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The 2026 FIFA World Cup: The Beautiful Game-Supersized

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The 2026 FIFA World Cup: The Beautiful Game-Supersized

The 2026 FIFA World Cup will be the largest ever, expanding to 48 teams, 104 matches, and three host countries, aiming to create an unprecedented global event.

Although FIFA's primary driver is revenue growth, with projections nearing \$11 billion, there are potentially large economic boosts for media, tourism, retail, and related industries, although rising costs risk limiting fan accessibility.

While the tournament will deliver massive global reach and commercial benefits, its long-term economic impact may be modest, leaving its true value in intangible gains like national pride, global visibility, and an incredible fan experience.

If the World Cup has always been football's grandest stage, then 2026 is shaping up to be its blockbuster reboot—bigger cast, longer runtime, and a budget that would make Hollywood jealous. With more teams, more matches, and more host cities than ever before, FIFA is turning its flagship tournament into a continental-scale spectacle that spans time zones, borders, and, quite possibly, fans' vacation budgets. It's a bold gamble: part sporting festival, part global business summit, and part endurance test for everyone involved. Whether it ultimately feels like a celebration of the beautiful game or an exercise in excess, one thing is clear—the 2026 World Cup will not just be watched; it will be experienced on a scale never seen before.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup is set to redefine the scale and scope of global sporting events, marking the most expansive edition in the tournament's history. Co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the competition will feature a newly expanded format of 48 teams and 104 matches, up from 32 teams and 64 matches in 2022, introducing a Round of 32 and extending the tournament by approximately one week. In total, the event will deliver roughly 156 hours of match play, underscoring FIFA's ambition to broaden global participation while maximizing commercial opportunities. While this expansion promises unprecedented reach and engagement, it also introduces logistical, financial, and geopolitical challenges that could shape the tournament's perception and influence future editions.

To no one's surprise, the central motivation behind the expansion is revenue generation. FIFA projects that total revenues from the 2026 World Cup could approach \$11 billion, a significant increase from the close to \$7.5 billion generated in 2022. This growth is expected to be driven by higher broadcasting rights fees, expanded sponsorship portfolios, and a dramatic increase in ticketing and hospitality income, which alone may contribute nearly \$3 billion. The anticipated attendance figures are equally striking:

between 6 million and 7.5 million fans are expected to attend matches, nearly doubling previous World Cup records. However, these financial gains come with mounting criticism. Ticket prices have risen sharply, raising concerns that the 2026 tournament may become the least affordable in history, reinforcing perceptions that commercial priorities are overshadowing accessibility for everyday fans. Last we checked, tickets in Miami were going from anywhere between \$700 and \$2,000 per seat, depending on the match.

Logistical complexity is another defining feature of the 2026 tournament. Matches will be played across 16 venues distributed throughout North America, making it the most geographically dispersed World Cup ever. Teams will face significant travel demands, often covering hundreds, if not thousands, of miles between matches in a compressed timeframe. This raises concerns about competitive balance, as teams with less favorable travel schedules may be at a disadvantage. Despite these challenges, the overall quality of play is expected to remain high. The globalization of soccer talent has

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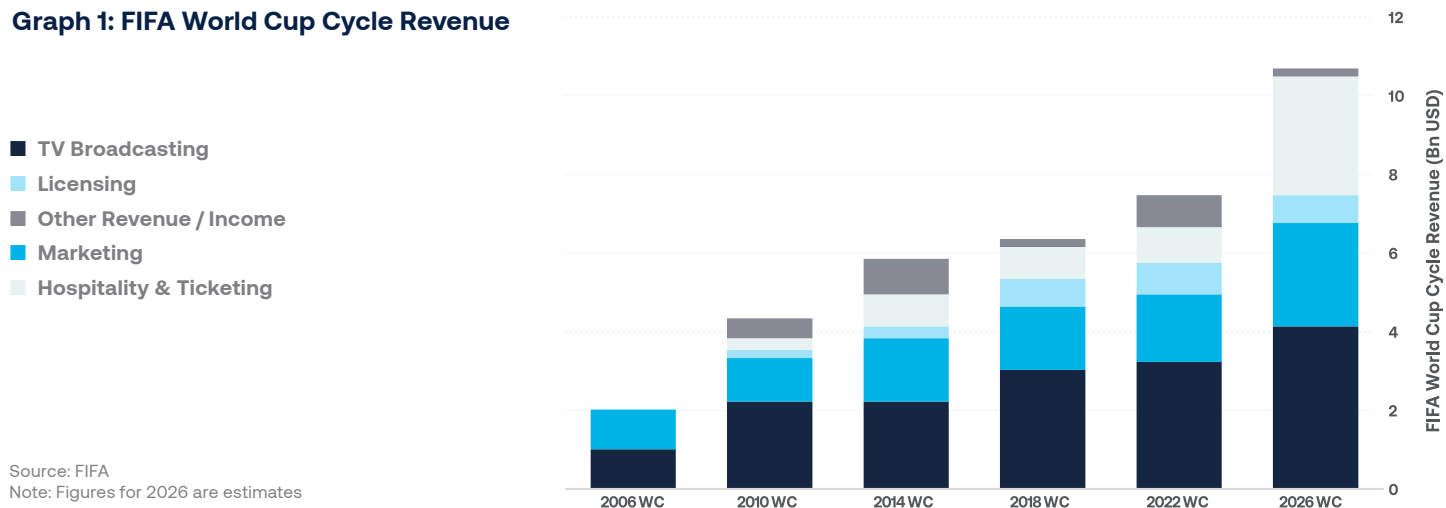
strengthened national teams worldwide, and the expanded format allows more countries to participate without significantly diluting the level of competition. As a result, the tournament is still likely to deliver compelling matches and maintain its global appeal.

