

Beyond the Game: How sports fandom became a year-round pursuit

Global research from The Trade Desk Intelligence uncovers the always-on nature of modern sports fandom and gives marketers a roadmap for reaching fans across every stage of it.



Key Takeaways

Understanding the sports life cycle 03

Fandom is no longer anchored around one live event. Marketers now have multiple opportunities to connect with these audiences, with 80% of global sports fans actively engaging across all stages of the sports life cycle.

Every moment of the sports life cycle is driven by a different mindset 04

More than 80% of sports fans say excitement is what drives their engagement. But sports fandom is shaped by more than the feel-good effects of the game.

Every stage of the sports life cycle has a channel 04

Connected TV (CTV) keeps fans close to the action, with 83% agreeing it is their go-to source. However, digital channel importance shifts depending on where fans are in the sports continuum.

Reach sports fans where the game takes them 05

2 in 3 global sports fans say they use an open internet source as a second screen while watching live games and matches, and they are 1.6 times more likely to engage these channels versus social channels.

Turn fan attention into lasting connections 06

With global fans following four sports on average per year, advertisers that meet fans across the full fan journey — by understanding the moments, mindsets, and media that drive influence — are best positioned to turn year-round fandom into year-round opportunity.

Reaching the always-on sports fan

There is no timeout in sports culture. A study of more than 3,500 sports fans across seven countries reveals that fandom has become a year-round pursuit. Fans follow four sports on average and they engage with sports content in a variety of different ways to keep up, according to new research from The Trade Desk Intelligence and PA Consulting. **Here's what marketers need to know about meeting these audiences across the full fan journey.**

FANDOM BY THE NUMBERS



4

sports on average are followed by fans throughout the year



82%

of sports fans say reliving winning moments drives their engagement



2 in 3

agree CTV heightens excitement and enjoyment of a sporting event



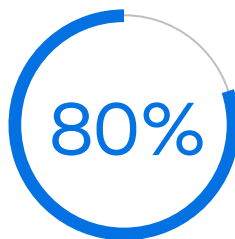
3 in 5

fans say sports make them feel like a part of something bigger

The season never really ends:

Understanding the sports life cycle

Fandom is no longer anchored around one live event. Today, the game is one chapter in a longer story. The research explores this shift through the lens of the sports life cycle: the anticipation created by the **buildup** before the game; the emotional live-action immersion **during** the game; the unpacking of the **postgame** analysis; the ongoing engagement and updates sought **between games**; and the continued buzz and connection happening in **the offseason**.

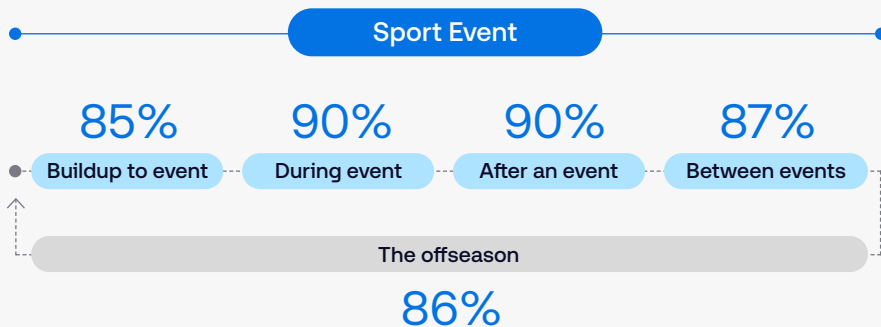


80% of global sports fans actively engage across all stages of the life cycle.

That sustained engagement creates continuous opportunity for marketers, and it makes media planning across the life cycle more important than simple reach.

Sports fandom is **always on**

There is no "offseason" when it comes to sports fandom.



Note: Numbers indicate the percentage of sports fans surveyed who actively engage during each stage of the sports life cycle.

Fans are **60%** more likely to use open internet sources vs. social media to engage content during the sports life cycle.

Every moment of the sports life cycle is driven by a different mindset

Excitement is the engine of sports fandom. Eighty-two percent of sports fans say excitement is what drives their engagement, but fandom is more layered than any single feeling. Five mindsets shape how fans engage content across the life cycle: **feel-good, immersion, curious, informed, and community**. Each one carries a different media need and a different opening for marketers to connect with relevance.

