Category Exclusivity Impact On Sports Sponsorships

Ian Young

Table of contents

Executive Summary

Category exclusivity is a strategic lever that brands and properties can use to enhance sponsorship recall, which is an essential step in moving fans toward engagement with a brand's product or service. Developing long-term strategic partnerships and increasing investment in high-visibility assets such as title sponsorships remain effective ways to strengthen recall. These approaches help maximize the unique value that sports sponsorship delivers.

Background

Sponsorships serve as a competitive tool for brands seeking to establish an advantage in the marketplace. Each year, brands invest heavily in sports and entertainment sponsorships because of their ability to transfer passion from the property to the brand, ultimately driving improvements to the brand's bottom line.

To realize these benefits, fans must first see and recall the brand. This requires effective use of the property's full range of assets to maximize visibility. However, in a crowded market, brands within the same category often compete for the same sponsorship opportunities, which can result in multiple brands sharing category presence at a single property. This raises a critical question: **what advantage does category exclusivity provide when a sponsor does not have to share the space with competitors?**

For years, Wakefield has delivered scientific sponsorship research for all major leagues across hundreds of properties. During this time, it has built a comparative database that provides personalized insights and benchmarks for clients, as well as aggregated analyses that identify broader sponsorship trends. Beginning in 2024, Wakefield added data collection on category exclusivity in order to quantify its impact.

The objective of this report is to examine the relationship between category exclusivity and sponsorship recall while accounting for other known drivers of recall. Table 1 below provides a sample illustration of the data structure used for analysis.

The full dataset consists of **604** sponsorship observations collected from 2024 through 2025. Each observation represents a unique combination of survey year, team, and partner (sponsor). In total, the data covers **74** properties and **400** distinct brands.

Table 1: Aggregated Wakefield Sponsorship Data

survey_year	team	league	partner	recall	category	contract_length	title_partner	exclusive_cat
2025	Montreal Expos	MLB	Tim Hortons	87.4%	Food Services	Established (4-6)	Yes	Yes
2024	Arizona Coyotes	NHL	McDonald's	51.4%	Food Services	Long-term (6+)	No	No
2025	Seattle Supersonics	NBA	Kroger	48.1%	Grocery	New (0-1)	No	Yes
2024	Houston Oilers	NFL	Ford	81.8%	Auto	Long-term (6+)	Yes	Yes
2024	Tampa Bay Mutiny	MLS	State Farm	32.5%	Insurance	Emerging (2-3)	No	No

Note: Due to space attendance (% of fans who have attended at least one game), ticket holders (% of fans who have season tickets), and passion not displayed.
Source: **Wakefield**

Exploratory Data Analysis

Exploratory data analysis began with the production of univariate and bivariate plots to provide an initial understanding of the dataset.

Response Variable: Recall

The primary response variable of interest is sponsorship recall. The distribution of recall values follows an approximately normal pattern, as illustrated in Figure 1.

