WSC SPORTS

Engaging the Host Nations: A 2026 North American Soccer Study

Executive summary

To better understand fan behavior leading up to the 2026 World Cup, we surveyed over 1,500 sports fans about their viewing habits and expectations ahead of the world's biggest international tournament.

Canada, Mexico, and the United States share hosting duties, but each country's relationship with soccer, media, and fandom in general is entirely unique.

In the US, soccer is gaining popularity but is overshadowed by the four major US sports. In Canada, sports fandom is dominated by hockey. More recently, though, soccer has increased its popularity among a younger, more diverse population and recent national team success. In stark contrast, soccer in Mexico is a symbol of national pride, and deeply part of street culture, daily life, and family gatherings — even more so during the World Cup.

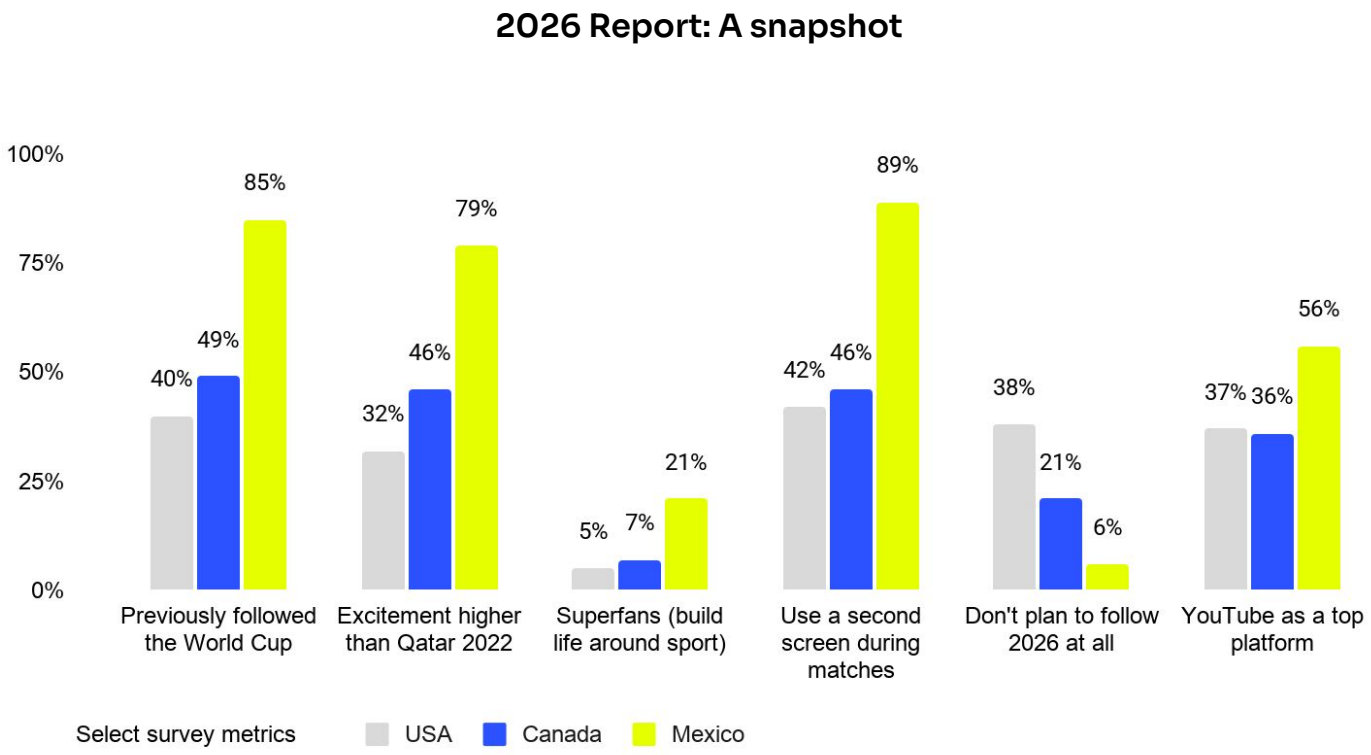
The survey data revealed deep divides in fandom intensity and consumption habits. For rights holders and brands looking to advertise during the tournament, success will depend on tailoring content and messaging to each audience. These findings can serve as a guideline.

Methodology

The survey was completed by 1,500 self-identifying sports fans — 500 fans from each of the three host nations: Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Participants completed an online, quantitative questionnaire about their sports fandom, viewing habits, content preferences, and expectations during the tournament.

A quick look at North America's three markets

As early assumptions point out, the three hosts are not one market. Mexico is hyper-engaged, mobile-first, and more active on social. The US is the largest monetary opportunity, but also the most disengaged — 38% don't plan to follow the tournament at all. Canada sits in the middle, with nearly half of the respondents previously following a World Cup.



Key takeaways

United States: The scale economy

The opportunity lies in the scale and spending power of the US market, but the key for rights holders and advertisers is younger audiences. A recent study of Gen Z sports fans , places soccer closely behind football and basketball as their most favorite sport. That growth is increasingly digital-first, with younger fans more likely to engage through highlights, creators, streaming, and social platforms rather than traditional broadcast alone.

Canada: The momentum market

Soccer fandom in Canada, compared to more established football markets, is highly event-driven, with many viewers engaging primarily around major national moments rather than year-round competition. For rights holders and advertisers, the opportunity is not simply reach, but habit-building: using the World Cup to turn occasional viewers into consistent fans through exciting storytelling, national narratives, and post-match digital content.

Mexico: The cultural powerhouse

Football in Mexico is already deeply embedded in culture, with fans engaging far beyond the live match itself. Unlike the US and Canada, the challenge is not building interest, but sustaining fans' attention across the entire tournament. The biggest opportunity is in real-time engagement: delivering instant highlights, new content formats, and socially-driven content that keeps fans connected before, during, and after matches.

Survey analysis

01 | The spectrum of fandom: Die-hards vs. event watchers

To successfully package and deliver content, rights holders and brands advertising with them should consider their audience. The host nations exist on completely different ends of the spectrum:

- **Enthusiasm highest in Mexico:** With over 84% of respondents planning to follow the tournament, content should focus on depth of storytelling to feed an already hungry audience with continuous coverage.

