

Cultural Breakthrough Index

Which brands broke through with consumers during the biggest cultural event of the year, and the strategic patterns behind why.

THE QUESTION

Presence is common. Breakthrough is rare.

Major cultural events create a crowded marketplace of official sponsors, opportunistic campaigns and fast reactive ideas. Visibility alone does not tell us which brands entered consumer memory, felt credible in the moment or inspired action.

The Cultural Breakthrough Index measures those outcomes. World Cup '26 is the first edition of a repeatable research platform that will examine major moments across sports, entertainment and culture.

81%

of respondents
recalled or recognized
at least one measured
brand.

The more
useful question
is what
converted
visibility into
meaning.

THE HEADLINE

Rights bought a head start. They did not guarantee the win.

01 NIKE WON WITHOUT RIGHTS

17% selected Nike as the overall winner. Its athlete, celebrity, product and entertainment platform also led cultural fit.

02 ADIDAS FELT NATIVE

Official match balls and national team kits embedded the brand in the competition. Adidas placed second on fit and overall winner.

03 McDONALD'S BUILT MEMORY

A meal, collectible cups and a recognizable story world tied Nike as the most memorable activation.

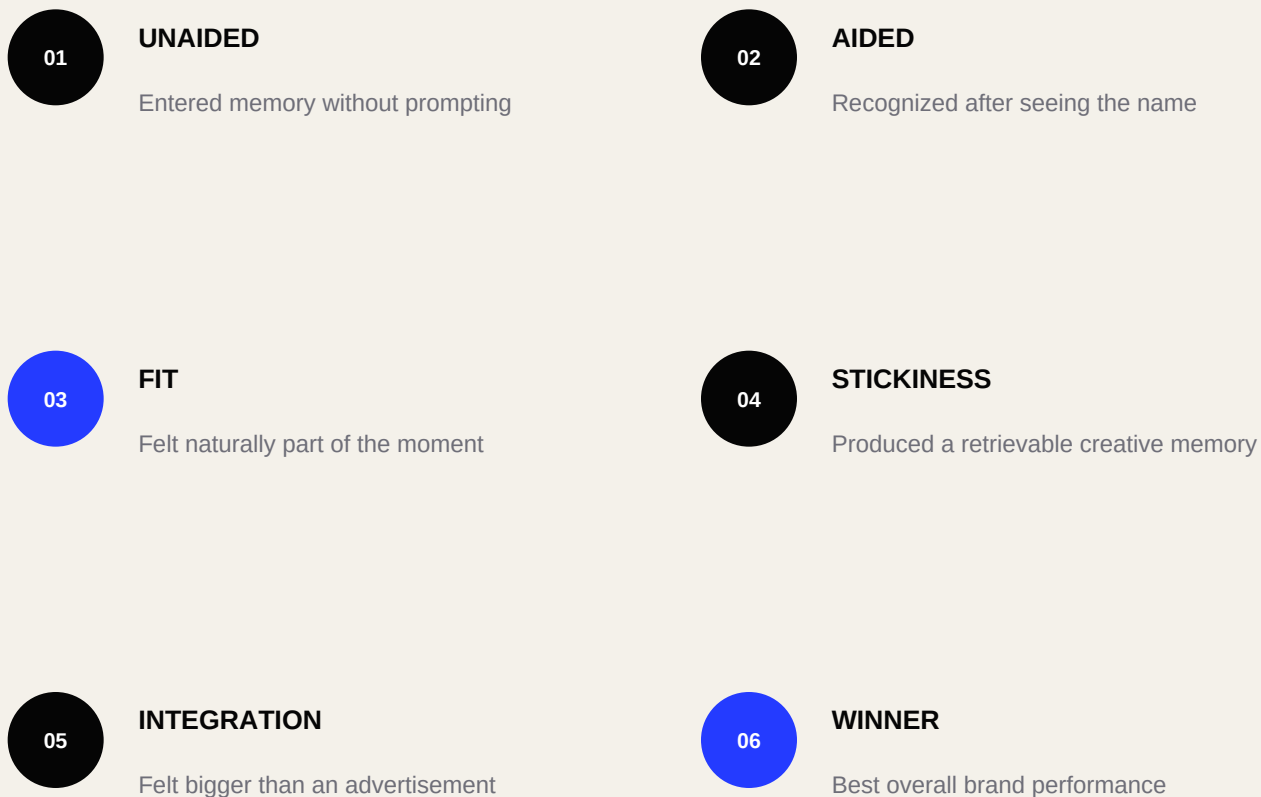
04 COCA-COLA OWNED VISIBILITY

Long association and scale produced the highest aided recognition at 61% and the highest unaided recall at 21.5%.

