsorship deal was announced shortly after the team relocated to Abu Dhabi's 'Yas Creative Hub', a gaming centre set up by the government's esports initiative, AD Gaming.⁵¹

The UAE has also heavily invested in esports infrastructure, most notably with the creation of Hub Zero, a \$59 million gaming and entertainment facility.⁵² Though this gaming hub has since closed, there are plans for the UAE-based company True Gamers to establish a \$280 million esports island in Abu Dhabi.⁵³ Additionally, the UAE government has launched the Abu Dhabi Gaming initiative to host events and encourage esports organisations to relocate to the region.⁵⁴

In gas-rich Qatar, the state has established its own Esports Federation and signed a memorandum of understanding with Quest Esports, an organisation focused on scouting, recruitment,

48 Gulf News, 2022, '\$2 million prize money at Dubai Esports Festival 2022, event concludes on a high note', <https://gulfnews.com/sport/uae-sport/2-million-prize-money-at-dubai-esports-festival-2022-event-concludes-on-a-high-note-1.1669099195970>

49 MultiVu, 2023, 'Dubai Ascends to New Heights as a Global Gaming Epicenter', <https://www.multivu.com/players/uk/9193451-dubai-global-gaming-epicenter/>

50 Etihad Airways, 2021, 'Etihad Airways announce landmark partnership with leading Esports team Nigma', <https://www.etihad.com/en-gb/news/etihad-airways-announce-landmark-partnership-with-leading-esports-team-nigma>

51 esportz, 2021, 'Dota 2 organisation Team Nigma is relocating to Abu Dhabi to be a part of AD Gaming Initiative', <https://esportz.in/team-nigma-abu-dhabi>

52 Cumming Group, n.d., 'Hub Zero, Dubai, UAE', <https://cumming-group.com/portfolio-items/hub-zero-dubai-uae/>

53 Esports Insider, 2024, 'True Gamers plans to create \$280m esports', <https://esportsinsider.com/2024/03/true-gamers-plans-280m-esports-island>

54 Esports Insider, 2023, 'Razer partners with UAE initiative AD Gaming', <https://esportsinsider.com/2023/08/razer-partnership-ad-gaming>

and training.⁵⁵ Although the financial details of this partnership have not been disclosed, it is part of Qatar's 'National Vision 2030' initiative, which aims to diversify the nation's economy away from fossil fuels, similar to Saudi Arabia's efforts.⁵⁶

Quest Esports, in partnership with Qatar, has recently entered into a joint ownership deal with Paris Saint Germain FC's (PSG) esports department for its team that competes in Dota 2 tournaments.⁵⁷ As part of this arrangement, Qatar Airways, a state-owned airline and PSG's shirt sponsor, will also be a shirt sponsor for Quest.⁵⁸ To further enhance its presence among Dota 2 fans, the Qatar Esports Federation has signed another memorandum of understanding with esports production company ESB.⁵⁹ This deal involves launching a Dota 2 league in Qatar, featuring three events with a total prize pool of \$2.6 million.

3.2 Fossil fuel majors

Like traditional sports, major fossil fuel companies view the growing esports industry as a platform through which they can clean up their image. However, unlike traditional sports, esports fans are often active participants in the games they watch, providing a unique opportunity for the fossil fuel industry to influence the digital behaviours of these audiences in ways that mirror real-world actions.

An example of this strategy is Shell's partnership with Fortnite, one of the world's most popular online games. As part of this sponsorship, Shell launched the 'ultimate road trips' promotion to advertise its new V-Power® NiTRO+ Premium Gasoline. Players

55 Inside The Games, 2022, 'Qatar Esports Federation partners with Quest and targets growth', <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1128508/qatar-esports-federation-quest-mou>

56 Planning and Statistics Authority, n.d., <https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/qnvl/Pages/default.aspx>

57 Esports Insider, 2023, 'PSG announces Dota 2 partnership with Quest Esports, creates PSG Quest', <https://esportsinsider.com/2023/10/psg-quest-esports-dota-2-psg-quest>

58 <https://esports.gg/news/dota-2/psg-partners-with-quest-esports-dota/>

59 Esports Insider, 2024, 'ESB and Qatar Esports Federation launch \$2.6m Dota 2 league', <https://esportsinsider.com/2024/02/esb-qatar-esports-federation-dota-2-league>

explore a Shell-branded island where they fill up virtual vehicles at interactive Shell gas stations and are encouraged to post screenshots online with the hashtag #Shellroadtrips for a chance to be featured by popular gamers.⁶⁰ This promotion goes beyond mere brand exposure by encouraging players to repeatedly interact with Shell's brand in an in-play environment distinct from reality.