- **Big upside, less engagement:** 38% of Americans and 21% of Canadians say they're not planning to watch; but that doesn't mean they're entirely lost. Big plays, cultural content, and national storylines are potential narratives to bring them into the fan fold.

- **A new generation of fans?** Compared to Mexico, more fans in America and Canada say they will follow the World Cup for the first time in 2026. The data reinforces soccer's continued rise in popularity across both markets, while highlighting a major opportunity.

Pre-defining audiences can be a catalyst for enabling organizations to launch successful campaigns. Depending on data capturing capabilities, some potential audience segments could be: hardcore fans, stadium visitors, gamers, food delivery users, or bettors. Latter examples are not necessarily tied to football and can be a goldmine for advertisers looking to market their products during the games.

02 | The battle for the screen: Broadcast vs. streaming

Even the way fans plan on watching the World Cup depends largely on the country they're in — which should determine where rights holders and advertisers use their marketing and content spend.

- **Mexico more stream-friendly**: 43% of Mexican fans report they typically watch sports via paid streaming platforms, compared to 37% and 24% in the US and Canada.

- **Live TV remains most-popular:** 66-68% of fans in each country plan to tune into live broadcasts (the most popular choice) – a small downtick compared to our 2023 World Cup survey where 72% of all respondents said they typically watch live.

- **YouTube: Fans' "preferred" platform:** Following their exclusive deal during the last Women's World Cup, YouTube remains the most popular streaming platform, and exclusive FIFA partner — giving access to match previews, select matches, and extended content.

03 | Speed and social currency in the digital era

How fans interact with content outside the live 90 minutes highlights a massive gap in digital maturity and expectation. And once again, we see the results varying from country to country.

- **2nd screen fatigue:** 58% of US respondents and 44% of Canadians do not use a second screen while watching sports, while over 90% of Mexican respondents reported watching on multiple devices.

- **Mexico's social immersion:** 24% of Mexican fans discuss the game in group chats, and 38% share or rewatch clips on social media during matches.

- **The highlight economy:** Short-form highlights (under 3 minutes) are the most demanded non-live content in the US and Canada, while in Mexico extended highlights and full-replays are preferred.

For the Mexican audience, speed is everything. Rights holders must publish highlights instantly to capture engagement before independent creators beat them to it on social media. In the US and Canada, post-game recaps and easily digestible short-form content are key to keeping casual fans informed without demanding their immediate attention.

04 | The innovation appetite

Fans were asked which "next-generation" features would improve their 2026 viewing experience, revealing differing levels of readiness for interactive technology.

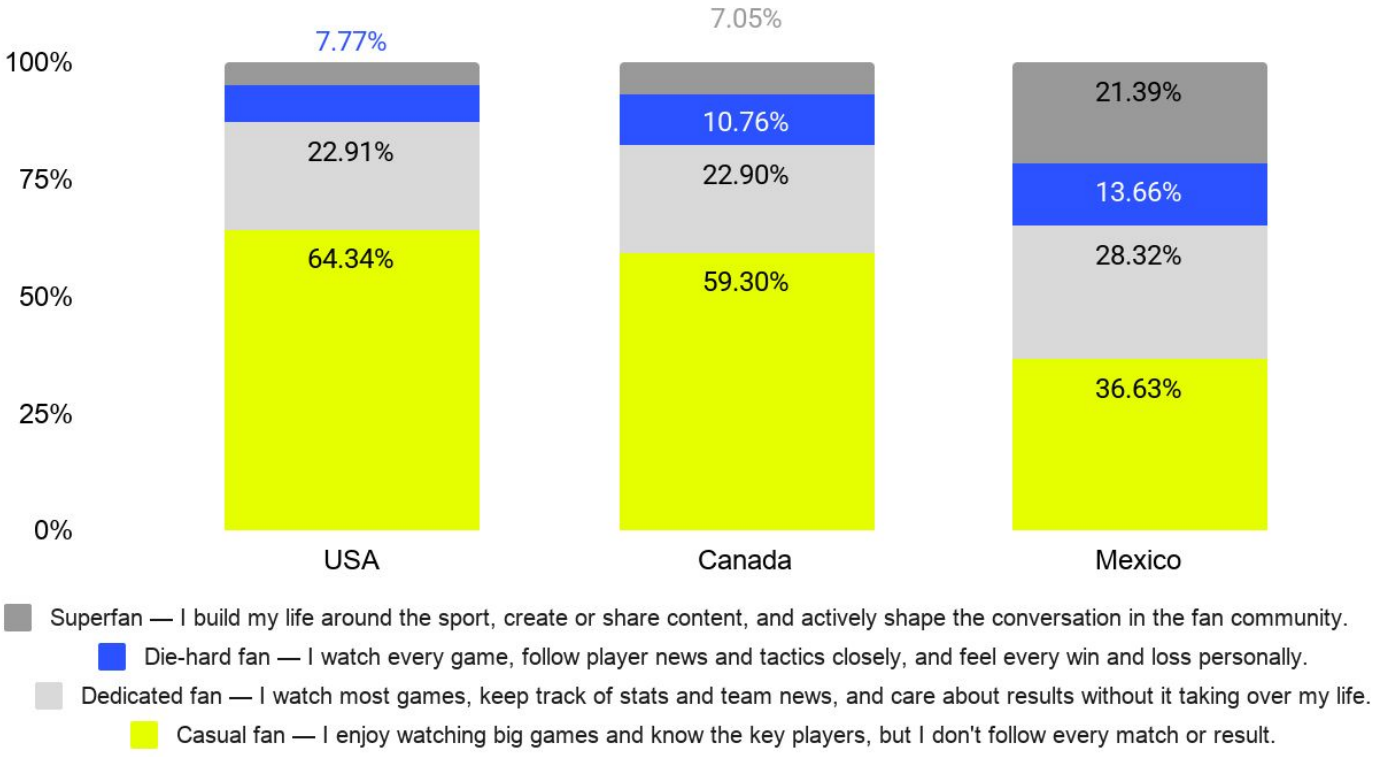
Potential features included: refcam, augmented reality, personalized highlights, multi-angle viewing experiences, and 3D replays.