HOW TO READ THE INDEX

Six layers of cultural breakthrough

The study moves from basic awareness to a final judgment of which brand performed best overall.

**N=200**

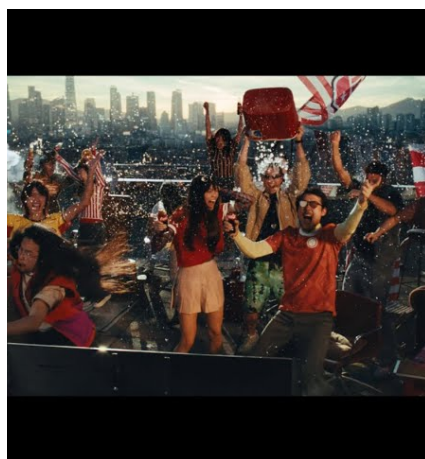
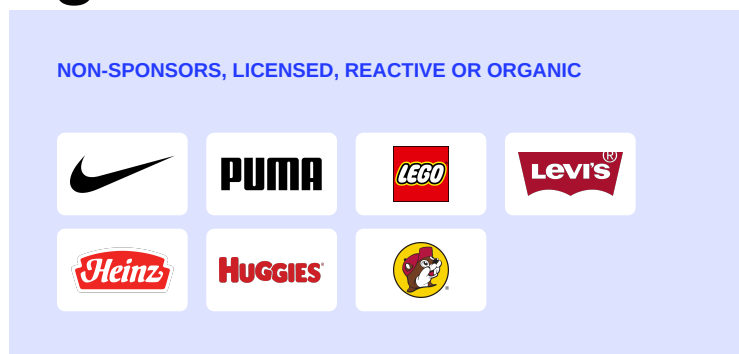
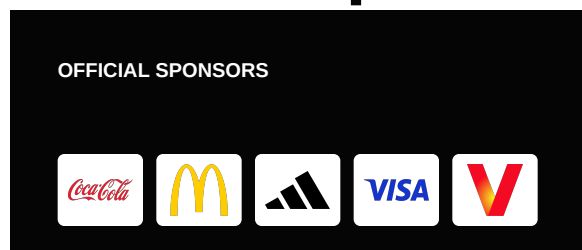
TOTAL U.S. SAMPLE

100 engaged or moderate fans
100 casual viewers or non-fans

English language, opt-in online panel. Findings are descriptive and directional.

12 BRANDS / DIFFERENT ROUTES

The field tested whether culture could outperform rights



SCALE

Coca-Cola built broad emotional visibility.



PRODUCT INTEGRATION

Adidas put the match ball and kits inside play.



CULTURAL UNIVERSE

Nike assembled talent, product and entertainment.

WHAT BROKE THROUGH

Four leaders. Four different systems.

17%**NIKE**

CULTURE SYSTEM

Talent and narrative created permission without official rights.

26.2%**ADIDAS**

PRODUCT SYSTEM

The ball and kits embedded the brand in the spectacle.

17.6%**MCDONALD'S**

MNEMONIC SYSTEM

The meal, cups and characters created retrievable cues.

61%**COCA-COLA**

SCALE SYSTEM

Reach and long association created the broadest recognition.

The strongest brands combined at least three jobs: visibility, permission, memory and participation.

AIDED RECOGNITION

A six-brand lead pack, then a steep long tail



Nike matched McDonald's on recognition without official sponsorship. Huggies generated strong marketing-industry conversation, but reached only 6.5% aided recognition in this sample.

RECOGNITION AND MEANING

Visibility and meaning were related, but not interchangeable

BRAND	AIDED	UNAIDED	FIT	MEMORY	BIGGER	WINNER
Coca-Cola	61	21.5	18.2	15	15	13
McDonald's	51.5	11	12.3	17.6	12.8	13.5
Nike	51	17.5	26.2	17.6	18.7	17
Visa	46.5	8	10.2	8	7.5	8
Adidas	44.5	16.5	21.4	11.2	15.5	16.5
Verizon	39	0	4.3	7	3.7	3
Puma	25.5	0	2.7	2.1	2.1	2
Levi's	15.5	0	1.6	2.1	2.1	1.5
LEGO	12	0	1.1	1.6	2.1	1.5
Heinz	11.5	0	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.5
Buc-ee's	8.5	0	0.5	0.5	1.1	1
Huggies	6.5	0	0	0	1.1	0.5

Blue values are 15% or higher. Fit, memory and bigger-than-an-ad figures reflect brand recognizers.