Fortnite's audience is notably young compared to other popular esports games, with about 53% of players aged 10–25.⁶¹ A 2019 study by the National Research Group (NRG) found that 25% of children in the US aged 10–17 spend their free time playing Fortnite.⁶² Shell has a long history of targeting children with advertising through educational materials and events like the Generation Discover youth festival in the Netherlands.⁶³ A leaked internal memo from Shell indicated that children were “more open-minded” towards the company than adults.⁶⁴ Similarly, BP has targeted children with advertising through school resources.⁶⁵

Other international fossil fuel companies have also leveraged esports to promote their brands. ExxonMobil's engine oil brand, Mobil 1, partnered with esports organisation Gen.G and entered teams into Rocket League competitions across North America, some of which Mobil 1 already sponsors.⁶⁶ Chevron recently

60 Shell, n.d., 'Shell Ultimate Road Trips', <https://www.shell.us/motorist/shell-ultimate-road-trips-sweepstakes.html>

61 Demand Sage, 2024, 'Fortnite Statistics 2024', <https://www.demandsage.com/fortnite-statistics/>

62 PR Newswire, 2019, 'Insights: Fortnite, The New Social Media?', <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/insights-fortnite-the-new-social-media-300861200.html>

63 Shell, 2018, 'Generation Discover festival 2017', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIYjG-zAFDw>

64 The Guardian, 2023, 'Shell called out for promoting fossil fuels to youth via Fortnite game', <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/oct/06/shell-fortnite-game-youth-marketing-campaign-fossil-fuels>

65 Desmog, 2017, 'BP Greenwashes Image By Pushing 'Blatant Advertising' on Schoolchildren', <https://www.desmog.com/2017/06/26/bp-school-resources-blatant-advertising-fossil-fuel-industry/>

66 The Business of Esports, 2022, 'ExxonMobil Brand Teams Up With Esports Org In Unique Partnership', <https://thebusinessofesports.com/2022/10/16/exxonmobil-brand-teams-up-with-esports-org-in-unique-partnership/>

became the 'Official Fuel Partner' of esports team Evil Geniuses,⁶⁷ a partnership that sparked significant criticism from the esports community due to Chevron's ongoing investment in fossil fuels.⁶⁸ Beyond US companies, Russian oligarch-owned Lukoil has been a name sponsor of the esports team ForZe since 2018.

3.3 Car manufacturers

Some of the most prolific companies engaged in sportswashing are car manufacturers. These companies primarily focus on shirt sponsorship deals with esports teams, ensuring their logos are prominently displayed at major tournaments.

Unlike in football, where maintaining sponsorship deals with the most successful teams is the goal, car manufacturers in esports typically aim to broker deals with different teams to maximise exposure. This strategy is effective because esports organisations usually specialise in one or two specific video games, each with their own tournaments. By switching between teams, car manufacturers can influence a broader range of esports fans.

Global car manufacturer Mercedes-Benz has been involved in the esports industry since 2017. Most recently, the company sponsored the League of Legends World Championships, co-creating the winner's ring with Riot Games.⁶⁹ The ring is made from "100% atmospheric carbon", with Mercedes claiming a 'commitment to sustainable luxury'.⁷⁰ However, with the average diamond containing just 0.1g of carbon, the CO₂ captured for the ring is miniscule when compared to the company's own emissions.

67 Fragster, 2023, 'EG announces partnership with oil company Chevron', <https://www.fragster.com/eg-announces-partnership-with-oil-company-chevron/>

68 Fragster, 2023, 'EG announces partnership with oil company Chevron', <https://www.fragster.com/eg-announces-partnership-with-oil-company-chevron/>

69 Mercedes-Benz, n.d., 'Mercedes-Benz X Esports', <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/art-and-culture/zeitgeist/esports/>

70 Mercedes-Benz, n.d., 'League of Legends Championship Ring', <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/art-and-culture/zeitgeist/esports/championship-ring/>

