

A WORLD WATCHING

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT
OF FIFA WORLD CUP 2026.

"This is not just the biggest sporting event in history; it is a catalyst that will forever transform the cultural landscape of North America."

- Victor Montagliani

CONCACAF President & FIFA Vice President



INTRODUCTION

TRULY GENERATIONAL
AND HISTORIC

When the final whistle blew on July 19th and Spain secured a thrilling 1-0 victory over Argentina, it marked the conclusion of a genuinely historic FIFA World Cup 2026.

In many ways, the monumentality of this tournament was a fait accompli. From the moment the bid was awarded in June 2018, the 2026 World Cup was architected to break records. As the first World Cup hosted on North American soil since 1994, it ushered in a new era of scale: an expanded 48-team format that increased the tournament load by 40 matches, bringing the total to 104 games. Beyond the sheer math, the stakes on the pitch had never been higher for the host nations. For Canada, this was arguably the most talented Men's National Team ever assembled, carrying unprecedented expectations - a pressure similarly felt by the United States squad.

Yet, despite the grand design, there were lingering questions and vocal skeptics leading up to the opening kickoff. Was North America truly a suitable, primary stage for the Beautiful Game? Would fans be willing to pay for premium ticket prices? Could local crowds match the energy and generational passion of international fanbases? Put simply: Did North America care?

In hindsight, those questions seem absurd.

World Cup fever didn't just arrive; it swept over the continent with an undeniable, gravitational pull. Whether it was the vibrant passion exported by international fanbases, the electric thrill of watching untraditional soccer nations succeed on home soil, or the sheer volume of soccer culture dominating every ounce of the public domain, the tournament was inescapably front and center. Of course, the event was not completely void of distractions. There were political debates, organizational controversies, and the inevitable cries of hyper-commercialism. But is any modern global mega-event immune

to those? They were merely footnotes to what was, undeniably, a resounding cultural and commercial success.

The FIFA World Cup 2026 will leave a lasting legacy. It is a watershed moment that is great news for fans, a catalyst for the sport's exponential growth in North America, and an unparalleled opportunity for brands.



The World Cup proved that major cultural sporting events remain the ultimate aggregator of human attention.

But capturing that attention requires a new playbook.

The purpose of this WPP Paper is to deconstruct the key metrics – from record-breaking broadcast viewership to billions of digital impressions - and unpack the most effective brand strategies of the tournament.

For marketers and media professionals, this is your guide to understanding exactly what it takes to win in the modern sports and entertainment landscape.



THE UNIFYING POWER OF SPORT

WHY WE WATCH, WHY WE CARE

The FIFA World Cup is a platform without equal. Its unrivaled scale, the stakes on the pitch, and the agonizing four-year wait between tournaments create a singular global focal point. It captures the world's attention in a way few others do. While we all experience the tournament differently, through the lens of our own national allegiances, cultural backgrounds, and chosen viewing screens, we are all ultimately experiencing the exact same event. We share a common understanding of its magnitude.

However, the elements that make the World Cup awe-inspiring to billions of people across the globe are the same fundamental, common denominators that make any sport compelling at any level. It is the raw materials that make sports inherently special.

As we reflect on this shared, generational experience of 2026, it serves as the perfect lens through which to unpack these common themes. It is a vital reminder to marketers of the beauty and power of sports that exists every day, in every community, between now and the next World Cup.



HUMAN CONNECTION AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING

Perhaps the most powerful evidence of sport's ability to unite was found not on the pitch, but in the streets. In host cities like Toronto, the true spirit of the tournament was captured in the massive, organic "nation parades" that swept through neighborhoods like Liberty Village before the matches. These joyful, fan-organized processions provided deeply inspiring content for onlookers and underscored a profound sense of belonging.

Crucially, the tournament provided an abundance of examples where rival fanbases embraced each other in celebration, not necessarily over the final score, but over the shared act of passionate competition. This camaraderie was a daily occurrence at the FIFA Fan Festival, in the spontaneous interactions between international tourists and locals (highlighted by the viral, joyous videos of Japanese tourists partying alongside Mexican fans), and within every sports bar and office viewing party across the continent.