- **Disinterest in the North:** 41% and 36%, of respondents in the US and Canada, respectively, stated "none of these" features would improve their experience.

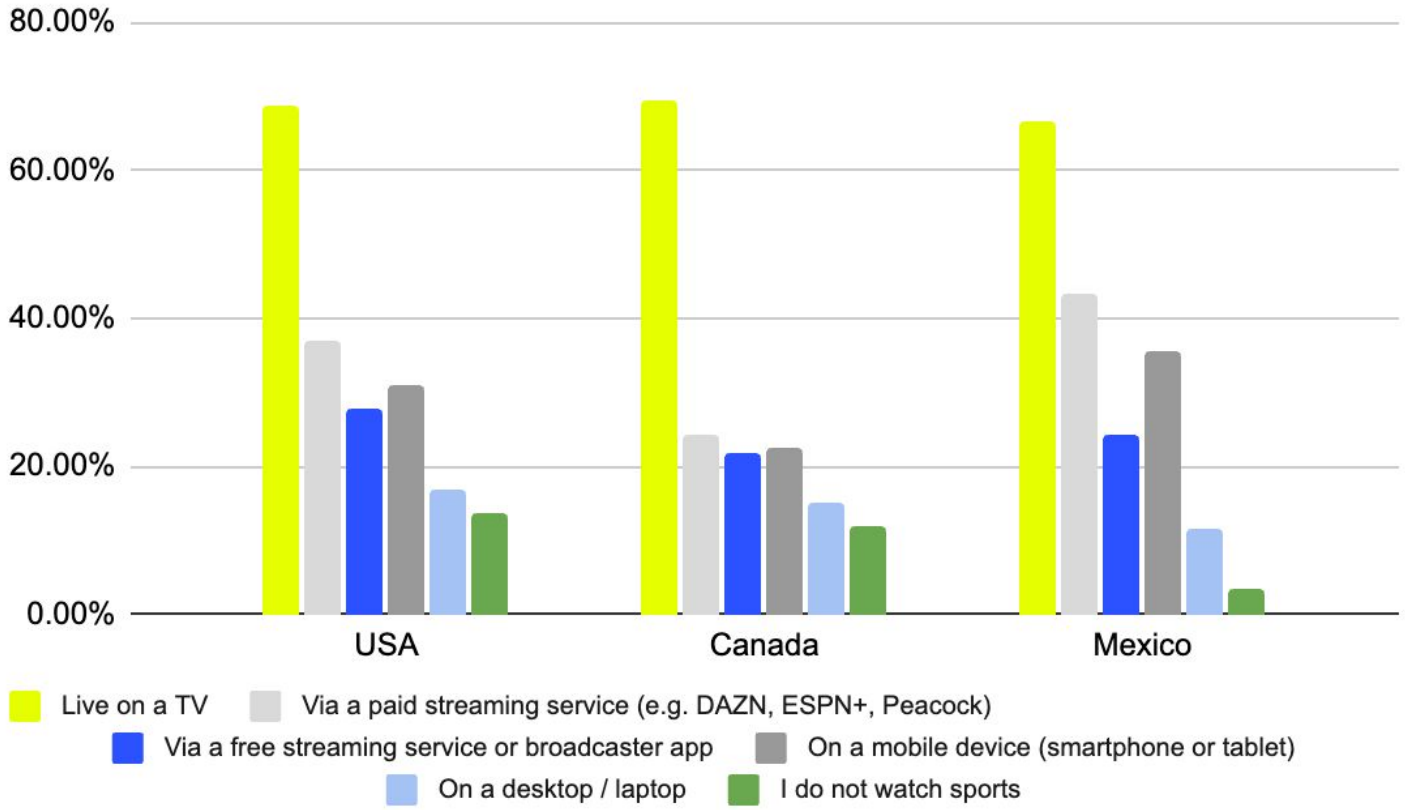
- **Demand for control in Mexico:** In general, Mexican fans expressed more openness to new ways to consume content; including augmented reality – where live player stats are overlaid onto the action. Less than 10% of fans in both the US and Canada showed interest in AR.