The World Cup’s influence extends far beyond the pitch. It is the largest sporting event in the world in terms of reach and viewership, surpassing the Olympics, Super Bowl, and Cricket World Cup. Approximately 5 billion people watched at least part of the 2022 tournament, and the 2026 edition is expected to exceed that figure due to its expanded format and broader geographic footprint. This growth reflects not only the sport’s rising popularity but also its increasing penetration in key markets such as the United States, where interest in soccer continues to accelerate.

From a commercial standpoint, the World Cup serves as a powerful economic catalyst across multiple industries, as seen in Graph 1. Media and broadcasting are among the primary beneficiaries. In the United States alone, Fox is projected to generate approximately \$550 million in advertising revenue from the tournament, while Comcast is expected to earn about \$200 million, with an additional \$72 million from its streaming platform Peacock. Digital platforms are also poised for substantial gains. Companies like Roku anticipate up to 25% growth in platform revenues, driven by increased advertising and subscription activity. Meanwhile, global technology firms such as Google and Meta are likely to experience spikes in engagement, mirroring the record-breaking digital traffic observed during the 2022 World Cup.

The hospitality, travel, and tourism sectors are also expected to see pronounced gains as millions of fans travel across North America. Airbnb has already reported an 80% surge in searches for accommodations in host cities and is offering incentives of up to \$750 to attract new hosts, signaling anticipated capacity shortages.

Graph 1: FIFA World Cup Cycle Revenue



Local economic impacts are substantial. Dallas alone projects between \$1.5 billion and \$2.1 billion in economic activity from hosting matches. Mexico, one of the co-hosts, is expected to attract approximately 836,000 tourists and generate \$2.7 billion in economic output, alongside creating more than 112,000 temporary jobs. Hotels, airlines, restaurants, and related services will all benefit from heightened demand, while employment levels in these sectors are likely to rise in the short term.

Consumer goods companies, particularly in food and beverages, are also positioned for strong performance. Increased viewing activity typically drives higher consumption of snacks and drinks, benefiting firms such as AB InBev, Molson Coors, and Constellation Brands. AB InBev’s longstanding FIFA sponsorship provides additional exposure advantages. Global brands like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Mondelez, and Hershey are leveraging the tournament through targeted marketing campaigns and product launches. Food distributors such as Sysco and US Foods are expected to benefit from increased restaurant traffic, while convenience retailers, including FEMSA’s OXXO stores, anticipate higher foot traffic and larger transaction sizes around match days.

Sportswear and retail sectors should similarly experience meaningful upside. Adidas alone estimates a €1 billion sales opportunity from the 2026 World Cup, with competitors Nike and Puma also capitalizing on heightened merchandise demand. Retail chains such as Old Navy, Urban Outfitters, and Abercrombie & Fitch are likely to benefit from soccer-themed apparel and fan gear sales. The company Fanatics, which holds exclusive rights to operate merchandise sales at the tournament, will oversee the largest retail operation in its history, serving all 48 participating nations.

However, the World Cup permeates a plethora of other industries as well, including sports betting, gaming, financial services, and logistics, which should also see increased activity. Sports wagering in the United States alone is projected to reach approximately \$2.25 billion during the tournament, boosting platforms like DraftKings and FanDuel. Gaming companies such as EA Sports could see a 30–40% increase in bookings due to heightened interest in soccer-related titles. At the same time, financial institutions, including Bank of America, are leveraging sponsorship agreements to deepen customer engagement, while logistics providers benefit from

increased inventory movement and advertising demand tied to the event.

Despite these widespread commercial benefits, the macroeconomic impact on host countries is generally modest and short-lived. Academic research consistently finds that hosting the World Cup has only a small and statistically insignificant effect on GDP growth, with any gains largely dissipating after the event concludes. Much of the spending associated with the tournament either leaks abroad or represents a reallocation of existing consumption rather than net new economic activity. Historically, while winning the World Cup may generate a temporary boost to economic sentiment and financial markets, these effects are also fleeting.

Ultimately, the enduring value of the World Cup lies beyond measurable economic outcomes. Hosting or winning the tournament delivers significant intangible benefits, including national pride, global visibility, and social cohesion. Surveys consistently show that populations place considerable emotional value on these experiences, often expressing a willingness to pay for the sense of happiness and prestige they confer.

In the end, the 2026 FIFA World Cup represents a landmark moment in the evolution of international sport. Its unprecedented scale will amplify both its global impact and its challenges, balancing extraordinary commercial success with concerns over affordability, logistics, and long-term economic value. The tournament may prove to be as much a test of financial and logistical endurance as it is of footballing excellence. With more matches, more money, and more miles traveled than ever before, it will either stand as a triumph of global ambition or a reminder that bigger is not always better. Either way, when the ball finally stops rolling, one thing is certain: the world will have been watching, some for the love of the game, others for the spectacle, and FIFA's grand experiment will have delivered plenty of both. ■



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