



What's Hot?!

January 2026



How Brands Can Be On The Ball this World Cup Year

As we enter 2026, the football world is gearing up for the Men's FIFA World Cup, a time for national pride, celebration, commiseration and lots of brand opportunities. Beyond official partnerships and sponsorship deals, there are myriad ways for brands of all budgets to get involved in World Cup mania.

Pre-match hype: While FIFA has a small list of official global partners, brands need not sponsor the tournament to get themselves out there in the run-up to this summer's football extravaganza. Rising Ballers, dubbed 'the voice of youth culture', concluded in their recent [World Cup Heartbeats](#) research that this will be the biggest World Cup ever for content creators.

With more than one-third of fans consuming football podcasts in the run-up to the tournament, this could present an avenue to reaching highly engaged sports audiences outside of matchday broadcasts.

In one of the most striking findings of the report, 62% of fans admit supporting more than one national team. This is both a product of the incredible global reach of football – with many immigrant communities and people of diverse backgrounds supporting both their 'home' nation and that of their families – and a by-product of an increasingly commoditised sport, with superstar players often as well-supported as teams.

This presents a great opportunity for brands which recognise the diversity of football communities. For example, England will be awash with talk of the Three Lions during the tournament, but brands may be able to cut through by amplifying the many other fandoms within the country.

During the tournament: Social is going to play an outsize role this tournament as fans consume highlights reels and hot takes across the small screen as the matches live on the big screen. According to the report, 60% will engage with creator/influencer/publisher content on Instagram, so ensuring brands are well-placed alongside commentary on the platform will be key to reaching audiences who are double-screening.

Another emerging aspect of modern football culture is many fans choosing to watch content creators at the same time as, or even in preference to, the matches themselves. Creators such as Mark Goldbridge have grown large followings by livestreaming themselves reacting to matches as they happen, offering fan communities an alternative to traditional TV commentary tracks. With many such creators open to brand partnerships, this presents another route for brands who may otherwise be priced out of World Cup advertising to maintain a presence during matchdays. Indeed, such reaction content often goes viral for its unabashed passion, potentially allowing brands to gain fame long after the full-time whistle.

Additionally, fan-zone style events through organisers like Boxpark could prove beneficial. People are eager for in-person, in-real-life community, and as pubs and bars book out, brands can get ahead by creating fan experiences alongside the game.

After the final whistle: Content will continue to find engagement with football fans long after their teams are knocked out of the tournament, through highlights, comedy skits, and passionate commentary.

Brands with an eye for the beautiful game should look to spot those up-and-coming creators and burgeoning podcasts early, and plan accordingly. Once the game is over, their careers will continue, and investing in their platforms could gain brands buy-in from fresh audiences.



How Generative AI is Changing the Ways Brits Discover Brands

Large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Microsoft's Copilot and Google's Gemini are changing the ways consumers seek information and inspiration, and even how they make purchase decisions, according to new proprietary research from the7stars.

The whitepaper, *From Keywords to Conversations*, published in collaboration with Potentia, shows that LLMs have rapidly moved from niche tools to everyday essentials for most Brits, with over half of consumers actively using them, including three-quarters of 25-34s. The speed at which Brits have both adopted and educated themselves on these tools is also striking. In a little over three years since ChatGPT first became widely available, some 78% of Brits feel they understand how to use LLMs to their everyday advantage.

While search engines remain the go-to route for brand discovery, the landscape is shifting fast. 41% of Brits say they use AI to discover new brands, higher than both social media (28%) and content creators (16%). As AI has become a part of our everyday lives, so Brits have grown used to purchase journeys starting with a question and a chatbot conversation; 78% agree that LLMs have 'revolutionised how they search and find information'.

That Brits place such faith in large language models is particularly notable given the myriad headlines in recent years about Generative AI's potential to 'hallucinate' incorrect information. Most popular chatbots include a disclaimer that AI can make mistakes, asking users to check information against other sources. Yet the7stars' research found that 61% of Brits have trust in the recommendations made to them by LLMs, a higher percentage than those who trust either peer or influencer reviews.

Indeed, qualitative research found that many Brits had greater trust in AI than even search engines, with consumers noting that LLMs tended to provide a single view, while many expressed frustration that search engines often offered up conflicting sources.

For now, LLMs continue to play a greater role in the research phase of the consumer journey, with impact on the purchase phase still to catch up. Currently, LLM-driven referral traffic accounts for only 0.07% on a last-click basis. Still, nearly half of users now rely on AI tools to shortlist purchases, showing the potential for Generative AI to assist Brits with more than just information.

