



2025

Global Sports Report

**Key factors transforming sports
and your sponsorship strategy**



Table of contents

Introduction

3

Section 1

The world's most popular sport is a win for brands

5

Section 2

Women's sports fans are changing the game

10

Section 3

Media is growing the game for new formats and global sports

14

Conclusion

19

About Nielsen

20

Introduction

The world of sports is exploding, and a number of factors are shaking up the game. Increased globalization, diversifying fandoms and changes in media consumption are creating passionate fans who are more connected than ever before. Of course, this brings in new opportunities and a few curveballs too.

To play it right in this ever-changing scene, brands and rights holders need to understand today's fans. The old playbook for marketing just isn't cutting it. Brands need to know when sponsorships are creating authentic relationships with fans and turning them into loyal consumers. Media companies need to keep up with how fans are tuning in—whether it's catching live action on their phone or binging highlights later. And for leagues and teams, it's all about building real connections with fans everywhere, creating a global cheering section that goes beyond just showing up to the stadium.

This report dives into the factors that are fueling this growth in sports globally—how we watch, how the world connects us and how different types of fans are shaping the future. By getting a handle on all of this, you can craft smarter strategies, turn marketing plays into winning scores, and make the most of the massive potential in global sports today.





Three growth factors

Today's sports marketing landscape is growing, with the value of global sports media rights surpassing \$60 billion in 2024. In this report, we highlight key factors that are reshaping sports to help you make smarter decisions around your sports sponsorships and know the true value of your investments.



1. The world's most popular sport is a win for brands

Whether fans call it football or soccer, the sport is the most popular around the world. Global tournaments in 2025, 2026 and 2027 will open up opportunities to breakthrough with fans—particularly the growing and passionate fanbase in the U.S.



2. Women's sports fans are changing the game

Women's sports are exploding in popularity. And with women making up almost half of all women's sports fans globally, fandom looks different from men's sports. Brands and rights holders need to break the mold as women's sports continue to evolve.



3. Media is growing the game for new formats and global sports

Thanks to streaming and social media, fans today have more access to sports (and the athletes that play them) than ever before. While media is growing engagement, it's also opening opportunities for new formats—like the fast growing tech-infused golf league TGL—to find fans.



1 The world's most popular sport is a win for brands

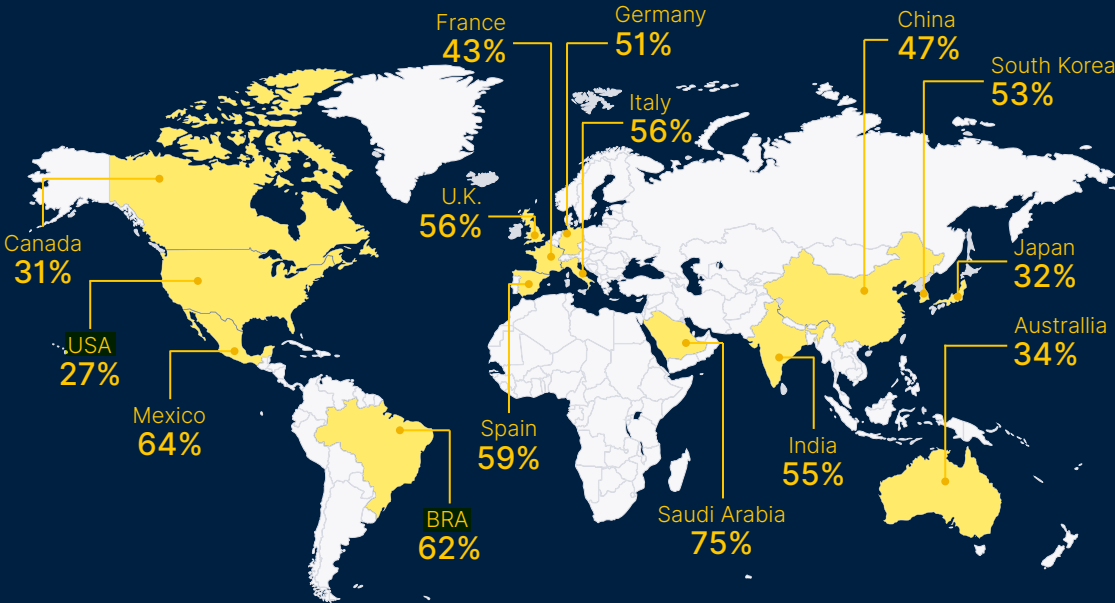
Football fandom varies by country

Football (also known as soccer) is the world’s most popular sport, with 51% of people on average saying they’re fans. This places it well above the next most popular sports globally—basketball (42% global fandom) and swimming (39%).

With major tournaments across men’s and women’s football in 2025, 2026 and 2027, brands and rights holders need to understand how fandom differs across markets. Some markets overindex the global average, such as Mexico