Appendix

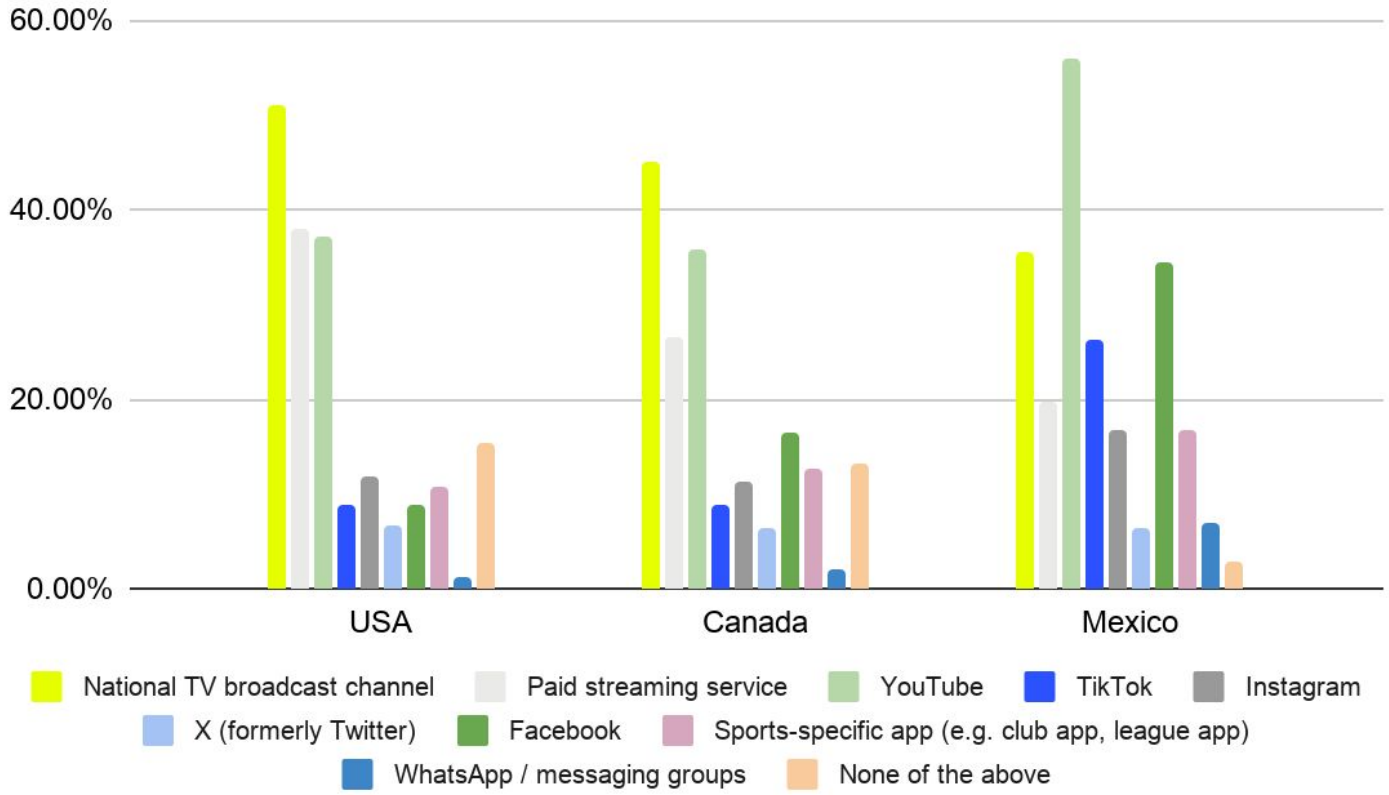
1. Which of the following best describes you as a sports fan? Select one option.



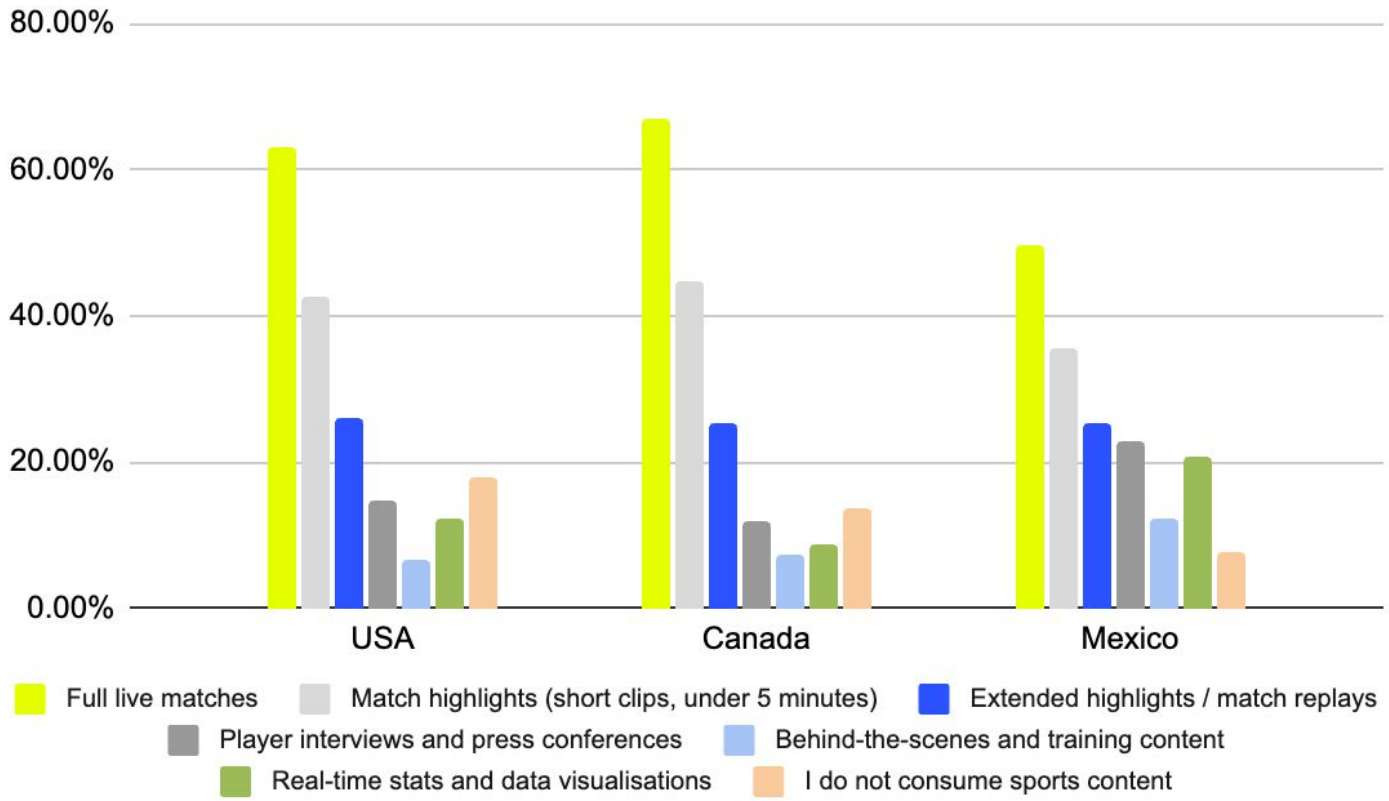
2. How do you typically watch live sports? Select all that apply.