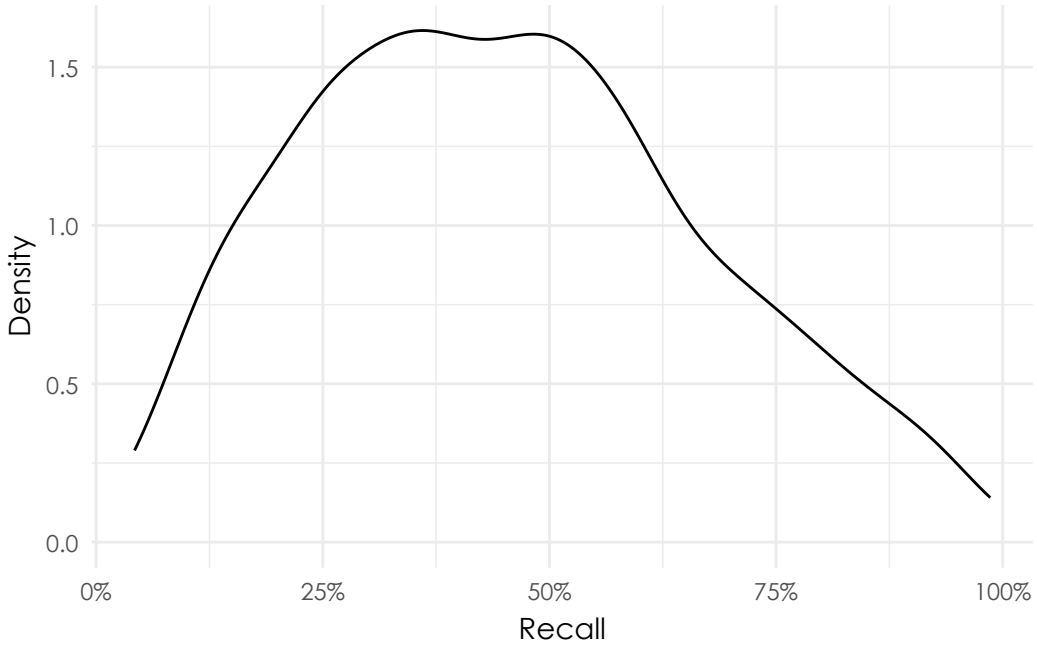
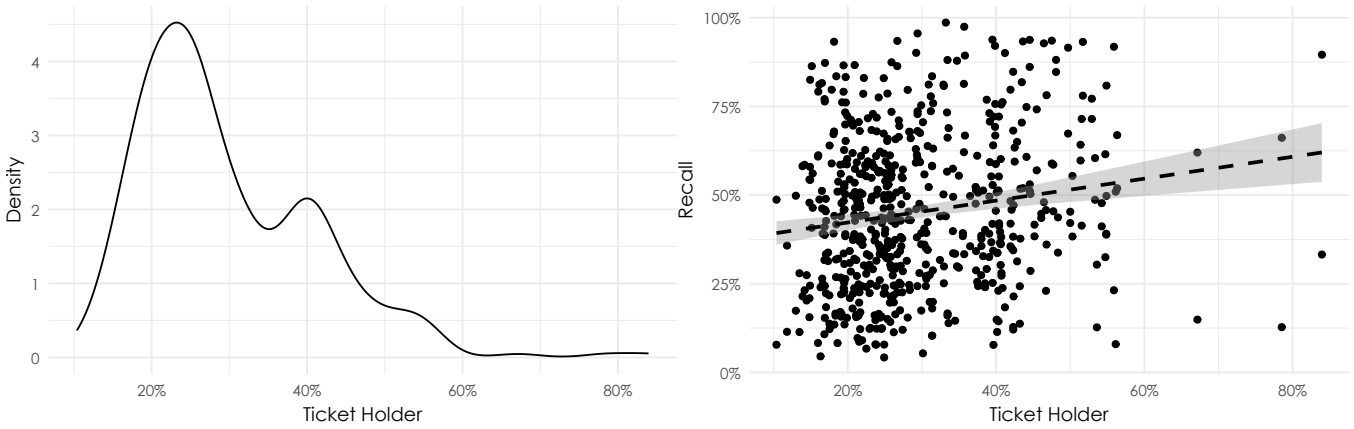


Figure 1: Distribution of recall

Predictor: Ticket Holder (% of fans with season tickets)

The percentage of fans who are season ticket holders shows a right-skewed distribution, primarily due to two teams that oversampled this group. While most observations fall around 25 percent, there is an additional concentration near 40 percent. Prior to modeling, these data points could be filtered or transformed to reduce skew. When compared with recall, the ticket holder variable demonstrates a slight positive relationship (Figure 2).