While Search remains the 'go-to' channel for brand discovery, the brand battle of the next decade will be fought in new ways. For brands to be successful, appearing at the top of a search result is no longer sufficient; brands must also ensure they form part of the everyday conversations consumers are having with LLMs.

This presents a clear challenge for marketing leaders: start optimising for LLMs now, or risk being invisible in the conversations that matter.

A PDF of the7stars' latest whitepaper, *From Keywords to Conversations: How LLMs are Rewriting Brand Discovery*, can be [accessed here](#). [Link not working right now but we're getting a new link!!]



Three Ways Consumers Are Shifting Spending in 2026

As Christmas trees come down and Brits return to their offices, a sense of normality is returning for many. But for retailers, uncertainty remains.

Barclays card data [suggests](#) that UK card spending fell by 1.1% in November compared with the year prior – the largest such year-on-year decline since February 2021, when the nation was under a strict lockdown. In December, shopper numbers were down 2.9% vs. 2024, [according to](#) the British Retail Consortium, which cited Budget uncertainty and suggested shoppers were instead waiting for January sales.

This points to declining consumer confidence as we enter Q1 2026. Using data from the7stars' quarterly tracker, *the QT*, and open banking data from Gravity Connect, three consumer spending trends emerge.

Clothing purchases down as Brits shift to second-hand

Gravity Connect spend data reveals that Brits spent 12% less on clothing in November and December 2025 compared with the same period in 2024. This trend was consistent across most of the country, with four in five postal areas reducing outlay. And even as total spend was higher during the week of Black Friday, this still represented a 17% decline vs. the comparable week, one year prior.

As new fashion sales drop, second-hand or 'pre-loved' sellers are the big winners. Vinted continued its rapid rise in 2025, with revenue [topping €1bn](#) for the first time, up to a 40% year-on-year increase. According to eBay's recent [Recommerce Report](#), Gen Z and Millennials are leading the pre-loved revolution, while over one-third of consumers report buying pre-loved goods at least monthly.

Brits continue to safeguard travel

In Q4, holidays and short breaks remained the big-ticket purchase on which Brits most intended to spend, with 57% intending either to increase or to maintain their spend in the category. This is backed by the Barclays card data, which found travel agents received a 10.7% Black Friday boost in November.

Ever since the nation returned from lockdown, more than four years ago, a consistent theme in our QT data has been a continuing demand for travel. Indeed, in line with an ongoing need for in-person experiences, Brits have told us they intend to protect travel spend at all costs. This has persisted through multiple periods of budget uncertainty and low consumer confidence and is likely to continue in 2026.

Subscriptions and party food prosper as Brits seek small luxuries

Another area in which Brits continue to voice confidence is streaming services. In Q4, 58% of respondents to our QT said they intended to spend the same or more on entertainment subscriptions. As subscription prices increase, a growing percentage of Brits are shifting to streamers' budget-friendly tiers, with Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney+ all posting record years for their ad-supported offerings.

Together with an uptick in supermarket food and drink sales, this suggests Brits are continuing to prioritise small luxuries in the face of growing uncertainty. M&S [has reported](#) 'record' Christmas sales, with premium party food ranges leading growth. As temperatures drop below freezing, it seems many Brits are opting for canapés and a choice of streaming services to keep their spirits high.

Much uncertainty persists over the state of the economy but, as recent spend data shows, retailers can be certain that the fight for consumers' minds and wallets remains as tough as ever.



Turning Climate Anxiety into Action: Insights from Ad Net Zero's Young Leaders

The urgency of climate change is undeniable. The last decade has been the warmest on record. While the environmental stakes are clear, addressing climate change is both vital for the planet and an essential consideration for adland, as global emissions from digital marketing alone are estimated to generate a higher carbon footprint than the aviation industry.

Polling shows that a large majority of the UK public now accepts the threat of climate change and, with this, many feel anxious about that threat. IPA research [revealed](#) this is felt even more keenly within the ad industry. Over half (53%) of industry professionals report feeling anxious about climate change, compared with 37% of the general population. They are also twice as likely to feel demoralised. Despite working in an industry with the power to influence behaviour and shape culture, many feel powerless to act.

In response, the Ad Net Zero Young Leaders Group was formed in 2024, bringing together emerging talent from over 40 businesses. These professionals – each with less than 10 years' experience and a passion for sustainability – provide fresh perspectives that senior leaders might otherwise miss. Over eight sessions, the group explored how to channel climate concern into meaningful action, resulting in four key recommendations for the industry.