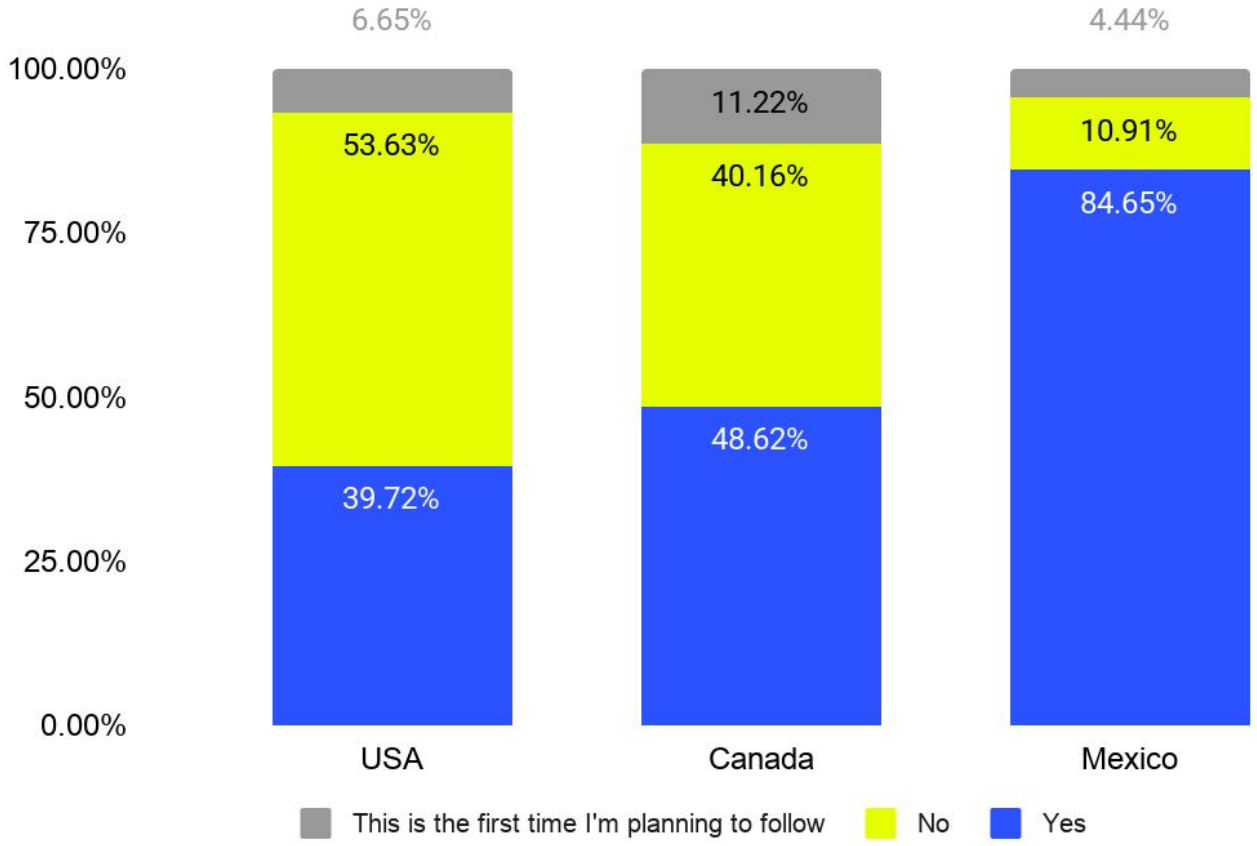
3. What platforms do you usually use to engage with sports content? Select up to three options.



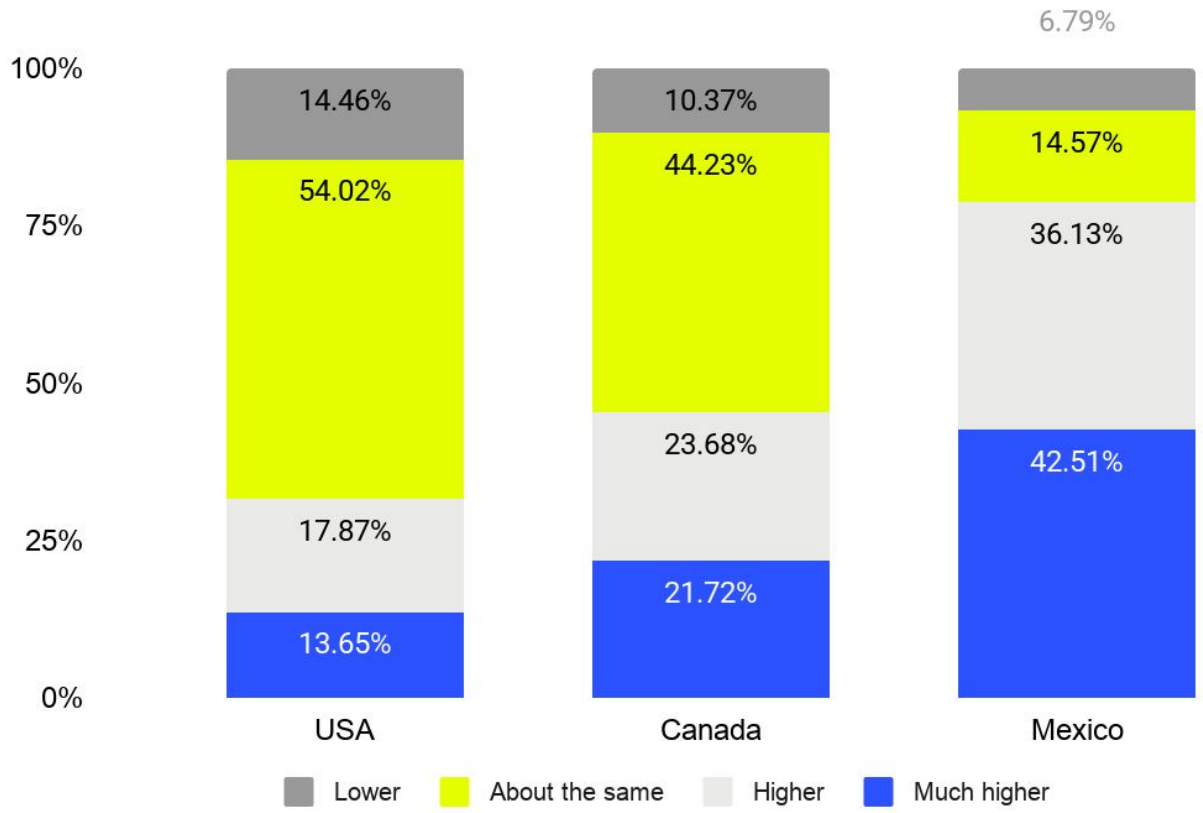
4. What type of sports content do you consume most? Select up to three options.