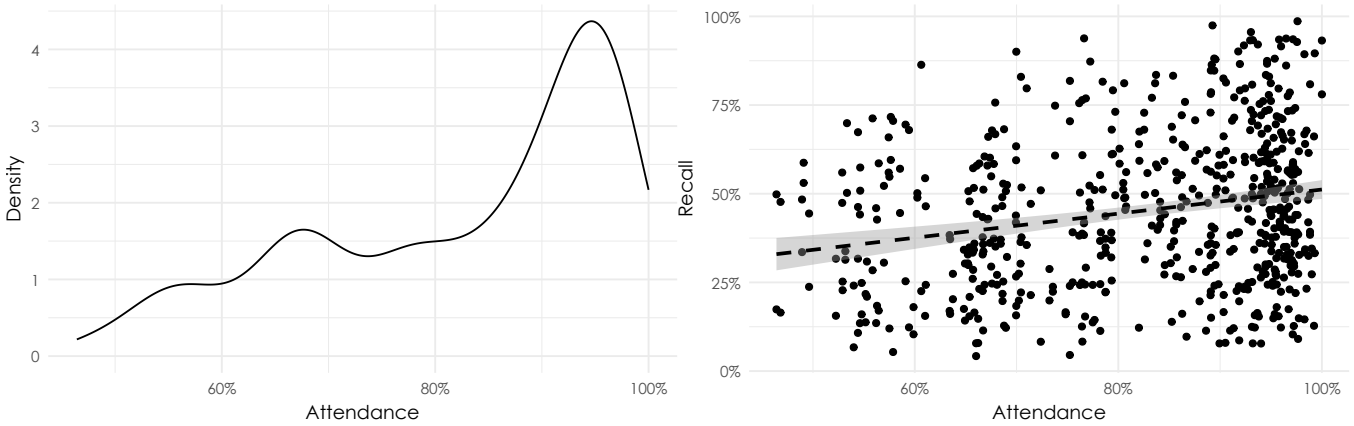


(a) Distribution of ticket holder variable (b) Relationship between ticket holder and recall

Figure 2: Ticket holder descriptives plots

Predictor: Attendance (% of fans who have attended at least one game)

Attendance, defined as the percentage of fans who have attended at least one game, is left-skewed. Most fans in the dataset report attending at least one event, with the peak of the distribution occurring around 95 percent. As with ticket holders, a transformation may be appropriate before modeling. The relationship between attendance and recall also shows a slight positive trend, although most values are clustered at the high end of the attendance scale (Figure 3).

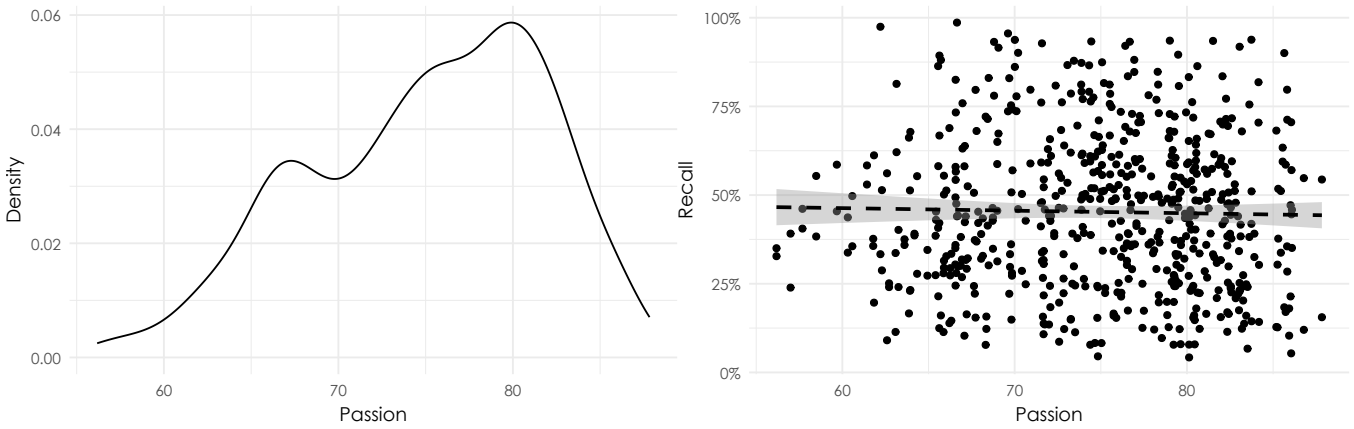


(a) Distribution of attendance variable (b) Relationship between attendance and recall

Figure 3: Attendance descriptives plots

Predictor: Passion

Passion, measured on a 100-point scale, follows a more normal distribution with a minor left skew. Most observations are approximately 80 out of 100. This variable may not require a transformation. The relationship between passion and recall does not reveal a strong positive or negative trend (Figure 4), making it a less likely candidate for inclusion in the model. This finding contrasts with analyses at the individual respondent level, where passion typically shows a strong positive correlation with sponsor recall.