CULTURAL BREAKTHROUGH INDEX

THE NON-SPONSOR EXCEPTION

CASE STUDY / NIKE 09

Nike won on meaning

RIP THE SCRIPT

Nike built a distributed cultural universe around athletes, celebrities, product and entertainment. Consumers saw a coherent world, not a single reactive execution.

26.2%

CULTURAL FIT

18.7%

BIGGER THAN AN AD

17.6%

MOST MEMORABLE

17%

OVERALL WINNER

Strategic read: cultural permission can compensate for a rights disadvantage when the platform has scale, coherence and a credible role.

Adidas became part of play

The official match ball and national team kits made the brand materially present inside the competition. This gave Adidas an accepted role that advertising alone could not reproduce.

26.2%

CULTURAL FIT

21.4%

FIT AMONG RECOGNIZERS

16.5%

OVERALL WINNER

Strategic read: rights create the most value when the product or service becomes useful to the event itself.





MNEMONIC SYSTEM

McDonald's made fandom tangible

A World Cup Meal, collectible cups and a recognizable story gave consumers several ways to retrieve the campaign from memory. The brand tied Nike as the most memorable activation despite lower unaided recall.

17.6%

MOST MEMORABLE

13.5%

OVERALL WINNER

The lesson: a product, object or recurring character gives every channel the same memory structure to reinforce.

SCALE SYSTEM

Coca-Cola owned mental availability

Long association with soccer and a broad emotional platform produced the strongest spontaneous and prompted recognition. Scale did the visibility work, but Nike and Adidas converted less reach into more cultural meaning.

61%

AIDED RECOGNITION

21.5%

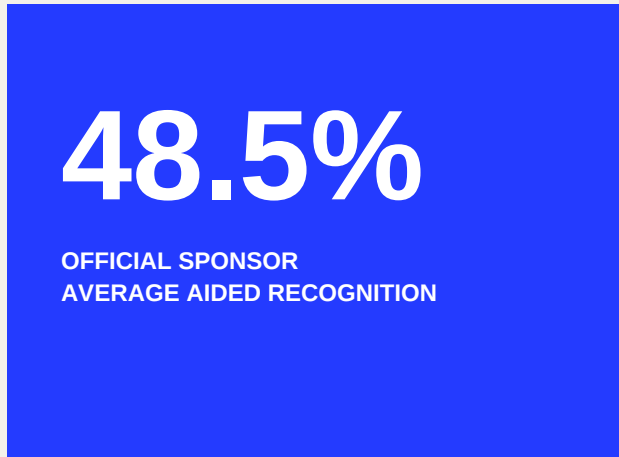
UNAIDED RECALL

Strategic read: long-term association compounds. It creates an advantage before the campaign begins.

RIGHTS AND CULTURE

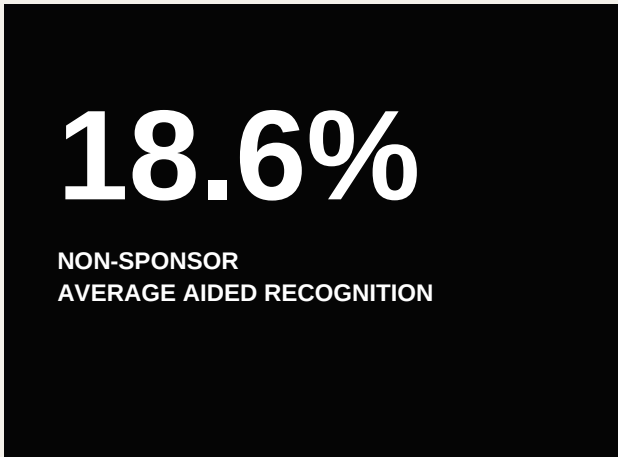
Rights increased the probability of being remembered

Official sponsors averaged more than twice the aided recognition of non-sponsors. Remove Nike from the non-sponsor set and the gap widens further.