1. Make sustainability part of everyday conversations

Sustainability often sits in silos. We can embed climate updates into internal communications through leadership updates, Q&A sessions, and even MS Teams conversations. This builds trust, maintains transparency and boosts retention. When sustainability becomes part of daily dialogue, it moves from being a side project to a shared responsibility.

2. Introduce sustainability into metrics and appraisals

Climate goals shouldn't be optional, and we all have a role to play in sustainability. By integrating sustainability KPIs into performance reviews and appraisals, we drive accountability and ensure climate priorities aren't sidelined during crunch times.

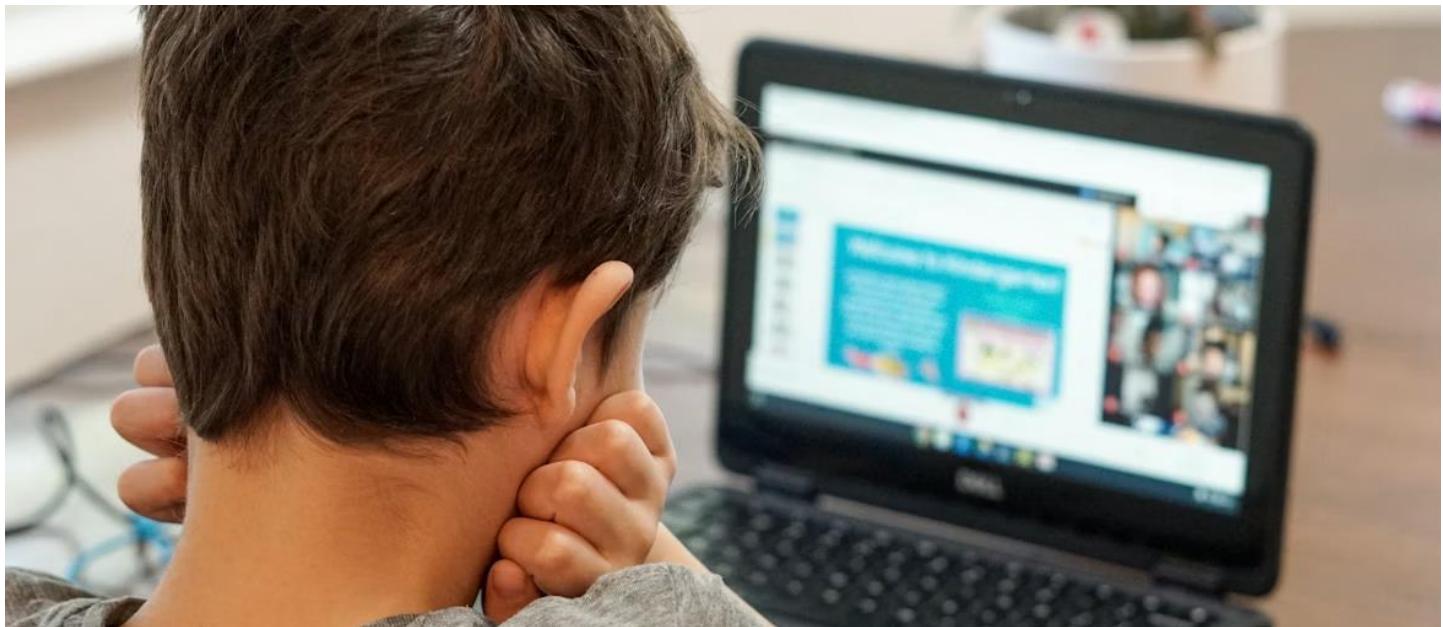
3. Flip the model with reverse mentoring

A practice of pairing senior leaders with junior staff through structured sessions brings fresh energy and ideas to the table, ensuring sustainability is central to leadership decisions. Reverse mentoring fosters collaboration and ensures climate challenges are examined from multiple perspectives.

4. Make climate literacy a standard skill

Knowledge combats eco-anxiety and misinformation. Industry-wide climate training – such as the [Ad Net Zero Essentials Certificate](#) completed by all staff at the 7stars – equips teams to embed sustainability into client work and future initiatives. The Guardian, for example, saw 97% of staff feel more confident discussing climate post-training. Embedding this confidence is what ultimately drives action.