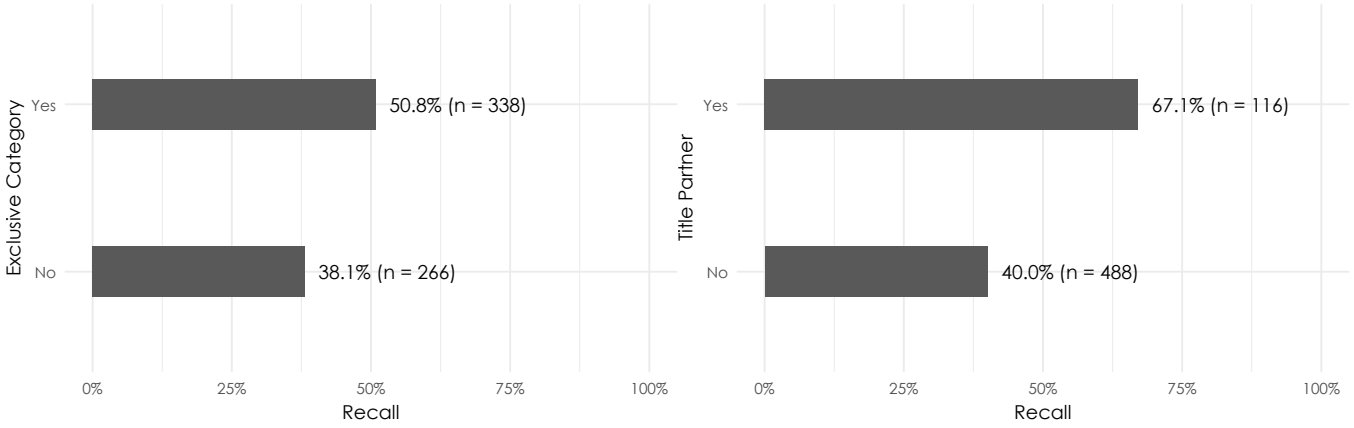


(a) Distribution of passion variable (b) Relationship between passion and recall

Figure 4: Passion descriptives plots

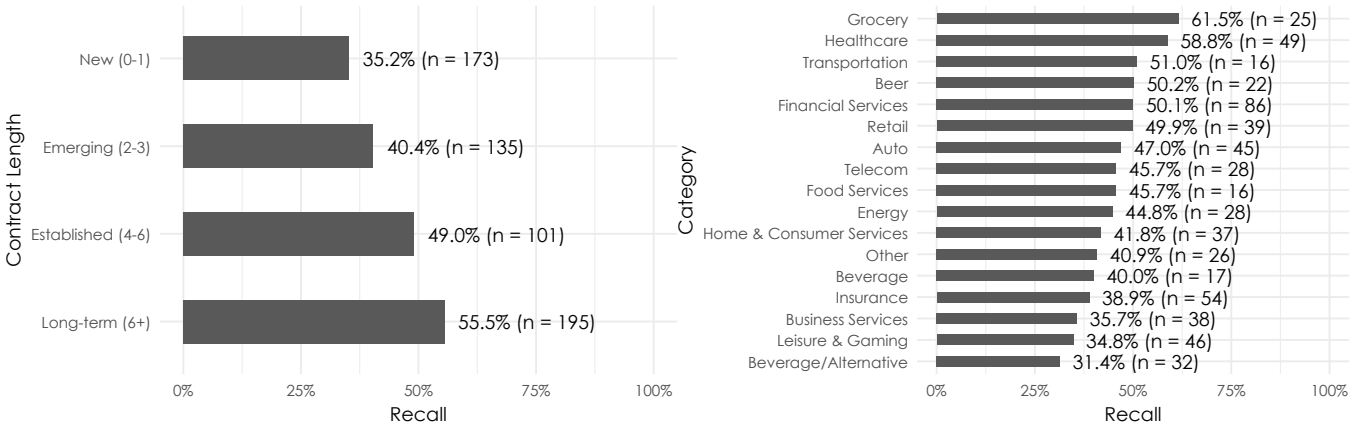
Predictor (Categorical): Contract Length, Exclusive Category, Title Partner, and Category

For categorical predictors, including contract length, category exclusivity, title partner status, and sponsorship category, distinct group-level patterns are evident (Figure 5). Longer contract durations are associated with higher recall. Exclusivity within a category corresponds with a 12 percent increase in recall. While relatively few sponsors hold title partner status, those that do exhibit substantially higher recall. Finally, recall percentages vary widely across different sponsorship categories.