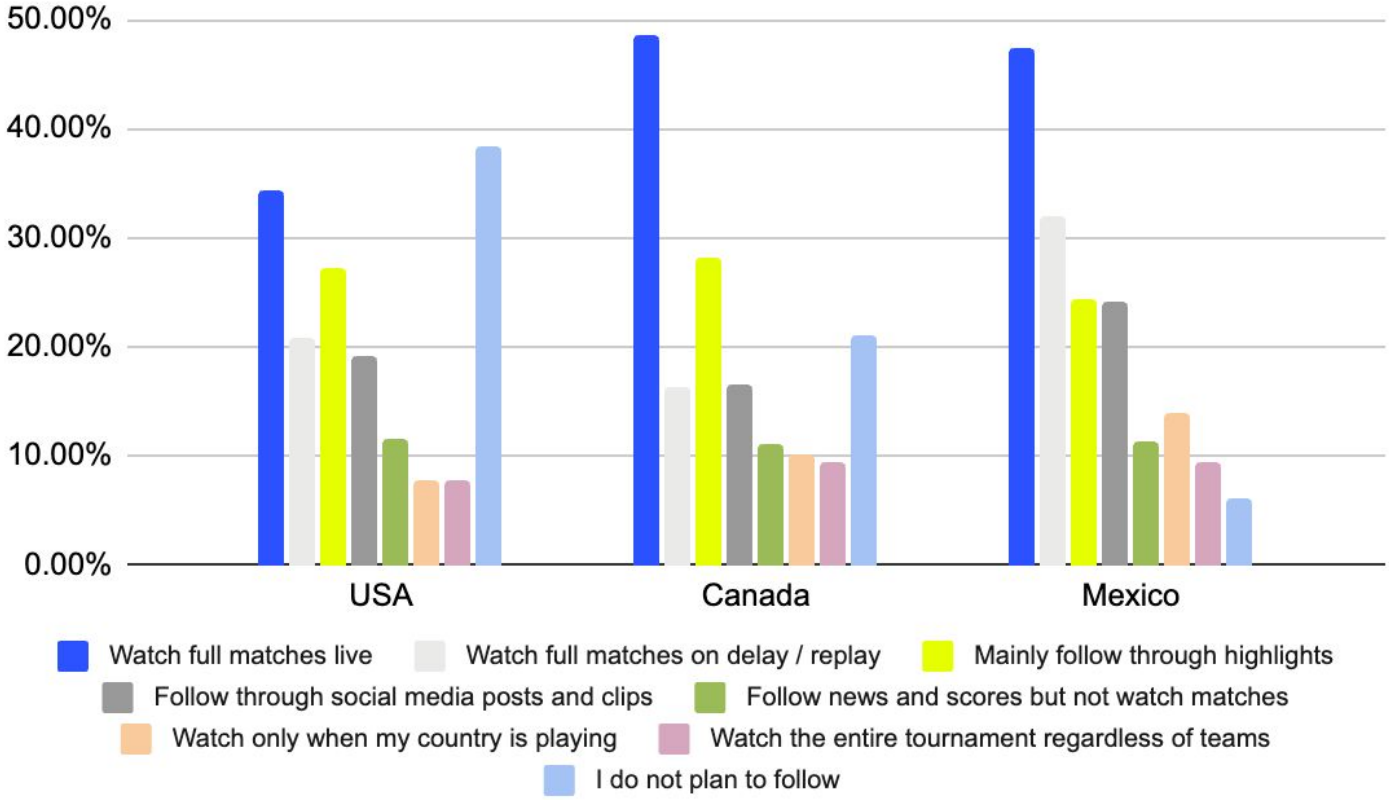
5. Do you normally follow the World Cup?



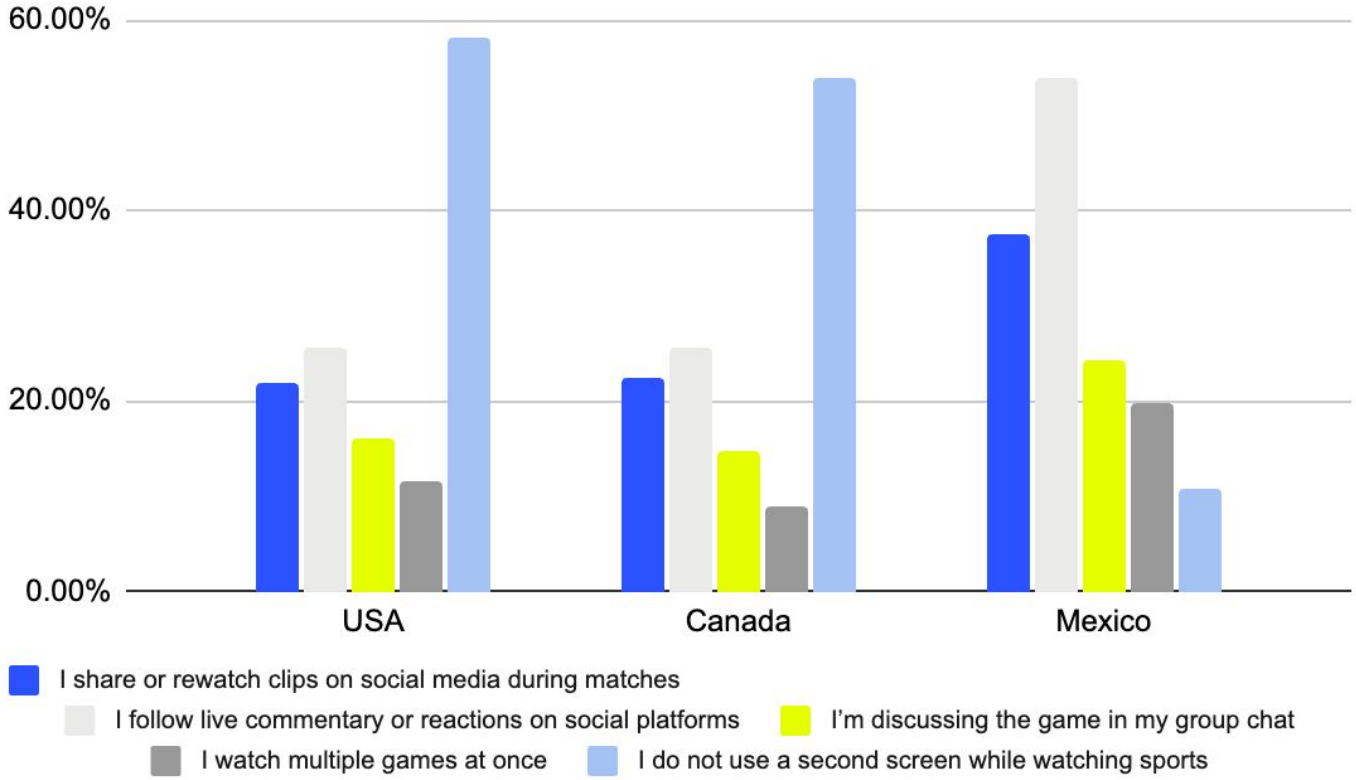
6. Compared to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, how would you describe your interest and excitement for the 2026 tournament?