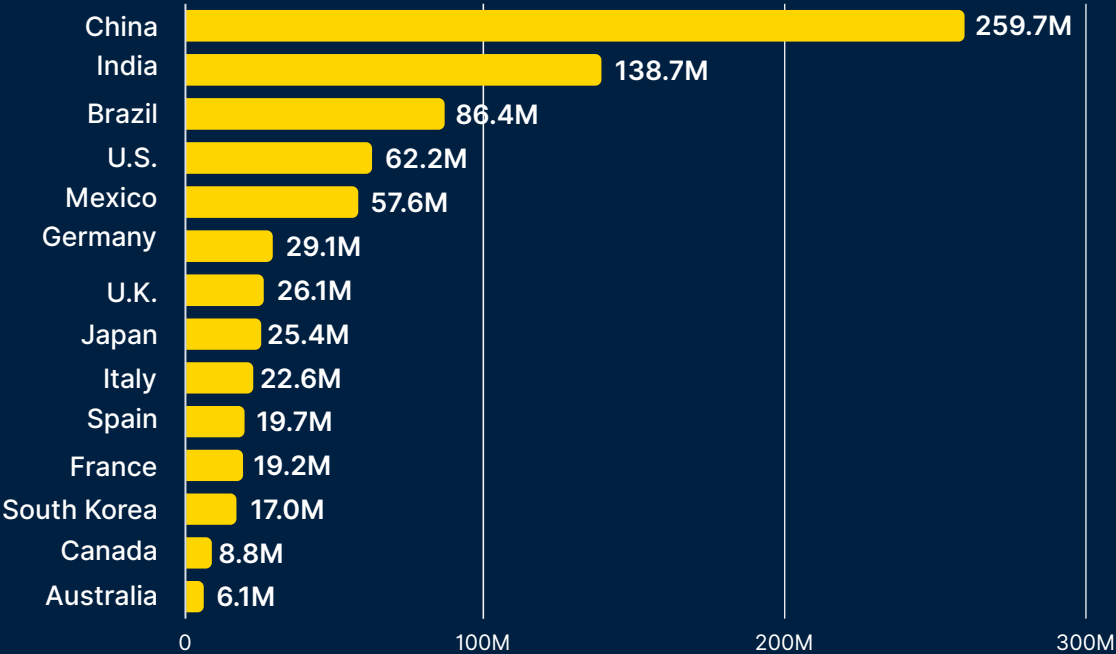
at 64% fandom and several major markets in Europe—good news with the UEFA Women’s EURO 2025 tournament right around the corner. However, it’s also important to consider population size. Despite a lower percentage of fans, the U.S. has the fourth largest football fanbase in the world with 62 million fans. That’s 2x more fans than major European markets.

Figure 1.1
Football fandom around the world



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Figure 1.2
Football fan population by country



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Football fans are more receptive to sponsors

Football is by far the sport that attracts the highest investments from brands globally—41% of all sports sponsorships are football sponsorships.¹ And for good reason: Football fans around the world are eager to engage with and buy from brands who sponsor competitions. In fact, 67% of global soccer fans find brands sponsoring their favorite competitions more appealing, compared to 54% of the general population.

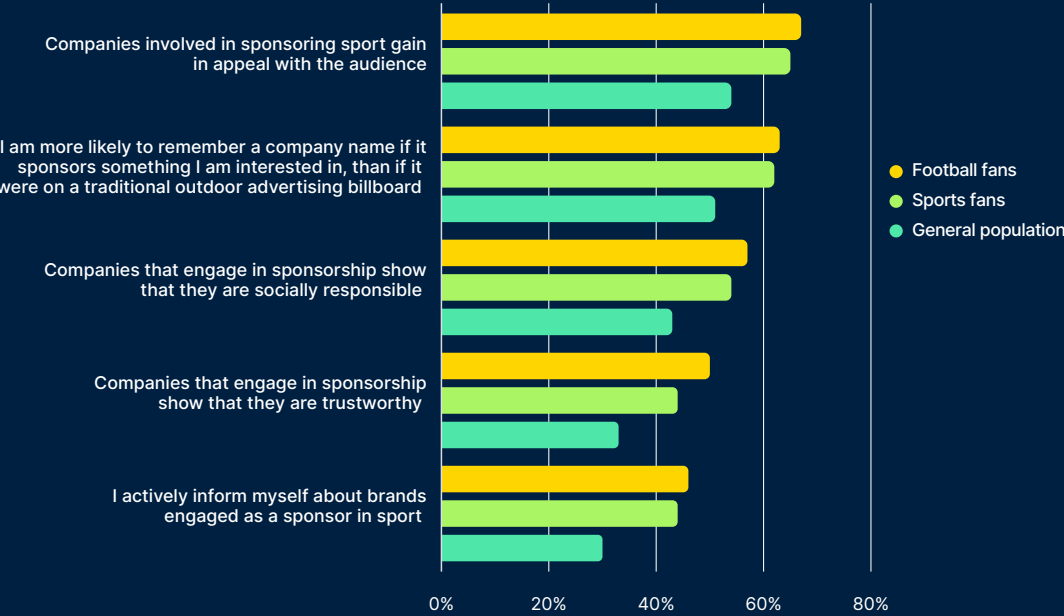
With the upcoming tournaments, this positive response to sponsorship is a win for brands. But getting your brand sponsorship right depends on

understanding the nuance of fans in your target market. As seen in Figure 1.4, U.S. fans are significantly more receptive to brand sponsorship than the country's general sports fans and are second only to football fans in Brazil, one of the sport's most dominant markets worldwide. Meanwhile, Brazil football fans are much more in line with overall sports fans in the country.