In a fragmented media landscape, live sports remain one of the few true "appointment viewing" occasions left. The FIFA World Cup 2026 delivered those moments in droves. Whether it was the Final, a heavily anticipated Team Canada knockout match, or just a casual late-night viewing with friends, the tournament actively enabled and encouraged people to connect with family, colleagues, and total strangers over a shared cultural moment.



A STORY FOR EVERYONE

UNSCRIPTED THEATER

Beyond the game itself, we watch for narratives. The World Cup is a peerless storytelling engine, generating stories that transcend the sport. But unlike movies or television, sport is the ultimate unscripted theatre: the script is written in real time, in front of a live audience, eliciting a visceral response that scripted entertainment simply cannot replicate.

At the World Cup, that means the collective gasp of a near miss, the tension of a Video Assistant Referee (VAR) review and the euphoric release of a game-deciding goal in the 90th minute.

This live, edge-of-your-seat tension is where unforgettable stories are forged.

Because the outcome is never guaranteed, the narratives that emerge feel undeniably earned:

- **The Underdog Triumphs:** The emergence of Cinderella stories, like the heroic, expectation-defying run of Cape Verde, reminding us why we root against the odds.
- **The Birth of Household Names (and Villains):** We witnessed the coronation of new global icons. Erling Haaland, already a superstar entering the tournament, became a household name, not just for his undeniable athletic credentials, but for his quirky humour and unapologetically "unserious" demeanour off the pitch. Conversely, the narrative required its villains. This role was often filled by the referees facing intense scrutiny over inconsistent applications of the rules, or the FIFA organizing body itself, enduring boos from traditionalists over mandated hydration breaks.
- **The "GOAT" Tracker:** The tournament provided dramatic, legacy-defining arcs. We collectively watched and celebrated what is likely Lionel Messi's final World Cup (don't quote us on that) as he chased the ghost of back-to-back titles, while simultaneously tracking Kylian Mbappé's torrid goal-scoring pace, making it clear he is destined to eventually rewrite the all-time scoring record books.
- **Hometown Pride:** Finally, the host nations delivered. While the final results may not have been the ultimate fairy tale, the host countries produced strong performances and unforgettable moments that undoubtedly gave their nations something to be proud of.

The beauty of sports is that you can't fast-forward to the end.

For marketers, this unscripted drama creates a hyper-attentive, deeply invested audience.

THE CULTURAL CALENDAR

The Intersection of Sport, Style, and Sound

What attracts consumers and fans to sport is not confined to the action in the game. Today, major sporting events act as the epicenter of global youth culture, creating a vibrant canvas where sport intersects with fashion, music, and lifestyle.

For the modern fan, the culture surrounding the game is just as important as the game itself. We saw this manifest in several undeniable ways throughout the tournament:

- Athletes have evolved into premier fashion icons. The pre-game "tunnel walks" rivaled the energy of Paris or Milan Fashion Week, heavily scrutinized and celebrated across social media. Furthermore, the explosion of "Blokecore," the trend of integrating retro soccer jerseys into everyday high-end streetwear, reached a fever pitch in North America.
- The tournament wasn't just watched; it was listened to. From the official anthems to the organic, viral stadium chants, the music of the World Cup drove global social media trends. We saw specific regional goal anthems instantly become trending audio on TikTok, spawning dance crazes that bridged the gap between die-hard soccer fans and mainstream pop culture consumers.
- The World Cup acted as a month-long cultural festival. Host cities like Toronto and Vancouver didn't just host matches; they hosted a convergence of global culinary scenes at Fan Fests, collaborative art drops, and massive integrations with the gaming world (like EA SPORTS FC).

This cultural expansion creates many ways for brands and marketers to become a part of the conversation.



All of these elements, the shared drama, the search for belonging, the underdog stories, and the clash of heroes, exist across all sports and will continue to unfold over the next four years. They may not always occur on the scale of a World Cup, but the significance of these moments to the communities that are passionate about them is never diminished.