Every stage of the sports life cycle has a channel

Powered by mindsets, a sports fan's attention shifts across the sports life cycle, and the media channels that carry that attention shift too. CTV spans every stage, through buildup to offseason.

THE 5 SPORTS FANDOM MINDSETS



Feel-good

I want the **big emotional highs** — feel excited, relive great moments, and enjoy the pure thrill of the sport



Immersion

I want to be **absorbed in the moment**, to switch off and feel as close to the action as possible



Informed

I want to **stay up to date** and informed of the latest relevant developments



Curious

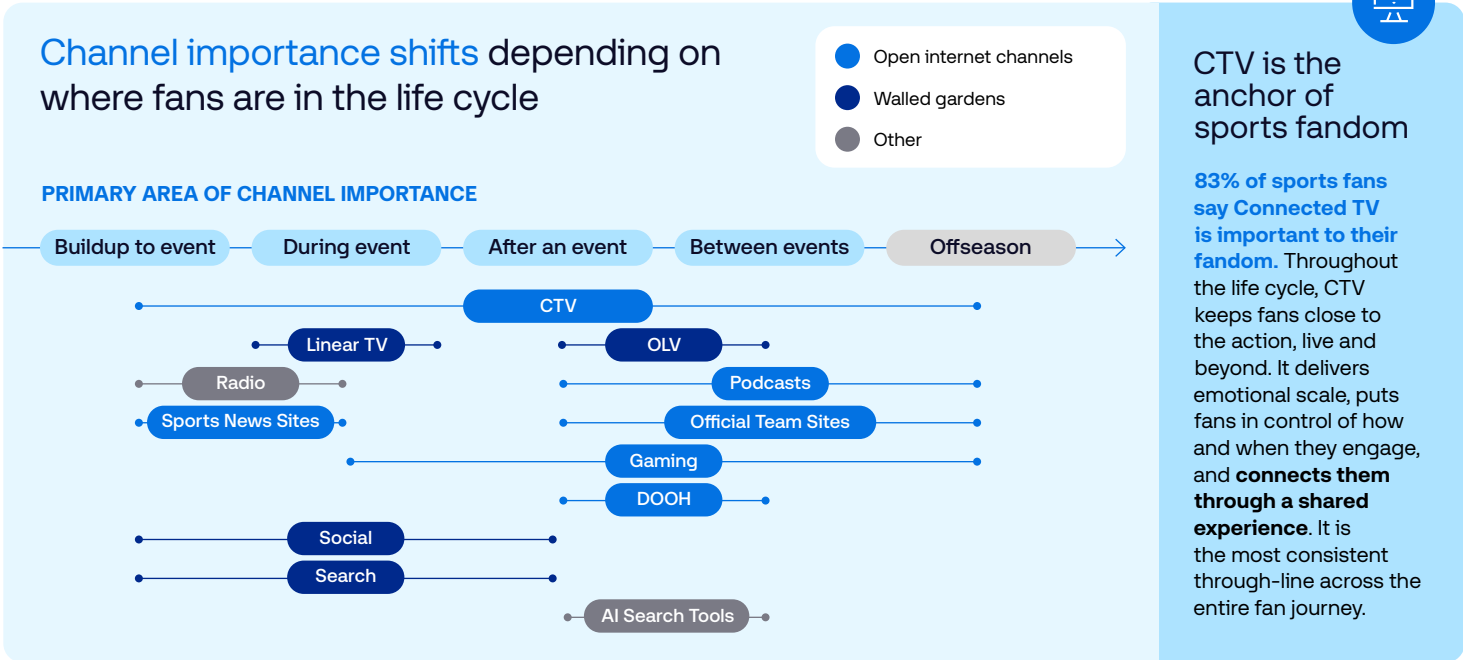
I want to **build my knowledge beyond the basics**, discover new information to feel more in the know than others



Community

I want to **feel part of a community**, connected to fans and athletes, and able to express my opinions

Podcasts and official team sites peak post-event, when fans are engrossed by the thrill of the game. The opportunity for marketers is in knowing which channels are the best fit for the moment.



Reach sports fans where the game takes them

Sports fans' engagement is driven by the moments and mindsets they are in. And digital channels across the open internet — CTV, digital audio, news sites, sports sites, and premium content platforms — are where fans spend most of their time. By connecting these channels via an [omnichannel strategy](#), and pairing media with the moments and mindsets driving their engagement, marketers are better positioned to help reach sports fans more relevantly.