¹ Nielsen Sports SponsorGlobe, 2023

Figure 1.3

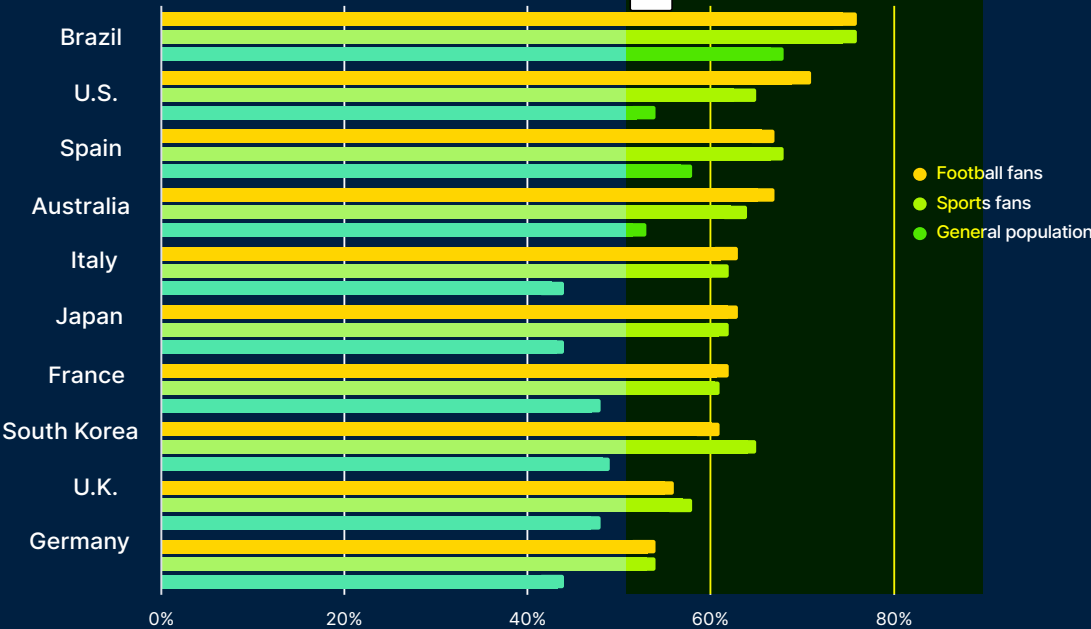
Global football fans lead global sports fans in sponsorship receptivity



Countries: Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, U.K., U.S.
Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Figure 1.4

Companies involved in sponsoring sport gain in appeal with the audience



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Spotlight

Getting to know soccer fans in the U.S. ahead of FIFA World Cup 2026™

The upcoming Men’s FIFA World Cup 2026™ will be hosted across North America. In the U.S., the sport’s fandom is on the rise. According to Nielsen Fan Insights, 62% of soccer fans and 11% of non-sports fans in the U.S expect their interest in soccer to increase in the next 18 months as we get closer to the tournament.

Sponsors need to understand U.S. fans to capitalize on the games. In the U.S., 76% of soccer fans are Millennials or Gen Z, 22% are Hispanic, and 34% earn \$100K or more in household income. And these young, diverse and affluent fans are eager to spend with brands that sponsor the game.

Need more soccer insights ahead of 2026?

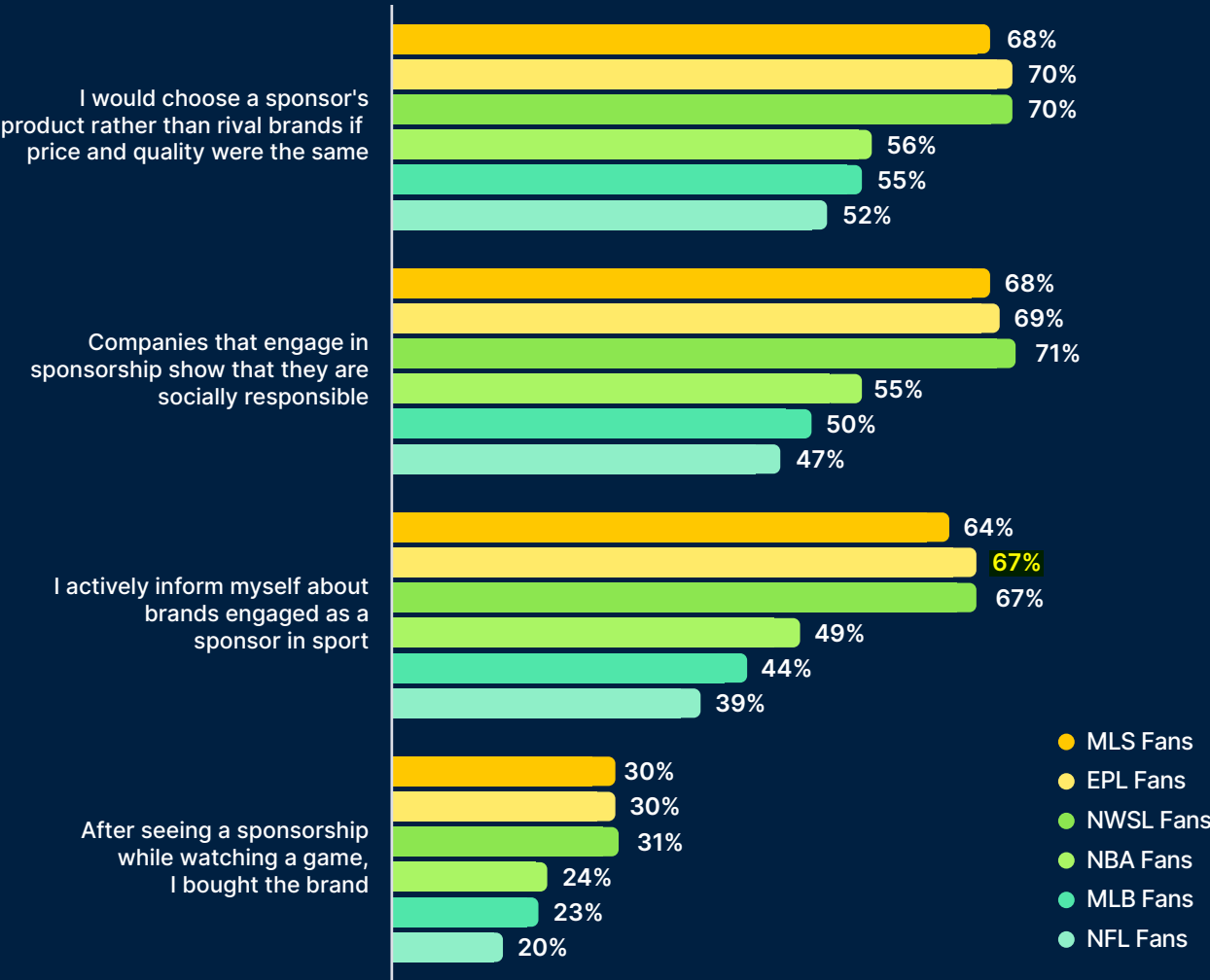
Learn who soccer fans are, what makes them tick, and their attitudes toward brands. Nielsen’s new soccer Fan Insights can help you answer questions such as:

- What is the projected impact of 2026 on soccer fandom? Will it be sustainable?
- Who are soccer fans—their demographics, interests and media habits?
- How does fandom differ across soccer properties?
- How do I best reach my target market? Is advertising or sponsorship a more effective strategy?

[Learn more](#)

Figure 1.5

Soccer fans in the U.S lean in with brand sponsors



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024, US Only

Game plan

Capitalize on football (or soccer) enthusiasts' passion with a well defined investment strategy.



For brands

Football fans are more likely than the general population to be influenced by sponsorship, affecting how they perceive a brand and what they're likely to buy. To authentically connect with this global audience and build trust, you should:

- Identify relevant fan bases, athletes and teams aligned with your products and messaging.
- Prioritize genuine engagement and a way to measure it—while tournaments are major moments where fans tune in, investing in leagues and teams can build long-term loyalty. Take [Michelob Ultra](#). The brand kicked off a big marketing push during the 2024 Copa America tournament and is now the official beer sponsor of Major League Soccer (MLS). This also aligns with its parent company, ABInBev, securing rights to the upcoming FIFA tournaments.

For rights holders

Building meaningful and impactful partnerships requires a long-term perspective. To support brand and broadcast partners effectively:

- Provide comprehensive insights into your fanbase—who they are, what they're interested in and what drives them to purchase.
- Create more robust platforms for partners to tap into the growing fanbases in markets like the U.S. to build sustainable businesses.
- Collaborate to define measurable outcomes aligned with partner goals.

Learn more about how Nielsen can help you plan your football investments at the [end of the report](#).



**Women's sports
fans are changing
the game**

2

Women's sports are gaining popularity

Interest in women's sports is growing—reaching 50% of the general population globally in 2024, up from 45% in 2022. Two of the world's biggest markets, India and China, show some of the highest levels of interest. But interest is growing quickly in smaller markets like the U.K. and Germany thanks to high-profile wins, major tournaments and consolidated TV coverage.

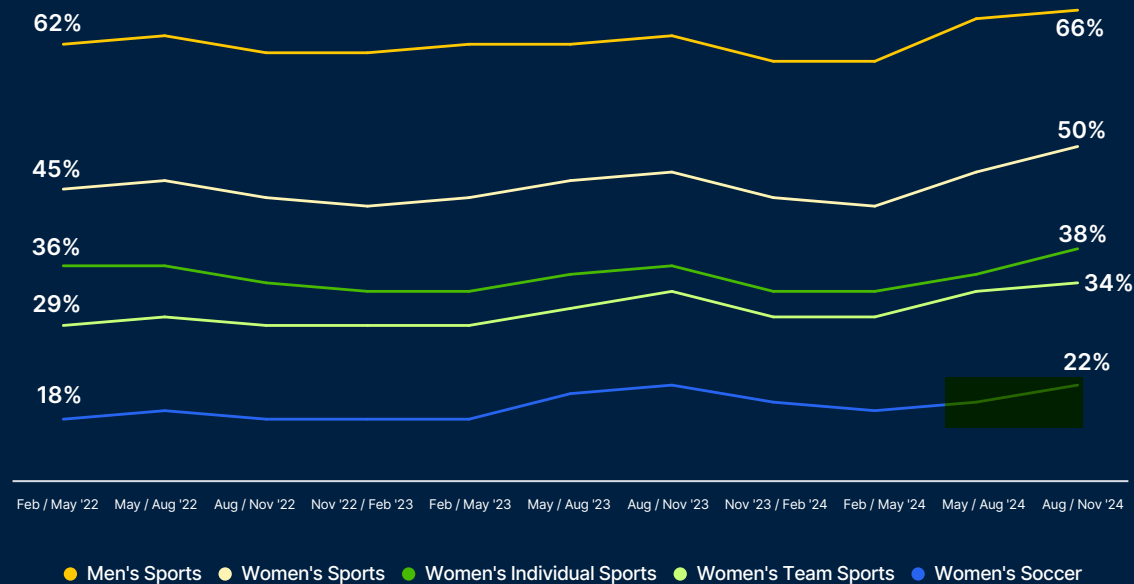
Some sports, in particular, are seeing strong growth. The fanbase for women's football, for example, has increased significantly over the last five

years, thanks to major tournaments, such as the 2022 UEFA European Women's Championship and the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. But one of the biggest stories in women's sports has been basketball. The WNBA fanbase has grown more than 31% in two years to 46.9 million in the U.S. And fans are tuning in—[viewership](#) for the 2024 WNBA regular season grew 201% over the prior season. Not surprisingly, sponsorships are following. As brands look to invest, they need to understand the unique fans these sports are attracting. For the WNBA, women accounted for 41% of U.S. fans in 2024.