These recommendations go beyond reducing emissions. By putting staff of all levels at the forefront of climate decision-making, they aim to create an industry that reflects the values of its people and audiences. Advertisers should consider making sustainability a recognised part of company culture, turning anxiety into action and leading the way toward a more sustainable future.



From 'Brain Rot' to 'Rage Bait': How Children's Time Online is Changing

They may have become something of a festive tradition, as clichéd as yet another 'Wrapped' feature, but annual Word of the Year lists can tell us a lot about public mood. In doing so, the prevailing theme of a year can be summed up in just one (or, as seems to be the case on a few too many occasions) two words. Take Oxford's annual winner: 2007's was 'carbon footprint'; it was 'credit crunch' a year later; with 'selfie' and 'vape' featuring before 'vax' took the crown for 2021.

Recently, however, Oxford's Word of the Year has taken a distinctly darker turn. The past two winners, 'brain rot' and 'rage bait' each point to the proliferation of harmful, addictive or hate-fuelled content on social media. This content has dominated commentary on social media in recent times, driven by the rise of large language models and the continuing controversies surrounding X, following its takeover by Elon Musk.

Ofcom's latest [Media Nations](#) report makes for essential reading in trying to understand this complex and evolving online world. In 2025, Brits' time online rose by ten minutes compared with the year before, averaging four and a half hours daily. Children aged 13-14 spend nearly as much time online, around four hours per day, and this is before factoring in time spent console gaming online. Just two platforms, Snapchat and YouTube, account for over half (52%) of this time.

And while most children feel that the time they spend online benefits them, particularly in supporting their studies, the picture is more nuanced. Seven in ten reported having seen potentially harmful content online in the past four weeks, while interviewers heard many children express concerns over the impact that addictive, 'brain rot'-style content was having on their wellbeing.

As online content evolves, brands are navigating an increasingly challenging path to ensure content is only reaching the audiences for which it is intended. Recent regulations such as LHF restrictions show the advertising industry stands willing to take the lead on reducing harm. Additionally, the UK Government's Online Safety Act, enacted last year, appears to be limiting young Brits' exposure to unsafe content. However, the report also notes a year-on-year rise in online users using VPNs to access age-restricted content, though such numbers have fallen in recent months.

With Australia having banned social media for under-16s in December, all eyes are on policymakers for signs of a similar ban in the UK, a policy the opposition Conservatives now [outwardly support](#). What the Ofcom report shows is that brands must continue to keep their finger on the pulse in this ever-changing, 'brain rot'-fuelled online world.



First TfL Line Sponsorship Arrives

Transport for London (TfL) has marked another branded first with the renaming of a full Tube line. For two weeks in January, the network's Bakerloo line [has become](#) the Bakerl0.0 line, as part of a sponsorship agreement with Heineken to promote its non-alcoholic beer. Additionally, both Waterloo and Oxford Circus have received the '0.0' branding on station signage.

This follows the news last summer that TfL was opening its doors to full line sponsorships, with Heineken following a number of brands including Burberry, Samsung and PlayStation to have developed branded partnerships which temporarily led to changes to TfL station signage.

As with previous TfL sponsorships, this latest move has divided opinion. While many accept the changes as a way for the network to raise much-needed funds, disability groups are among those to [express concern](#) about the potential impact on passenger accessibility.



X Restricts Grok Features as Ofcom Conducts Urgent Review

The media regulator, Ofcom, says it is conducting an [urgent review](#) of X, following widespread outcry over deepfake images created by the social media platform's AI chatbot, Grok. In a move supported by the Government, Ofcom will consider whether X has violated the UK's Online Safety Act.

In response, X [has confirmed](#) it has removed the ability for Grok to edit images of people into more revealing clothing.

Free speech campaigners have expressed concerns over a potential ban on X, which has around 20 million users in the UK. However, the platform has shed users in recent years following a string of controversies since its takeover by Elon Musk. This has led many mainstream brands to [pull advertising](#) from the platform.



Apple Signs Deal with Google for Gemini to Power AI

In a move that unites two of the world's largest tech companies, Google [has partnered](#) with Apple to power Apple's AI features through its Gemini models.

This will include Apple's signature Siri feature.

The move is likely to reignite interest in Apple's AI offering, with Apple having faced criticism that it is ["lagging behind"](#) competitor models including Gemini, OpenAI and Anthropic in this space.

However, the partnership announcement may catch the eye of antitrust regulators, with Google having last year navigated a landmark antitrust case in the US. The judge in that case [ruled](#) that Google could continue to make revenue-sharing payments to Apple.