The findings speak to the potential impact of an omnichannel approach: 80% of sports fans surveyed agree connected digital channels are essential to their fandom, while 64% say one touchpoint leads them to the next premium sports site. Plus, 65% of fans surveyed report a higher likelihood to engage further when connected channels are part of the mix because they all offer something different to the experience.



Engagement on connected channels prompts further action across other open sources — fueling a continuous cycle of fan engagement



87%

likely to engage with another connected channel after using one



64%

agree exploring sports content on CTV or podcasts prompts further engagement on quality sports websites



3 in 5

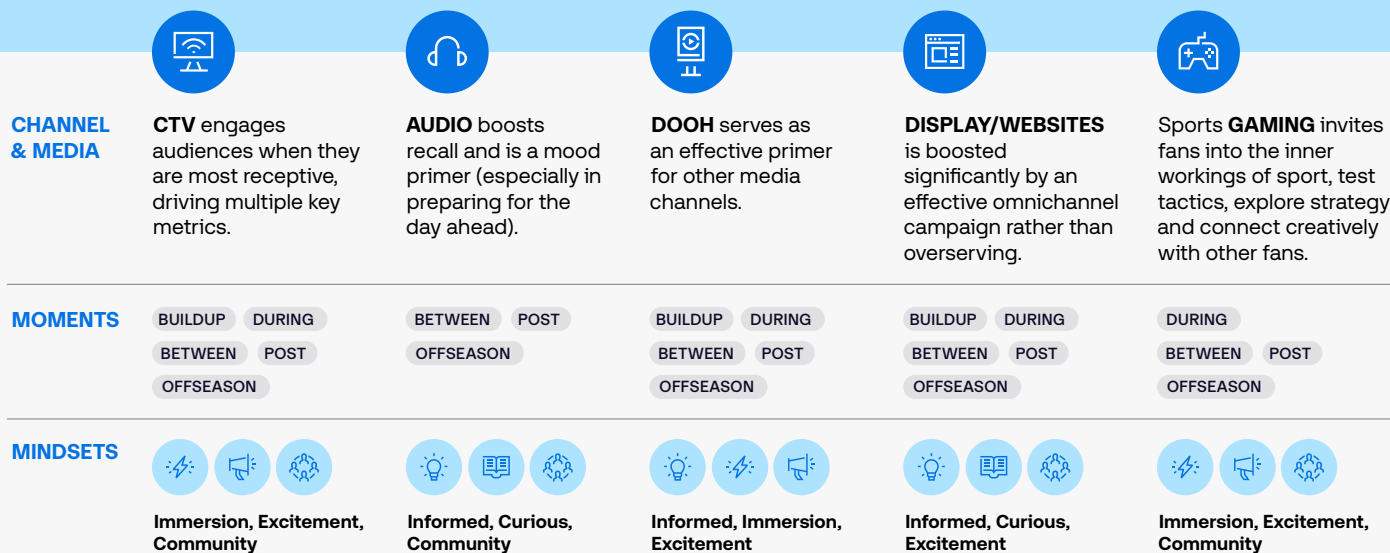
agree watching at home increases their desire to attend live or participate more

Turning fan attention into lasting connections

As sports audiences move across the digital landscape, omnichannel campaigns create value that extends beyond any single channel. Each interaction becomes an opportunity to reinforce the last, increasing engagement, participation, and emotional connection.

For advertisers, the result is a multiplier effect that turns year-round fandom into year-round opportunity.

How to map your media strategy to the moments and mindsets that drive fan engagement



Methodology

What we did

Quantitative:

We conducted an online survey among 3,550 sports fans across the U.S., U.K., Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Saudi Arabia to build a detailed picture of the importance and influence of various media channels across different stages of the sports fandom journey in 2026.

Qualitative:

We asked 35 people across the U.K. and Germany to keep a four-day diary, capturing in-the-moment interactions with live sports content on digital media channels. Understanding which channels are used before, during, and after sports events enables us to determine what emotional and rational benefits each channel provides for sports fans.

Unless otherwise specified, all results reflect the proprietary research conducted by The Trade Desk and PA Consulting. This information is provided solely for background and is not a representation or guarantee of any future performance.

Source: The Trade Desk Intelligence and PA Consulting, Sports Fandom Study, n=3,550, U.S., U.K., Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Saudi Arabia, 2026.



A media platform built for the open internet

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