Figure 2.1

Interest in women's sports in growing

Among the general population



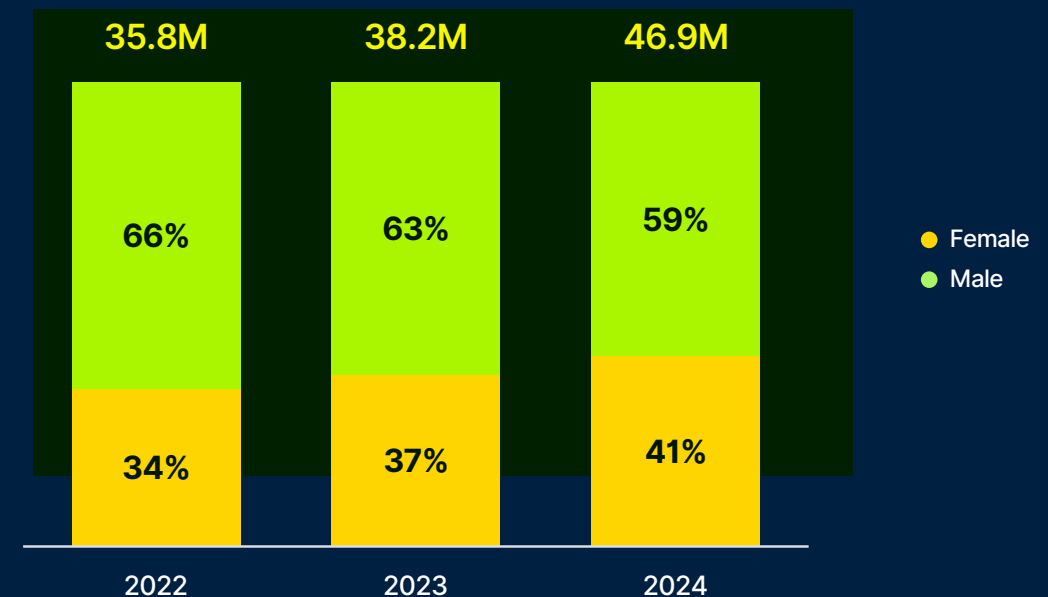
Countries: Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, U.K., U.S.

Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2022 - 2024, Sports - Athletics, MMA, Tennis, Golf, Football, Rugby Union, Cricket, Basketball

Figure 2.2

Women are helping to drive the growth in WNBA fans

U.S. only



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

New fans open the door for sponsors

Women are increasingly making up a larger share of fans for both women's and men's sports. In 2024, women represented 47% of fans of women's sports and 42% of fans of men's sports, up from 45% and 40%, respectively, in 2022.² Different audiences call for different approaches—and unique brand opportunities.

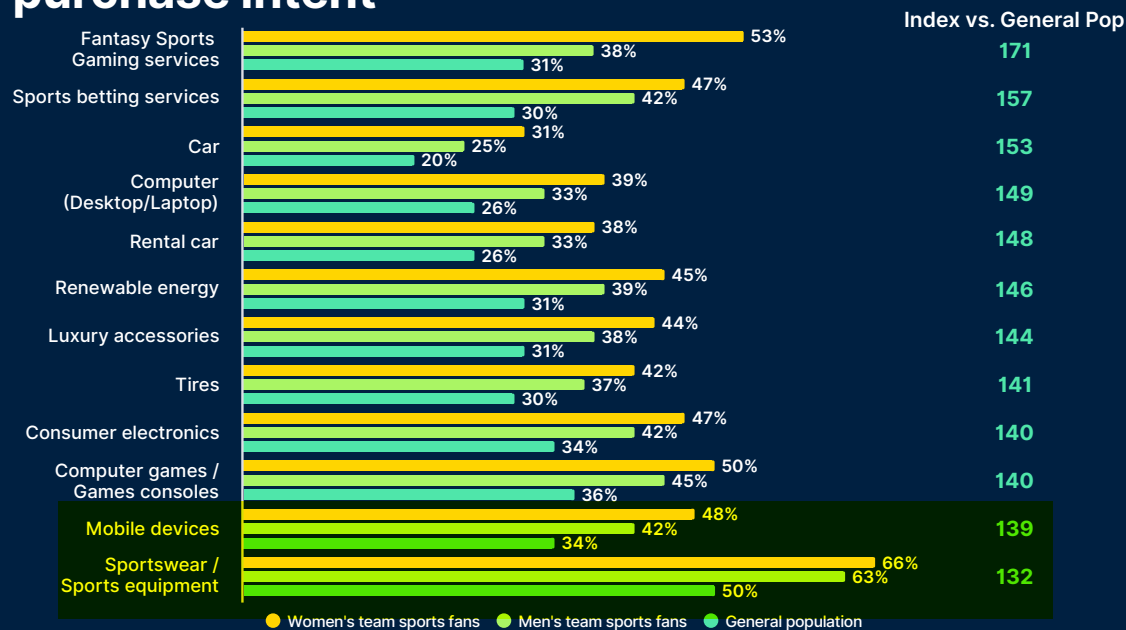
Supporting women's sports is no longer the right thing to do, it's a business imperative. With a strong female fandom, women's sports are opening the door to new players within the sports sponsorship space. We've seen

an increased diversification in sponsor categories as purchase intent shifts. Luxury brand **Coach** recently became the official handbag partner of the WNBA, a category where women's team sports fans are significantly more likely to buy than the general population. And the good news for brands looking to invest is that similar to football fans globally, women's sports fans are eager to engage with the brands that sponsor the teams, games and leagues they care about.

² Nielsen Fan Insights, 2022 - 2024 (Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, U.K., U.S.)