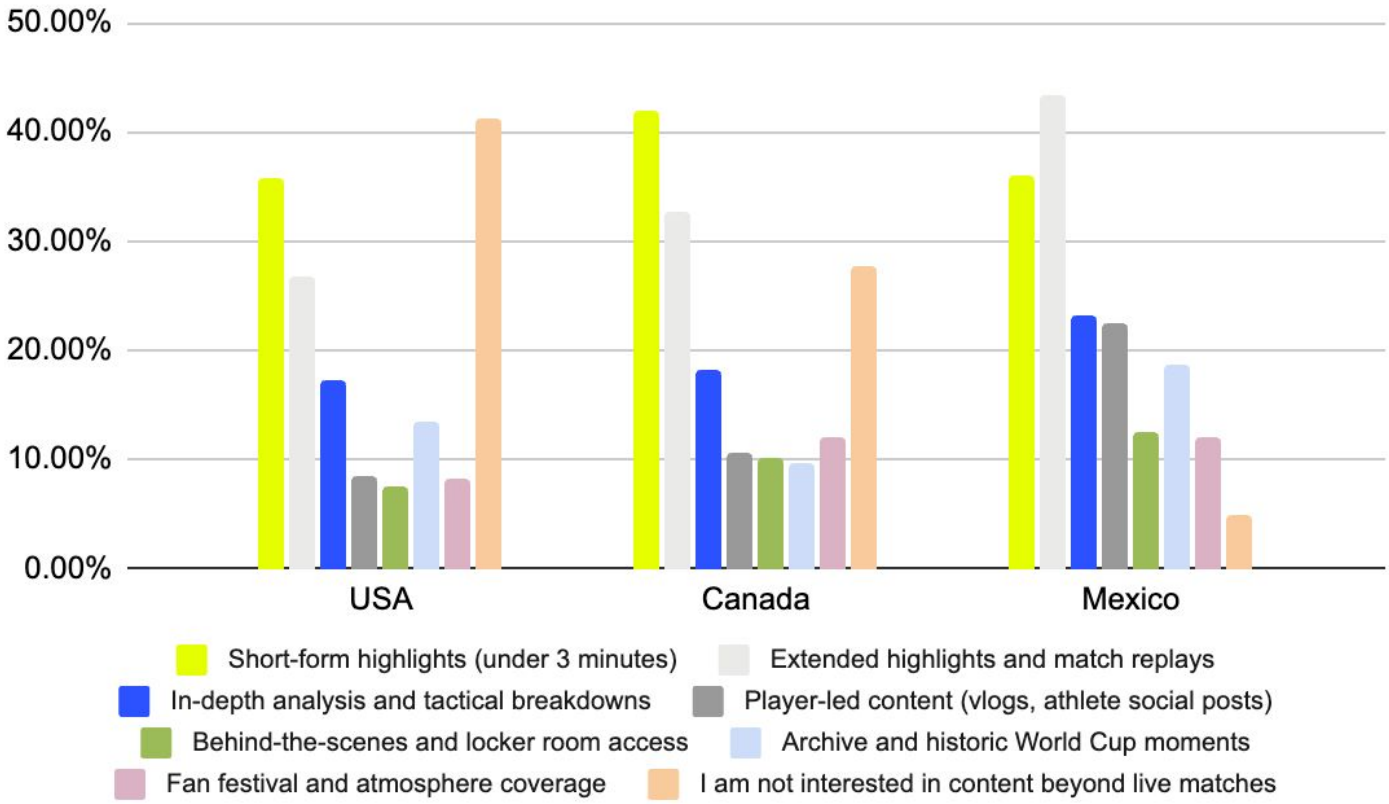
7. How do you expect to follow the 2026 World Cup? Select all that apply.