48.5%

OFFICIAL SPONSOR
AVERAGE AIDED RECOGNITION



18.6%

NON-SPONSOR
AVERAGE AIDED RECOGNITION

13.3%

NON-SPONSOR AVERAGE WITHOUT NIKE

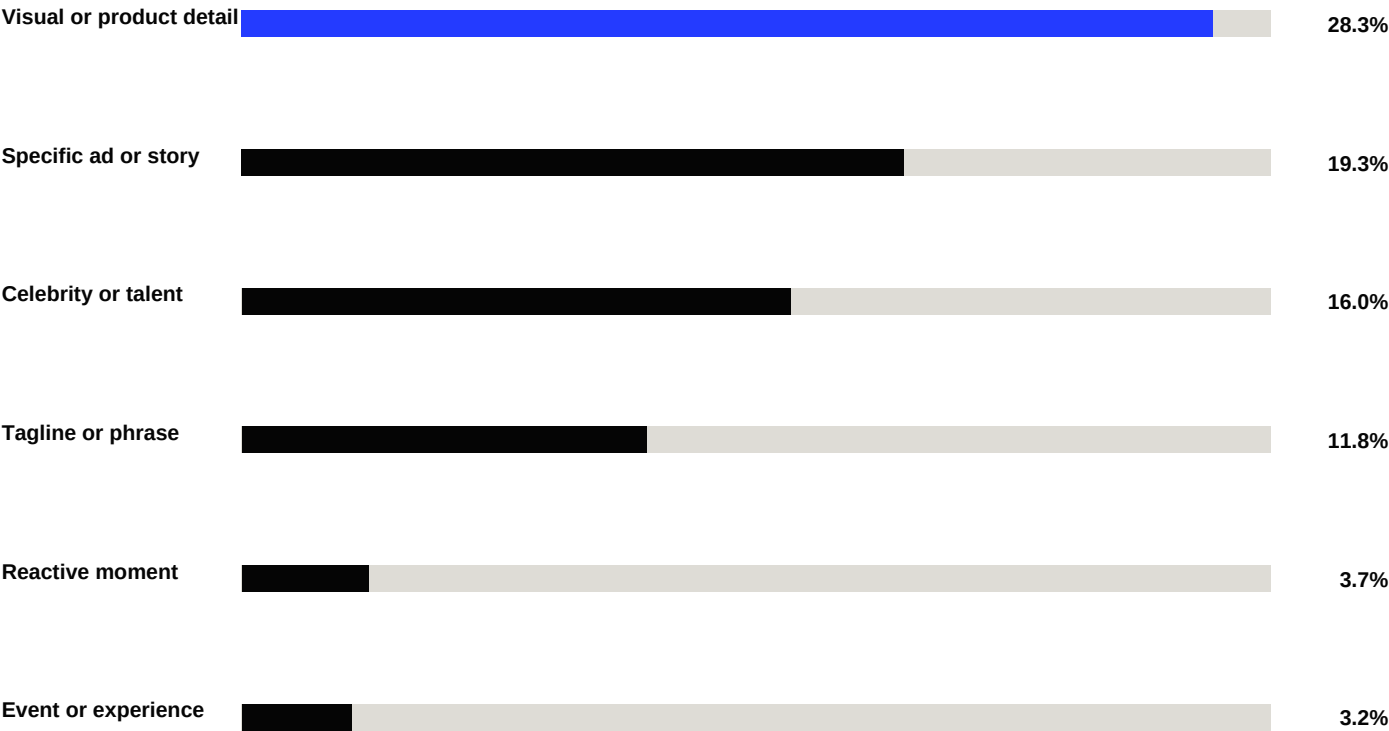
Official brands captured 66.3% of cultural fit selections, 58.8% of memorability selections and 55.1% of winner selections.

Rights functioned as an accelerant. They supplied guaranteed visibility and credible touchpoints. Brands still needed a distinctive system to convert that advantage into memory and meaning.

WHAT PEOPLE REMEMBERED

Concrete assets carried the memory

When respondents described what they remembered, products, visuals and specific stories dominated. Generic relevance rarely supplied a retrievable cue.