Figure 2.3

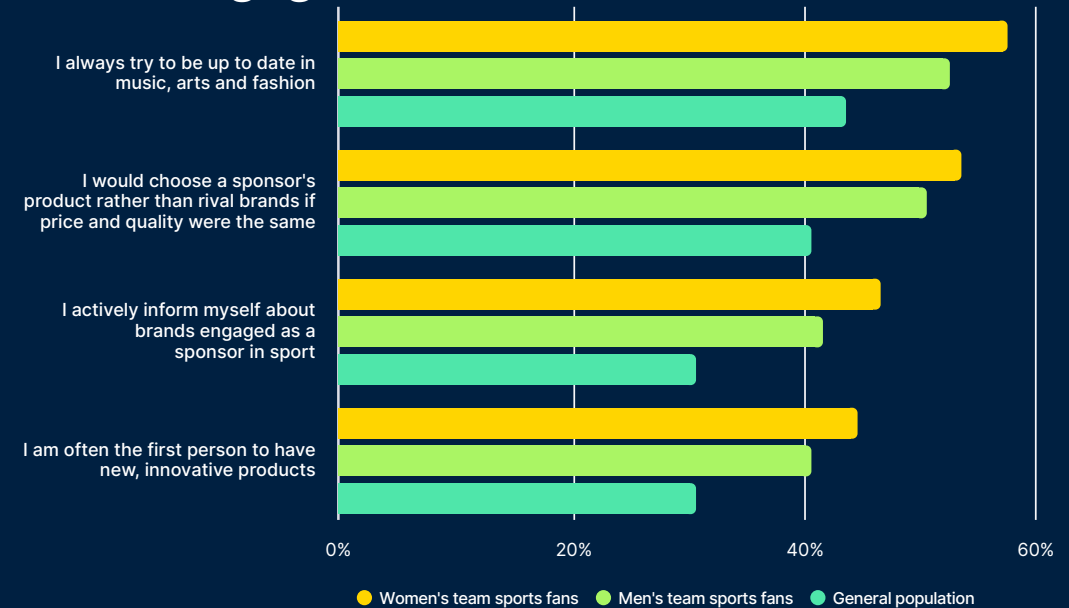
Fan of women's team sports show higher purchase intent



Q: Which of the following products / services do you plan to buy / use in the next year? (Within the next 6 months)
Countries: UK, India, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, USA, South Korea, Brazil. N1,000 general population per wave
Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Figure 2.4

Fans of women's team sports favor brand engagement



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Agree / Strongly Agree
Countries: UK, India, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, USA, South Korea, Brazil. N1,000 general population per wave
Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Game plan

Don't take a one-size-fits-all approach to reach the new fans of women's sports.



For brands

The new demographics who are flocking to women's sports are opening up opportunities for brands in industries that historically haven't invested heavily in sports.

- Experiment with different sponsorship models. The [Women's Super League \(WSL\)](#) and Women's Championship are currently seeking a principal sleeve sponsor for both football leagues in the U.K.
- Explore new types of partnerships. Manchester City Women recently announced a partnership with [snuggs](#) as the Club's Official Period Underwear Partner—a first in women's football.
- Support up-and-coming women's sports. In the U.S., [big brands](#) like Ally Financial and Sephora are partnering with Unrivaled Basketball League—new women's professional sports leagues founded within the last four years.

For rights holders

While women's sports are growing in popularity, access is critical for fans and brands alike to connect with women's sports content.

- Make it easier to be a fan through broad distribution and cross-promotions. At the start of the 2025-2026 season, [English Women's Championship](#) matches expanded access with streaming on YouTube in addition to coverage on broadcast.
- Focus on growing and amplifying women's sports stories that add genuine value to the fan experience.
- Leverage the ability of women's sports to connect brands directly with fans by seeking out partnerships with brands geared for female consumers.

Learn more about how Nielsen can help you tap into **the growing world of women's sports at the end of the report.**

3

**Media is growing
the game for new
formats and
global sports**

TV is finding new fans

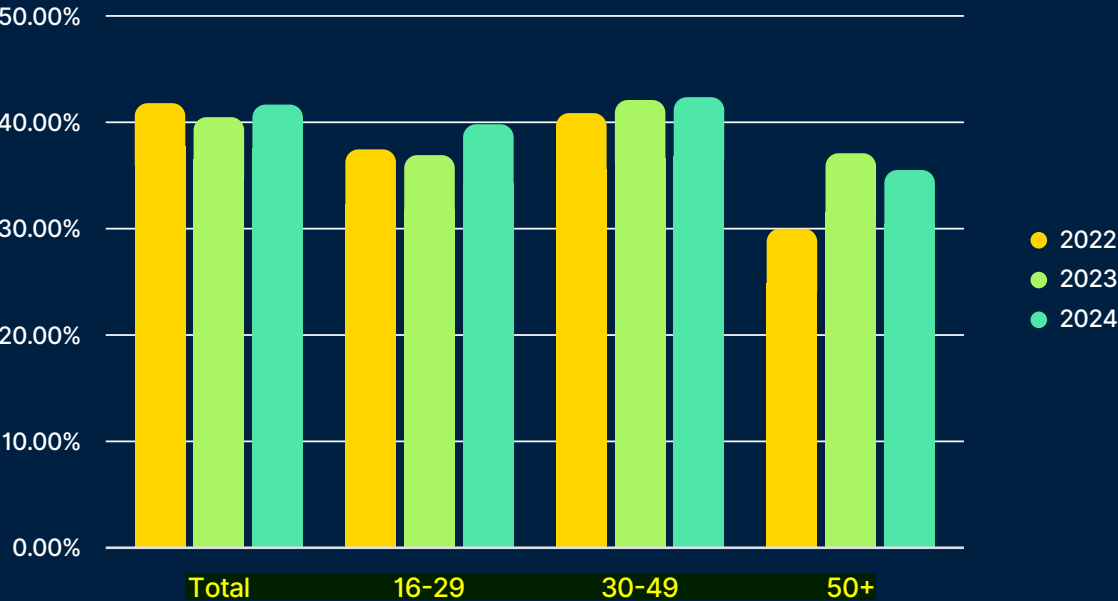
Live sports remain a powerful driver of fan engagement. Over the last year, we’ve seen media owners make big plays for **sports rights contracts**—on both streaming and linear platforms. For streamers, sports are unlocking new audiences. In fact, between 2022 and 2024, fans 50 and older who regularly use streaming to consume sports media have grown 21%.