This deep, emotional landscape is the most fertile ground available to build genuine, lasting connections.

Activating in sports is not just about buying eyeballs; it is about earning the right to be part of a cherished, communal memory.



THE WORLD PLAYS TOGETHER

The FIFA World Cup 2026 was always built to be history. The 48-team format was 16 more than 2022 in Qatar and the 104 Games was 40 more than the 64 then. And the numbers speak for themselves:



GLOBAL IMPACT

Broadcast & viewership

5 Billion

Unique viewers globally across platforms

1.8 Billion

Protected views for the final making it one of the most-watched singular broadcast in history



CANADAS BROADCAST & VIEWERSHIP DEEP DIVE

30.5 Million

UNIQUE CANADIAN VIEWERS REPRESENTING

75%

of Canada

6.4 Million

VIEWERS FOR THE FINALS

MAKING IT THE MOST WATCHED EVER IN CANADA

5.4 Million

AMA FOR CANADAS KNOCKOUT GAME VERSUS MOROCCO

MAKING IT THE MOST WATCHED NON-FINALS GAME IN CANADIAN HISTORY

THE DIGITAL UNIVERSE

In 2026 social media wasn't just a 'second screen' for Gen Z and Millennial audiences. It was their primary lens through which they experienced the tournament

200%

CANADIAN STREAMING CONSUMPTION VERSUS 2022

7 Billion

ENGAGEMENTS

Across 42 million distinct stories and social posts

20 Billion

VIEWS OF FIFA CONTENT

Across owned social and digital

213.6 Billion

NEW FOLLOWERS ON ATHELTE INSTAGRAM...

23 Million

FOR HALLAND ALONE

FANDOM & AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

27%

Of Canadians report actively
engaging with soccer regularly



ATHLETE ENGAGEMENT

For years, a fundamental behavioural shift has been taking place: younger audiences are pledging loyalty to individual athletes rather than traditional teams. The 2026 World Cup is likely accelerating this. Fueled by creator-led, always-on social storytelling, athletes are no longer just participants in the tournament; they are standalone media networks.

ERLING HAALAND	NORWAY	+32.1M
VOZINHA	CAPE VERDE	+29.4M
JUDE BELLINGHAM	ENGLAND	+12.0M
LAMINE YAMAL	SPAIN	+11.0M
CHRISTIANO RONALDO	PORTUGAL	+11.0M
LIONEL MESSI	ARGENTINA	+7.5M
GILBERTO MORA	MEXICO	+6.6M
MICHAEL OLISE	FRANCE	+5.7M
TIM PAYNE	NEW ZEALAND	+5.5M
ALPHONSO DAVIES	CANADA	+4.2M
JONATHAN DAVID	CANADA	+1.5M



ATHLETE ENGAGEMENT

To capitalize on this, marketers must understand the new character arcs that were created this summer:

The Next Gen Coronation: A clear changing of the guard has arrived. The hype surrounding the next generation of superstars was fully validated on the pitch, but their marketing power developing online. With every match, tunnel walk, and public appearance, these young players are shaping their brand to complement their media power.

The Evolution of the Icon: Make no mistake, the established legends are not fading, their commercial utility is just evolving. Global stars Messi and Ronaldo still commanded some of the highest net-increases in social following this summer. As they transition toward the twilight of their active playing careers, expect them to pivot. By the next World Cup, with less emphasis on on-pitch performance, they are poised to absolutely dominate the broadcast and brand landscape as cultural ambassadors.

The Beckham Blueprint: If you want proof of what that post-career evolution looks like, look no further than David Beckham. Despite retiring over a decade ago, he was arguably the commercial MVP of 2026. Beckham fronted campaigns for a staggering 11 different global brands specifically during the World Cup window, perfectly complementing his portfolio of seven long-term luxury and equity partnerships. He is the proof that an athlete's commercial peak can happen long after they hang up their boots.