In 2023 alone, Mercedes-Benz sold two million cars with internal combustion engines.⁷¹ Considering the average emissions and lifespan of a car, this fleet will produce approximately 11,000,000 tons of CO₂ over its lifetime, surpassing the annual CO₂ emissions of Zimbabwe.⁷² The emissions are likely significantly higher when factoring in the growing sales of larger fuel-inefficient SUVs and the emissions from the 200,000 hybrid cars sold the same year.⁷³

Beyond their strong financial ties with League of Legends, Mercedes has sought to influence wider esports audiences. The brand has been the “official automotive supplier” of ESL UK, a regional division of one of the world’s largest esports leagues, ESL.⁷⁴ Britta Seeger, a member of parent company Daimler’s Board of Management, explained the strategy: ‘eSports gets us into a dialogue with young people, especially those with an affinity for technology.’⁷⁵

BMW and Kia are two other prominent car manufacturers in the esports industry. Both companies have moved between sponsorship deals with various esports teams, each specialising in different video games and tournaments. Kia has also integrated itself more deeply within esports by becoming the official sponsor of the League of Legends Championship Series. As part of this deal, Kia will have in-game banners, logo placements on the camera view, and present awards to teams and players.⁷⁶

71 Electric Cars Report, 2024, ‘Mercedes-Benz electric vehicle sales rise 73% in 2023’ <https://electriccarsreport.com/2024/01/mercedes-benz-electric-vehicle-sales-rise-73-in-2023/>

72 European Commission, 2023, ‘GHG emissions of all world countries’, https://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/report_2023

73 Inside EVs, 2024, ‘Mercedes-Benz Set A New Electric Car Sales Record In Q4 And 2023’, <https://insideevs.com/news/704768/mercedes-electric-car-sales-2023q4/>

74 Esports Insider, 2020, ‘Mercedes-Benz continues sponsorship of ESL Premiership’, <https://esportsinsider.com/2020/09/mercedes-benz-esl-premiership-renewal>

75 ESportz, n.d., ‘Mercedes Renews Partnership With ESL Premiership’. <https://esportz.in/mercedes-renews-partnership-with-esl-premiership>

76 Kia News Center, 2024, ‘Kia America becomes Official Sponsor League of Legends League Championship Series’, <https://www.kiawebscenter.com/news/all/kia-america-becomes-official-sponsor-league-of-legends-league-championship-series/s/bbe169e1-de2d-43a9-ba74-fa438541e2fc>

Figure. 1: Notable high-carbon sponsorship in esports since 2017

High-Carbon Sponsor	Esports Organisation	Sponsor Industry
Qatar and Qatar Airways	Quest Esports (Scout, Training and Teams)	Petrostate and state-owned aviation company
Qatar	ESB (Events)	Petrostate
Saudi Arabia and Saudi Aramco	Gamers8 (Events)	Petrostate and state-owned fossil fuel company
Saudi Arabia and Saudi Aramco	Esports World Cup [formerly Gamers Without Borders] (Events)	Petrostate and state-owned fossil fuel company
United Arab Emirates and Emirates	Dubai Esports and Gaming Festival (Events)	Petrostate and state-owned aviation company
United Arab Emirates and Etihad Airways	Team Nigma (Teams)	Petrostate and state-owned aviation company
United Arab Emirates	Hub Zero (Esports Venue)	Petrostate
Chevron	Evil Geniuses (Teams)	Fossil fuels
Lukoil	FORZE Esports (Teams)	Fossil fuels
Shell	Epic Games (Developer and Events)	Fossil fuels
Audi	Imperial eSports (Teams)	Car manufacturing
BMW	Fnatic (Teams)	Car manufacturing
BMW	Cloud9 (Teams)	Car manufacturing
BMW	OG Esports (Teams)	Car manufacturing
BMW	paiN Gaming (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Cadillac	Team SoloMid (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Ford Motors	00Nation (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Ford Motors	Psyonix (Developer and Events)	Car manufacturing
Haval	Virtus.pro (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Honda Motor Company	Team Liquid (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Honda Motor Company	Riot Games (Developer and Events)	Car manufacturing
Honda Motor Company	EA NHL World Championship (Events)	Car manufacturing
Hua Xiang Group	Rare Atom (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Kia Motors	Cloud9 (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Kia Motors	Riot Games (Developer and Events)	Car manufacturing