For linear TV, new formats can open up new audiences. In the U.S., fans of **TGL**, a new interactive, tech-infused golf league, have grown 17% since just

the end of 2024. The sport’s first regular season averaged 513,000 viewers per match on **ESPN platforms**, more than college basketball during the same time slot the previous year. It’s no secret TGL is designed to attract a younger audience to grow the game of golf, and that’s exactly what it’s doing. Looking at TGL viewers ages 18-34, 32% are not regular PGA viewers—indicating that the sport is successfully attracting a new and younger audience.

Figure 3.1

Sports streaming is growing with all sports fans—including older fans

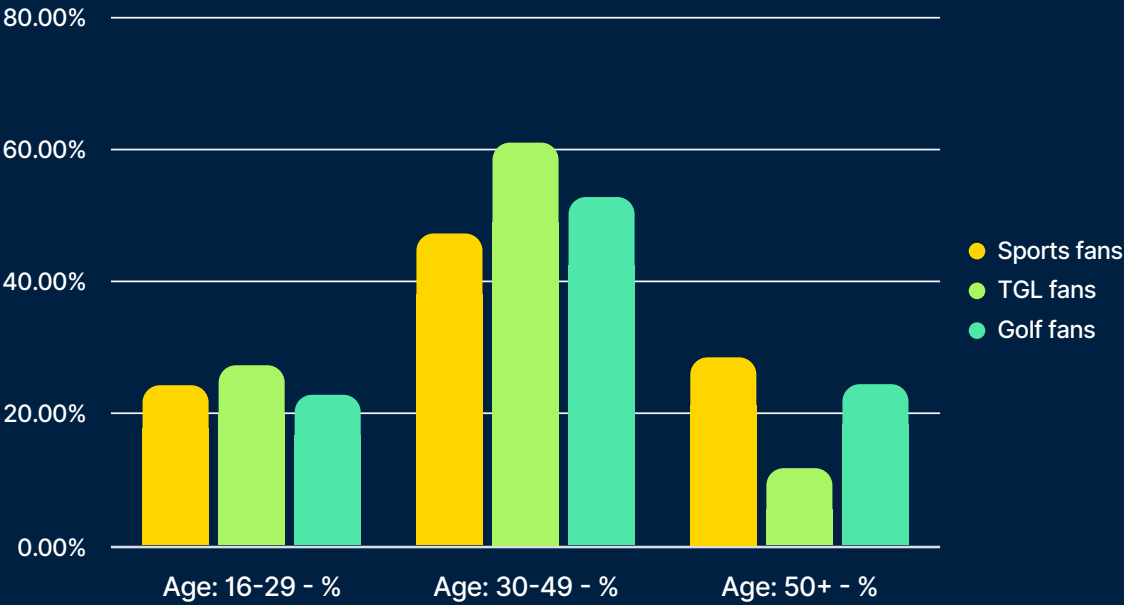


Countries: Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, U.K., U.S.
Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2022 - 2024, Sports –Athletics, MMA, Tennis, Golf, Football, Rugby Union, Cricket, Basketball

Figure 3.2

TGL is finding new fans for golf

U.S. only



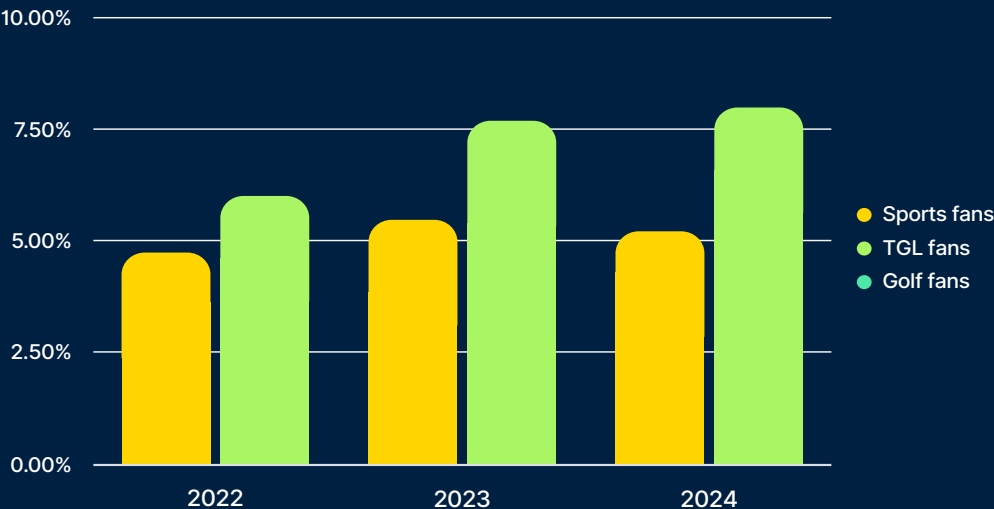
Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Social media is connecting fans and brands

Social media is helping to drive the globalization of sports. Take rugby. While the sport has strong fan bases in several countries, including New Zealand where it's the most popular sport and 42% of the population are fans, fandom in other countries is much smaller. In the U.S., only 14% of the population are fans of the game. But that's changing. During last year's **Olympics Games**, Ilona Maher made **headlines** for her impressive performance in Rugby Sevens, winning bronze for Team USA, as well as her social media presence. Within the first week since the Olympics opening ceremonies, Ilona grew her Instagram following by more than 141% (gaining 1.1 million followers).³ The sport as a whole is benefiting from increased exposure. Globally, women are starting to follow rugby at a faster rate than men.