Elevated profiles of Canadians: Looking within our own borders, Alphonso Davies proved that his cultural gravity transcends box scores or minutes played. Despite a tournament with limited time on the pitch, his profile and following continued to surge. The challenge, and opportunity, for Canadian marketers is to evolve their thinking. It's time to stop treating domestic stars like Davies as a "four-year pulse" activated only during the World Cup, and start partnering with them as powerful, evergreen assets who hold year-round international weight.



UNPACKING THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN

Curating a list of the "best" marketing campaigns from the 2026 World Cup is a daunting task. The sheer scope of global activity spanning official campaigns, clever grassroots tactics, and bold ambush stunts makes it impossible to highlight every brand that deserves recognition. As strategists, it would be irresponsible for us to simply applaud the flashiest campaigns purely because they had the deepest pockets. It is easy to generate noise when you can afford an official sponsorship, top-tier production, and global celebrity talent. Anyone can buy reach but earning cultural relevance is much harder.

While the brands we have selected to feature below represent significant global investments, we are not highlighting them for the size of their budgets. Instead, we are unpacking the highly specific, innovative, and strategic choices they made to deploy those assets.

MICHELOB ULTRA BIG BUDGET, SHARP INSTINCTS

Michelob Ultra was among the most present/visible brands on the backs of large budgets; official status, GOAT ambassadors and substantial media budgets. That is a simple recipe for success. We liked this campaign not because of the deep pockets but because of how they deployed their assets:



1. GLOBAL SCALE & LOCAL RELEVANCY

Using Lionel Messi to anchor a global TV spot is an easy way to grab eyeballs. But the regional adaptability was the effective part. Michelob took that exact same storyline and swapped in regionally relevant stars for specific markets. Here in Canada, they subbed in Jonathan David, showing you can flex scale while feeling relevant, locally.

2. RESPONSIVE MARKETING

Before the tournament, Michelob put up a billboard near the stadium featuring Jonathan David with one finger pointing skyward. It was an unremarkable detail, right up until David's massive three-goal performance against Qatar. Michelob physically updated the billboard over-night, so he was holding three fingers up. They turned a static piece of media into social talking point.

3. 'ZERO' HALO EFFECT MARKETING

Marketing alcohol with active athletes is not permitted but those strict endorsement rules don't apply to non-alcoholic beverages. Throughout the tournament, they covered the media ecosystem with athlete-heavy spots for Michelob Ultra Zero, running in parallel with ads for their traditional beer. While a savvy media planner can spot the regulatory differences, the average fan is less sophisticated. It was a clever approach to casting a star-studded halo over the entire portfolio.

UNILEVER

THE DECENTRALIZED ARCHITECTURE

While Unilever has the global scale and budgets to outspend the competition and succeed - what makes their FIFA World Cup 2026 campaign admirable is the architecture. In fact, summarizing their integrated campaign succinctly is difficult, and that is exactly the point. It wasn't a single message; it was a complex ecosystem deliberately built to cater to a breadth of different consumer journeys and brand stories.

1. THE TRADITIONAL FOUNDATION

Unilever anchored the campaign with their Global FIFA rights, activating across 35 different brands. This was effectively leveraged on a global scale with retail activations in 120 markets. This physical footprint gave fans highly desired access to World Cup experiences and ticket sweepstakes. Crucially, it included a CSR tie-in, funneling funds from these retail moments directly into their "Confidence to Play" platform, which supports sports participation and builds self-esteem for youth. These are important, core elements to effectively capture attention and drive relevancy for any integrated campaign.



2. THE RADICAL PIVOT

The less traditional part was their all-in approach to creator marketing. Unilever actively opted out of relying on polished brand ads and high-impact linear media placements. Instead, they chose to connect through social communities, working with 50,000+ creators globally to weave their suite of products into the daily fabric of the tournament.



3. FUELING THE CREATOR ARMY

Unilever understood that you must give creators a canvas. They equipped their influencer network with compelling, exclusive platforms to generate content. By building out experiential pop-ups, hosting VIP creator lounges, and granting behind-the-scenes access, Unilever ensured the resulting content was compelling.