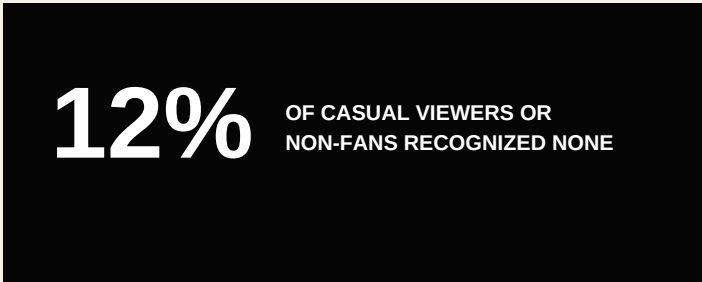
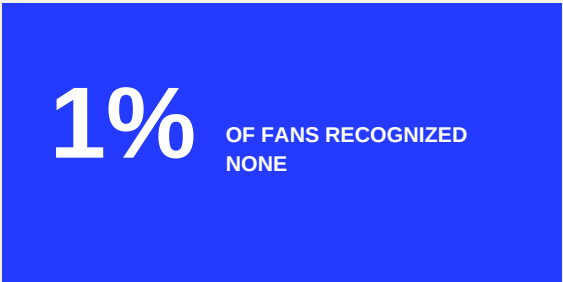
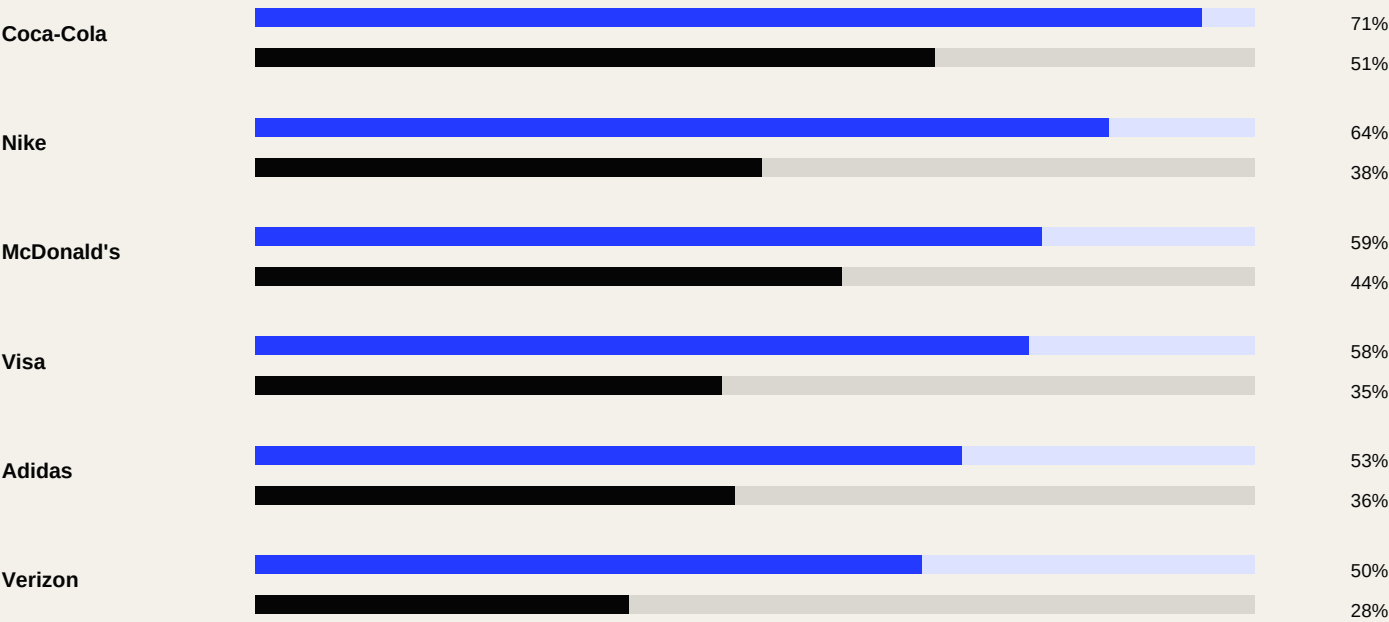
78.6%