(a) Exclusive Category (b) Title Partner

Figure 5: Categorical descriptives plots 1



(a) Contract Length (b) Category

Figure 6: Categorical descriptives plots 2

Model Construction

A linear regression model was used to assess the impact of predictor variables on sponsorship recall. The initial set of variables included exclusive category, title partner, attendance, passion, and category. For the categorical variables, reference levels were set as follows: "No" for exclusive category and title partner, "New (0-1)" for contract length, and "Insurance" for category. Insurance was selected as a baseline due to its high number of observations and status as a more traditional sponsorship category.

Following initial exploration, passion was removed from the model because, as suggested in Figure 4, it showed a weak and non-significant relationship with recall. The final model included exclusive category, title partner, contract length, and category. The next section presents the model results, assumptions, and key takeaways.

Results

The final linear regression model demonstrates strong overall significance ($p < 0.001$) and an R^2 of 0.485, indicating that approximately 48.5% of the variance in recall is explained by attendance, contract length, exclusive category, ticket holder, title partner, and category. Most variables, with the exception of certain category levels, are statistically significant in a positive direction. This means that an increase in the variable, either quantitatively or relative to the reference level, corresponds to a positive increase in sponsorship recall. Passion was excluded from the model due to its lack of statistical significance. The adjusted R^2, often used to assess overfitting, showed only a minimal decrease to 0.464.