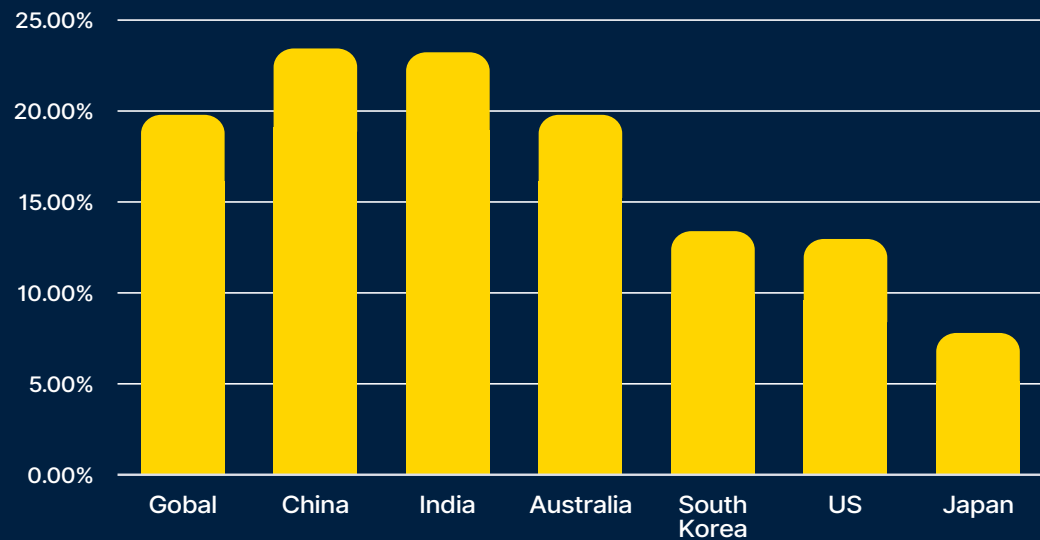
Social media and emerging sports can also be growth opportunities for brand sponsors. Long popular for casual play, pickleball—a paddle sport with aspects similar to tennis—has seen fans grow in several countries as professional leagues have developed over the last decade. Last year, Nature Made® tapped into the sport's growing fandom with a **social media campaign** for a pickle-flavored multivitamin on the heels of announcing its partnership with USA Pickleball™. Asking fans if they were #ProPickle or #NoPickle helped generate interest in the brand and the sport.

Figure 3.1
Female followers of women's rugby are growing faster than male followers



Q: Element of Sport followed by gender (currently gathering year and countries)
Countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, USA Source: Nielsen Fan Insights

Figure 3.2
Pickleball fandom is on the rise globally



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, 2024

Game plan

Unlock new audiences and consumers by investing early in new and expanding sports.



For brands

New formats and global sports can have small but passionate fans who are eager to support brands that invest.

- Develop a multi-platform strategy and tailor your messaging to resonate with fans wherever they watch.
- Consider partnering with young talent who have a natural connection to the brand. Such partnerships can raise an athlete's profile while deepening brand credibility and status among fans.

For rights holders

Sports fans are eager to follow the game. Consider how different teams, leagues and media can help you find new fans and audiences.

- Expand your understanding of who the fans are, why they love the sports and what kind of content they're looking for.
- Don't just invest at the professional level. For new and expanding sports, growing interest is important for building long-term fans of the sport.
- Embrace a test and learn mindset to identify what truly works for fans and channels.

Learn more about how Nielsen can help you navigate media fragmentation on the [next page](#).

How Nielsen can help

As a global leader in sponsorship analytics and fan intelligence, Nielsen can help you identify and connect with the audiences that matter most.

Discover key fan insights

Nielsen **Fan Insights** measures how fans are engaging with their favorite sports, giving teams and leagues more powerful insights into what fans expect and how brands can best allocate their sponsorship spend.

Drive sponsorship ROI

Nielsen's **sponsorship analytics** provide the insights you need to optimize sponsorship activation and drive ROI thanks to partnership performance measurement across the entire portfolio.

Unlock your true media value

Nielsen's **media valuation** data helps you optimize sports sponsorship by measuring the total value of brand exposures across channels. Know what's working, what's not and when to adjust.

[Contact us to learn more](#)



Conclusion

Ultimately, successfully connecting with today's sports fans requires more than just adapting to change. It's about crafting narratives that resonate across various touchpoints, leveraging data to create meaningful connections, and investing in long-term relationships. By embracing a test-and-learn mindset and prioritizing genuine engagement, you can navigate today's fragmented media landscape and capitalize on the massive potential within global sports.

We can equip you with the insights you need to understand the nuances of different fan demographics, develop adaptive and multi-platform approaches that cater to diverse audiences, and create effective engagement and sponsorship strategies.

To stay informed on the latest media trends and access a wealth of sports insights, check out the [insight page](#) on our website.

About Nielsen

Nielsen is a global leader in audience measurement, data and analytics. Through our understanding of people and their behaviors across all channels and platforms, we empower our clients with independent and actionable intelligence so they can connect and engage with their global audiences—now and into the future.

Learn more at www.nielsen.com and connect with us on social media ([X](#), [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)).

Audience Is Everything®