named a concrete visual, story, person or phrase

FANDOM AS AN AMPLIFIER

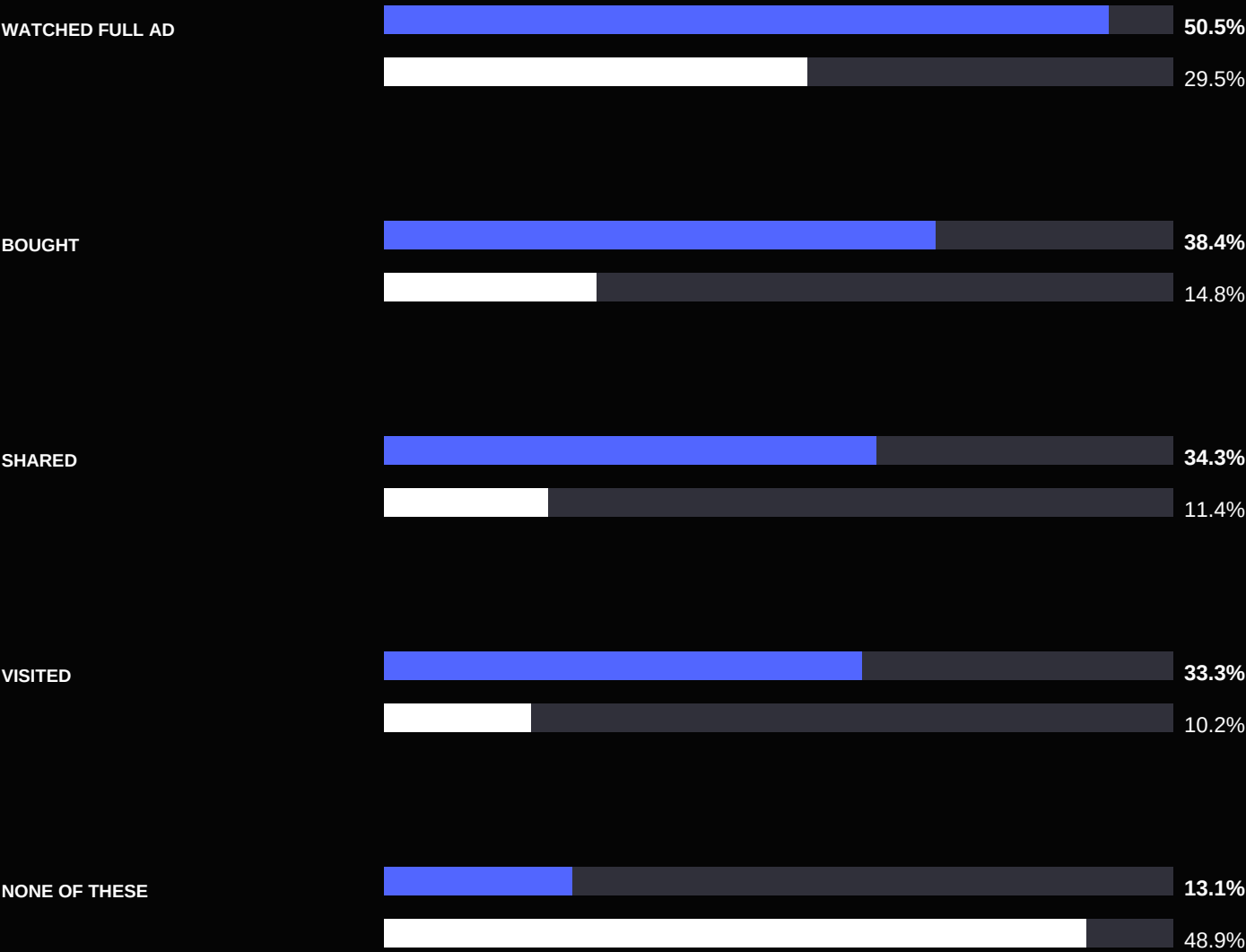
Fans were easier to reach, and far easier to move

The brand hierarchy remained broadly similar across groups. The size of the response changed sharply.



FROM MEMORY TO ACTION

Fandom created a compounding behavioral advantage



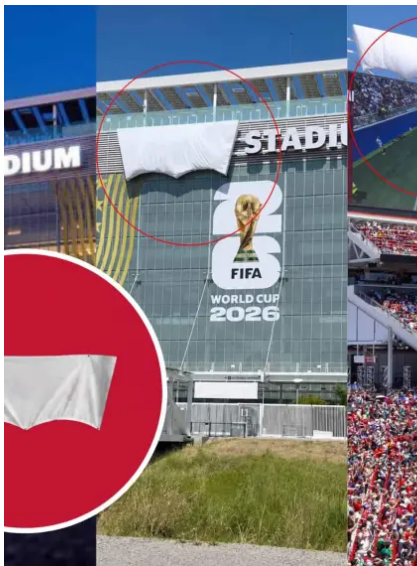
ENGAGED OR MODERATE FANS

CASUAL VIEWERS OR NON-FANS

THE ATTENTION GAP

Industry acclaim did not guarantee consumer memory

Huggies, Heinz and Levi's produced timely ideas that attracted marketing-industry attention. Broad consumer penetration remained modest in this directional sample.