High-Carbon Sponsor	Esports Organisation	Sponsor Industry
Kia Motors	Thunder Predator (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Kia Motors	Rogue (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Kia Motors	Team Vitality (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Lamborghini	Psyonix (Developer and Events)	Car manufacturing
Lexus	100 Thieves (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Lexus	The Esports Awards (Events)	Car manufacturing
Mazda	HellRaisers (Teams)	Car manufacturing
Mercedes-Benz	ATK Arena eSports (Esport Venue)	Car manufacturing
Mercedes-Benz	ESL (Tournament)	Car manufacturing
Mercedes-Benz	Riot Games (Developer and Events)	Car manufacturing
Nissan	FaZe Clan (Team)	Car manufacturing
Nissan	Psyonix (Developer and Events)	Car manufacturing
US Army	Complexity (Teams and Events)	Military
US Air Force	ESL Gaming (Events)	Military

4. Lagging behind: how to get ahead of e-sportswashing



The growing threat of e-sportswashing needs to be tackled head-on. But doing this will be challenging and there are many sensitivities that must be navigated. There is, however, multiple imperatives for starting to challenge high-carbon sponsors within esports and beyond it:

- **Protecting the planet:** The combustion of fossil fuels accounts for approximately 90% of the carbon dioxide emissions saturating the atmosphere, driving global warming and intensifying extreme weather events worldwide. The impacts are now unmistakable: failed harvests, uncontrollable wildfires, prolonged droughts, and forced migrations. To prevent further global heating, humanity must reduce fossil fuel use immediately, with wealthy nations in the global north making the most significant and rapid cuts. Protecting the climate requires ending the promotion of fossil fuels, products dependent on them, and the states striving to maintain their profitability and dominance in the global economy.
- **Protecting young people:** The audience of esports is overwhelmingly young. The future these children and young adults face will increasingly be shaped by the ecological climate crisis and older generations inability to act swiftly. This is both tragic and deeply unfair. High-carbon sponsors and petro-states understand that their reputations and social licence to operate are waning, but commercial partnerships through esports provide a means to improve their standing in the eyes of a younger audience.

- **Protecting the future of all sport:** The investments, actions and operations of high-carbon industries and petrostates are putting the future of all sports at risk. The virtual nature of esports might insulate it temporarily from the most visceral impacts of the climate – but it will not escape unscathed. For sports fans, organisations and athletes, ensuring a future where sport can continue to be played and enjoyed is vital. This requires cutting ties with the companies that are undermining that future.

To achieve these imperatives, there needs to be coherent strategies, tactics and targets for campaigning and advocacy efforts. The growth of the esports industry, its burgeoning ecosystem and the unique culture around it mean that efforts will be needed at several levels, simultaneously. These could include:

- **Calling on esports teams and governing bodies to align commercial strategies with a liveable future:** Sports organisations and governing bodies must protect the future of their sports and their fans. Polluting companies are undermining that future, while using the power of sport to reach billions worldwide. Fans, athletes and concerned citizens should demand greater ambition and action from the organisations responsible for governing and representing sport, and that they should drop sponsorship from major climate polluters.

- **Building a network of esports athletes and streamers to raise awareness in the community:** The growing reach and influence of esports provides an opportunity to build a network of fans that can demand action from esports organisations and their commercial partners. Campaign groups can provide a pivotal role in helping fans organise around specific sponsorship deals or providing tools and sharing best practice to athletes and streams that want to use their platform to speak out on the threat posed by high-carbon industries.
- **Supporting calls for advertising and sponsorship bans at a local and national level:** There is growing momentum worldwide for the introduction of high-carbon advertising restrictions and bans. The esports community, as a global network, could add to this momentum by calling upon their local and national representatives to introduce greater restrictions on high-carbon advertising.

Related resources from Badvertising



Badvertising, 2024, **Olympic Smoke Rings: How the climate polluting sponsors using the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games for self-promotion will increase emissions.**

Badvertising, 2024, **'Dirty Snow: How polluters are destroying the winter sports they sponsor'.**

Badvertising, 2023, **'How to screen-out polluting sponsors: A low-carbon toolkit for sports organisations to navigate the issue of polluting sponsorship'.**

Badvertising, 2023, **Caught Offside with Offsets? Why offsetting won't solve sports' climate problem**

Badvertising, 2023, **Dangerous Driving: Why sport should drop sponsorship from major polluters - the cases of Toyota and BMW.**

Badvertising, 2021, **'Sweat Not Oil: Why sports should drop advertising and sponsorship from high-carbon polluters'.**

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See also Cool Down - the sport for climate action network cooldownclimate.org



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