For a massive enterprise juggling a complex matrix of brand messaging and diverse audience segments, this decentralized approach was a calculated risk. It allowed them to deliver a seemingly infinite stream of human, tailored content that matched the digital-first consumption habits of modern fans. Furthermore, by flooding the digital ecosystem with authentic, creator-led conversations, this strategy aligns with the emerging frontier of Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) - optimizing content for AI-generated search responses.

ADIDAS

TWO-PRONGED APPROACH

We would be remiss not to highlight adidas, given the impressive performance their World Cup campaign generated. The brand posted record Q2 profits on the back of 17 million soccer jersey sales, were among the leaders in earned media generation, and officially increased their 2026 corporate growth guidance by 9%–10%.

This ROI wasn't achieved simply by relying on their endemic status as the official ball and kit supplier of Nations. adidas activated the World Cup on two fronts: performance and lifestyle.

1. ON THE PITCH (PERFORMANCE)

adidas brought innovation to athletic performance. Anticipating the highly publicized concerns from European teams regarding the Southern U.S. heat, adidas introduced pre-match uniforms featuring cooling technology adapted from Formula 1. This cutting-edge apparel actively helped lower players' body temperatures by 0.5 degrees.

2. OFF THE PITCH (LIFESTYLE)

Beyond the stadium, adidas focused on lifestyle. adidas became the poster child for "Blokecore" the streetwear trend that anchors everyday casual attire with vintage soccer jerseys. This aesthetic is uniquely suited for adidas, bridging their heritage as an official soccer kit sponsor with their large lifestyle and Originals streetwear brand.

THE EXPERIENTIAL HUBS

To bring this cultural crossover to life, adidas activated massive physical hubs globally, mirroring their execution in Toronto at the STACKT market. Anchored by a viewing party, adidas offered interactive experiences that merged their performance business (like live cleat trials and shot-tracking) with lifestyle elements, such as offering fans complimentary on-site barber services.

Capped off by an "adidas vs. adidas" final featuring Argentina and Spain (which accelerated sales by an estimated \$300 million compared with 2022), the campaign is proof of concept that large sponsorship investments yield strong ROI.



'NEWSJACKING'

HEINZ, LEVI'S, GILLETTE (AMONG OTHERS)

During the tournament, FIFA's strict broadcast rules led to the on-screen censorship and blurring of non-sponsor brands found within the properties of FIFA events. Rather than taking a back seat, select brands flipped the script. They leaned directly into the censorship, using reactive social media to "newsjack" the moment and steal the attribution. While this is not sound strategy, this IS the result of sophisticated marketing teams built for calculated risk-taking. It requires an organizational structure that is flexible, legally brave, and highly responsive. Not every brand is currently wired to operate this way, but in a modern landscape where culture unfolds in real-time, the ability to instantly turn a broadcast roadblock into a viral moment is a superpower.



LASTING IMPACT & LEGACY

The FIFA World Cup 2026 was a month of spectacle, but it's important not to lose sight of what it will accelerate. It fundamentally altered the sports and entertainment landscape in North America, leaving behind a legacy that marketers should understand.



CANADA IS A SOCCER COUNTRY

Soccer is no longer a "niche" or "challenger" sport in this country. The FIFA World Cup 2026 was the explosive catalyst, but the underlying tectonic plates of Canadian sports fandom have been shifting for years. It has firmly entrenched itself within the mainstream cultural consciousness.

Nearly two million more Canadians are interested in soccer than just two months ago, bringing the total audience to almost 18 million adults.

Canadians who say CANMNT is their favourite sports team nearly doubled, rising from five percent to nine percent nationally, equivalent to approximately 1.3 million new supporters.

69 percent of adult Canadians saw coverage of CANMNT during the FIFA World Cup 2026, while 47 percent followed the team at least somewhat closely.

It is common for major milestones to attract new audiences, but the most powerful events create systemic, generational change. Look no further than what Vince Carter and the Toronto Raptors did for basketball in Canada a quarter-century ago; they seeded a culture that eventually yielded an NBA Championship and a pipeline of top-tier Canadian talent. The FIFA World Cup 2026 has seeded the same fertile ground for soccer.