Levi's

15.5%

AIDED RECOGNITION



Heinz

11.5%

AIDED RECOGNITION



Huggies

6.5%

AIDED RECOGNITION

A fast cultural response still needs distribution, repetition and a memory structure. Earned-media velocity and broad consumer breakthrough measure different outcomes.

OWNABILITY AND REACH

Distinctive ideas still needed enough distribution to travel

15.5%**LEVI'S**

Constraint became a visible brand asset.

12%**LEGO**

Play and iconic talent created an ownable behavior.

11.5%**HEINZ**

Distinctive packaging carried the idea.

8.5%**BUC-EE'S**

Host culture created organic discovery.

6.5%**HUGGIES**

Cultural fluency earned trade attention.

Cultural relevance does not remove the need to build memory. Brands must give the idea enough time and exposure to become retrievable.

THE BREAKTHROUGH MODEL

Five principles for the next cultural moment

01**BUILD A ROLE**

Define why the brand belongs before choosing the channel.

02**ENCODE THE IDEA**

Use a product, visual, person, story or phrase people can retrieve.

03**DESIGN A SYSTEM**

Connect paid, earned, social, product and experience around one memory structure.

04**PLAN FOR CASUALS**

Make the idea clear beyond the event's most engaged audience.

05**SEPARATE BUZZ FROM SCALE**

Track marketing conversation and consumer penetration independently.

Visibility opens the door. Permission, memory and participation determine whether the brand becomes part of the moment.

ABOUT THE STUDY

A directional read for sharper marketing decisions

Signal & Story Collective designed the Cultural Breakthrough Index to examine brand performance after major cultural events. Goody Nation supported the quantitative research. The World Cup '26 study used an English-language, opt-in U.S. panel of 200 respondents who followed the tournament in some way.

WHAT THE DATA CAN SUPPORT

Relative recall and selection patterns across measured brands. Directional comparisons between fan groups. Hypotheses about how activation design relates to memory.

WHAT IT CANNOT PROVE

Causal channel effectiveness, media return or population incidence across the full U.S. market. Small differences and subgroup results require caution.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Pollfish raw survey data, n=200. Signal & Story manual coding of unaided and open-ended responses. Public campaign materials from Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Adidas, Visa, Verizon, Nike, Puma, LEGO, Levi's, Heinz, Huggies, Buc-ee's, Bank of America and Gatorade. Full source links and coding documentation available on request.

SIGNAL & STORY COLLECTIVE

Planning for the next major cultural moment?

We help brands turn audience signals into integrated cultural programs with a clear role, a memorable idea and an accountable path to market.

[SIGNALANDSTORYCOLLECTIVE.COM](https://signalandstorycollective.com)

FOR EDITORS

Key findings, at a glance

Press-ready statistics and story angles from Edition 01. Full data, respondent bases and methodology appear in the preceding pages.

17%

Nike's overall winner share, the highest of all 12 measured brands, despite having no official World Cup rights.

6.5%

Aided recognition for Huggies, one of the most-discussed reactive ideas in marketing circles.

81% / 27.3%

81% recalled or recognized brand activity. Among brand recognizers, 27.3% reported buying.

17.6% vs 7%

Memorability for McDonald's versus Verizon. Both used celebrity and official rights, but consumers responded differently.

"Sponsorship secures a seat at the table. It does not secure top-of-mind status."

SIGNAL & STORY COLLECTIVE, CULTURAL BREAKTHROUGH INDEX, EDITION 01

STORY ANGLES

- 01** How a non-sponsor outperformed every official partner on cultural meaning.
- 02** Why a reactive campaign celebrated by marketers barely registered with consumers.
- 03** The gap between being seen and being bought, and the activation choices that can close it.

For interviews, underlying data or the full 200-respondent dataset: clients@signalandstorycollective.com
Please credit "Signal & Story Collective, Cultural Breakthrough Index" on first reference.