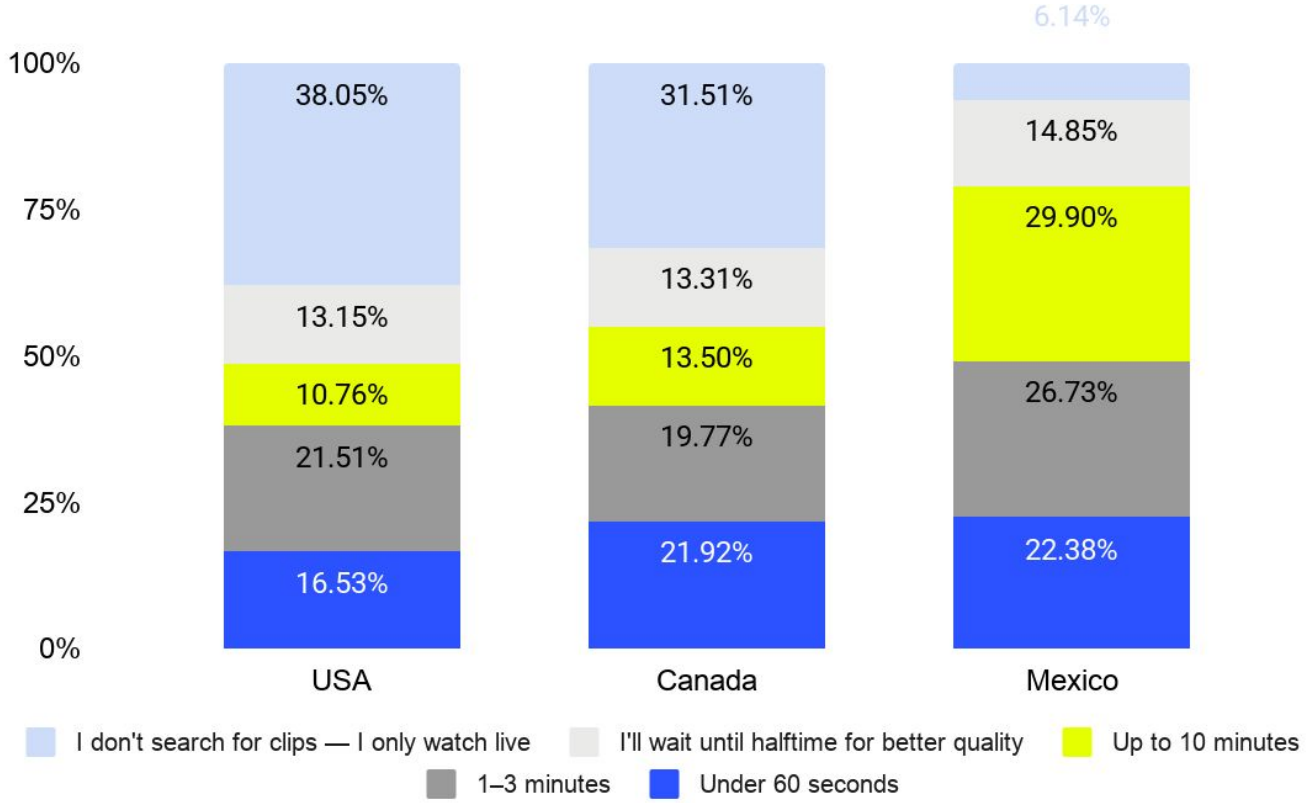
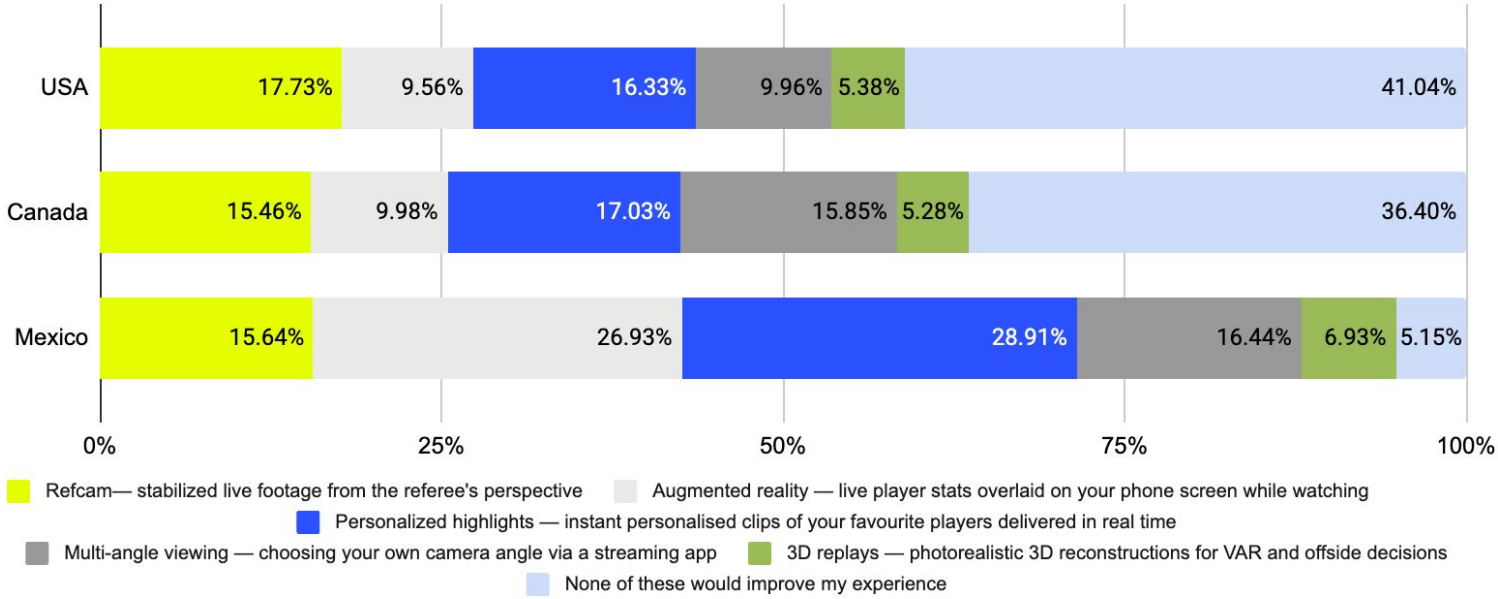
8. When watching a major tournament like the World Cup, which of the following best describes your second and third-screen behavior? Select all that apply.



9. Beyond the live 90 minutes, what World Cup content are you most interested in? Select up to three options.



10. When your favorite team or player scores a goal, how long are you willing to wait for a replay from an official channel (usually the broadcaster or the team) before searching for the clip posted by anyone on social media? Select one option.



11. Which "next-generation" feature will improve your 2026 World Cup viewing experience the most? Select one option.