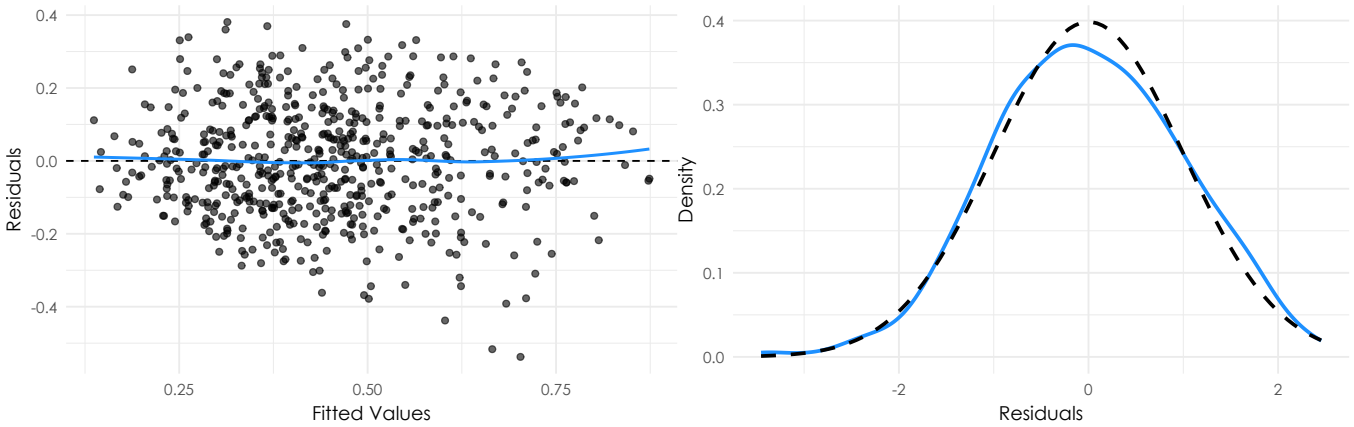
Table 2: Model Output

term	estimate	std_error	statistic	p_value	conf_low	conf_high
(Intercept)	-0.013	0.046	-0.283	0.777	-0.102	0.077
Attendance	0.240	0.050	4.850	0.000	0.143	0.338
Contract Length: Emerging (2-3)	0.059	0.018	3.165	0.002	0.022	0.095
Contract Length: Established (4-6)	0.116	0.020	5.736	0.000	0.076	0.156
Contract Length: Long Term (6+)	0.181	0.018	10.159	0.000	0.146	0.216
Exclusive Category: Yes	0.063	0.014	4.565	0.000	0.036	0.091
Ticket Holder	0.122	0.061	1.994	0.047	0.002	0.243
Title Partner: Yes	0.229	0.018	12.367	0.000	0.192	0.265
Category: Auto	0.070	0.032	2.176	0.030	0.007	0.133
Category: Beer	0.127	0.040	3.143	0.002	0.048	0.206
Category: Beverage	0.029	0.045	0.648	0.518	-0.059	0.116
Category: Beverage Alternative	0.005	0.036	0.128	0.898	-0.067	0.076
Category: Business Services	-0.008	0.034	-0.243	0.808	-0.075	0.059
Category: Energy	0.066	0.037	1.781	0.075	-0.007	0.138
Category: Financial Services	0.069	0.028	2.492	0.013	0.015	0.123
Category: Food Services	0.122	0.045	2.690	0.007	0.033	0.211
Category: Grocery	0.178	0.039	4.589	0.000	0.102	0.254
Category: Healthcare	0.054	0.032	1.697	0.090	-0.009	0.118
Category: Home Consumer Services	0.029	0.034	0.862	0.389	-0.038	0.096
Category: Leisure Gaming	0.036	0.032	1.106	0.269	-0.028	0.099
Category: Other	0.081	0.038	2.142	0.033	0.007	0.156
Category: Retail	0.114	0.034	3.394	0.001	0.048	0.180
Category: Telecom	0.070	0.037	1.891	0.059	-0.003	0.143
Category: Transportation	0.126	0.045	2.781	0.006	0.037	0.215

Note: $R^2 = 0.485$ | Highlight represents statistical significance at 0.05
Source: **Wakefield**

Assumptions

Before interpreting the results, the model assumptions were evaluated. Figure 7 examines linearity and normality. Plot (a) indicates that the linearity assumption is reasonable, while plot (b) suggests that the residuals are approximately normally distributed.

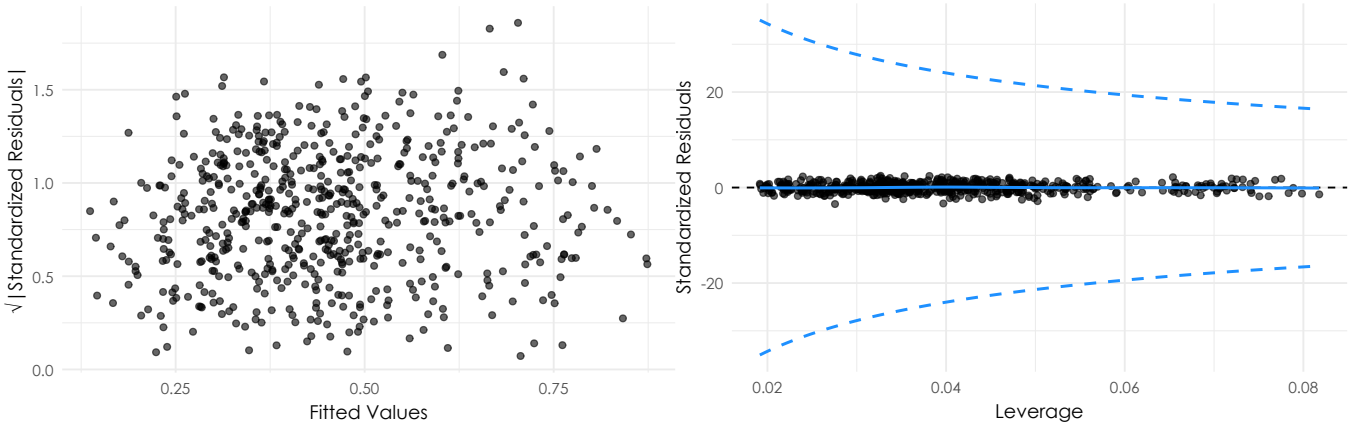


(a) Linearity (b) Normality

Figure 7: Assumptions: Linearity and Normality

Figure 8 evaluates equal variance and influential observations. Plot (a) shows a slight upward