CANADA'S FAVOURITE SPORTS

ALL CANADIANS

1 HOCKEY	32%
2 SOCCER	12%
3 BASEBALL	11%
4 BASKETBALL	9%
5 FOOTBALL	8%

CANADIANS NOT BORN IN CANADA

1 SOCCER	28%
2 BASKETBALL	15%
3 HOCKEY	13%
4 TENNIS	9%
5 SWIMMING	8%

CANADIANS AGED 18-29

1 SOCCER	19%
2 HOCKEY	17%
3 BASKETBALL	15%

CANADIANS AGED 30-44

1 HOCKEY	25%
2 SOCCER	18%
3 BASKETBALL	14%

Abacus Data National Research Survey. 1,500 Canadians aged 18 and older, conducted between July 14-16 2026. The margin of error for a comparable probability sample is +/- 2.5%.

OUR GAME NOW

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The 'Sports' Ecosystem is Larger than Ever

You do not need an official, multi-million-dollar FIFA sponsorship to be successful activating the World Cup. The tournament proved that sports are now the epicenter of global culture, intersecting heavily with fashion, music, and gaming. Brands that leaned into the lifestyle surrounding the game were successful in their own right. Success today requires cultural fluency, not just a large sports marketing budget.

Experience as the Engine

The staggering 146.8 billion social video views generated during the tournament were not the result of brands broadcasting polished commercials; they were the byproduct of fans capturing real-world culture. The brands that succeeded didn't just push content at audiences, they built immersive, physical, and cultural experiences that fans naturally wanted to document and share. Whether it was a hyper-localized culinary pop-up, a collaborative fashion drop, or a uniquely curated fan zone, the new mandate is clear: brands must architect the real-world moments that serve as the engine for digital word-of-mouth. Build the cultural experience, and the fans will create the content for you.

Don't Wait for the Next World Cup

The 2026 World Cup broke the regular four-year slumber of North American soccer fandom and the sport has been permanently elevated to the mainstream. World Cup marketers would be wise to abandon "pulse marketing" around mega events and shift to "always-on" approach to maintain the momentum. There is value in the domestic properties (NSL, CPL, Canada Soccer and athletes) should the fandom continue to surge as we've seen with other sports following major moments.

Conclusion

For Canadian fans, the summer of 2026 served as the climax to an historic run of sports culture. As the confetti finally settles, the sports calendar will shift back into a more familiar, predictable rhythm over the next few quarters. Fans finally have a moment to catch their collective breath.

But there is no off-season for brand marketers.

The next global tentpole (of hyper-relevancy to North American fans) is on the horizon: the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. While a two-year runway might feel like an eternity to the casual fan, for marketers tasked with delivering ambitious objectives, 2028 is on the doorstep.

The task of "World Building" around Los Angeles 2028, crafting multi-year narratives, securing athlete partnerships before the market peaks, and engineering an authentic ecosystem that bridges local communities to the global stage, is onerous and challenging. As we saw with the brands who won the World Cup, you cannot simply buy your way into cultural relevance at the eleventh hour. The brands that will stand on the podium in Los Angeles are the ones doing the heavy lifting today. The clock is ticking. Planning begins, now.

A WORLD WATCHING

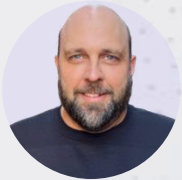
UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

WPP Media empowers brands to win by building upon a foundation of deep audience intelligence, strategic relevance, and innovative media ecosystems.

The WPP Media Sports + Entertainment team are leaders in sponsorship marketing, uniquely positioned to help brands move beyond transactional partnerships and build meaningful, culturally resonant strategies — whether through the FIFA World Cup 2026, women's sports, or the broader sports and entertainment landscape.

Connect with your WPP Media client lead today to discover how our data-driven strategies and media innovation can build your brand and drive business growth.

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