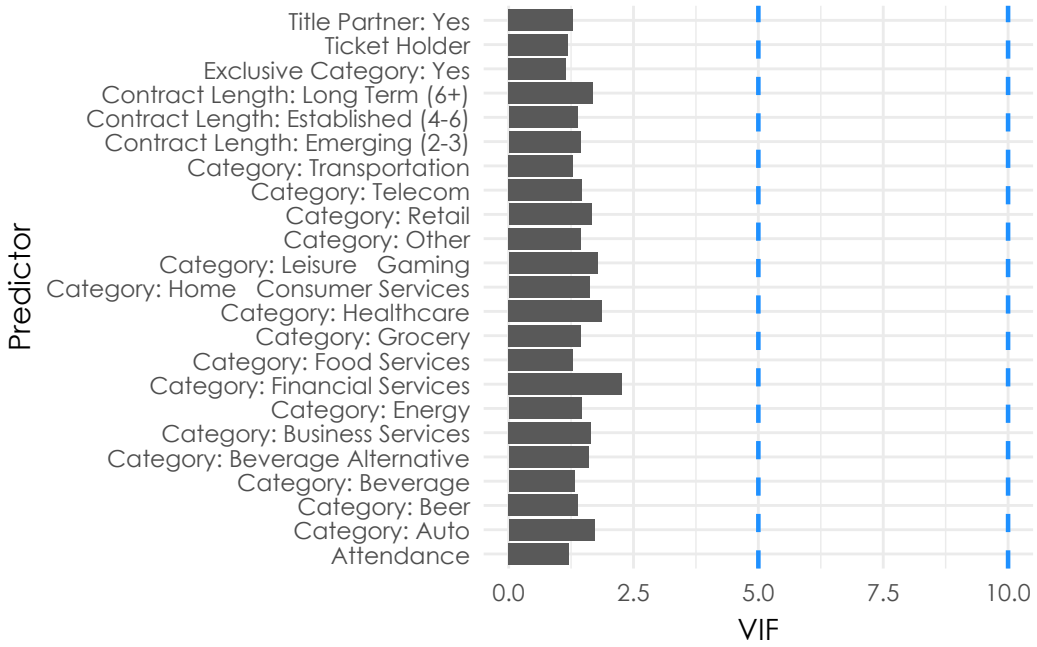
trend but no strong funnel shape, indicating acceptable homoscedasticity. Plot (b) reveals no influential observations that would disproportionately affect the model.



(a) Equal Variance (b) Influential Observations

Figure 8: Assumptions: Equal Variance and Outliers

Finally, Figure 9 presents a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis to assess multicollinearity. No variables exceeded concern thresholds, indicating that multicollinearity is not an issue.



(a) VIF Plot

Figure 9: Assumptions: Multicollinearity

Takeaways

Table 2 highlights that attendance, ticket holder, contract length, exclusive category, and several categories (auto, beer, financial services, food services, grocery, other, retail, and transportation) are statistically significant predictors of recall.

Sample Interpretations:

- Attendance → A 1-unit increase (0% to 100% of fans attending at least one game) corresponds to a 24% increase in recall. More realistically, a 10% increase in attendance is associated with a 2.4% increase in recall, controlling for other variables.
- Title Partner: Yes → Sponsors that are title partners are expected to have, on average, 22.9% higher recall than non-title partners, controlling for other variables.
- Exclusive Category: Yes → Sponsors that are exclusive within their category are expected to achieve 6.3% higher recall compared to non-exclusive sponsors, controlling for other variables.
- Category: Grocery → Grocery sponsors exhibit 17.8% higher recall than sponsors in the insurance category, controlling for other variables.

Beyond individual estimates, variable importance analysis provides perspective on the relative impact of predictors. Figure 10 ranks predictors by the absolute value of their test statistics. Title partner status and contract length have the largest influence on recall. Exclusive category, the primary variable of interest, ranks fifth among 15 significant predictors, contributing approximately 7% of total variable importance.

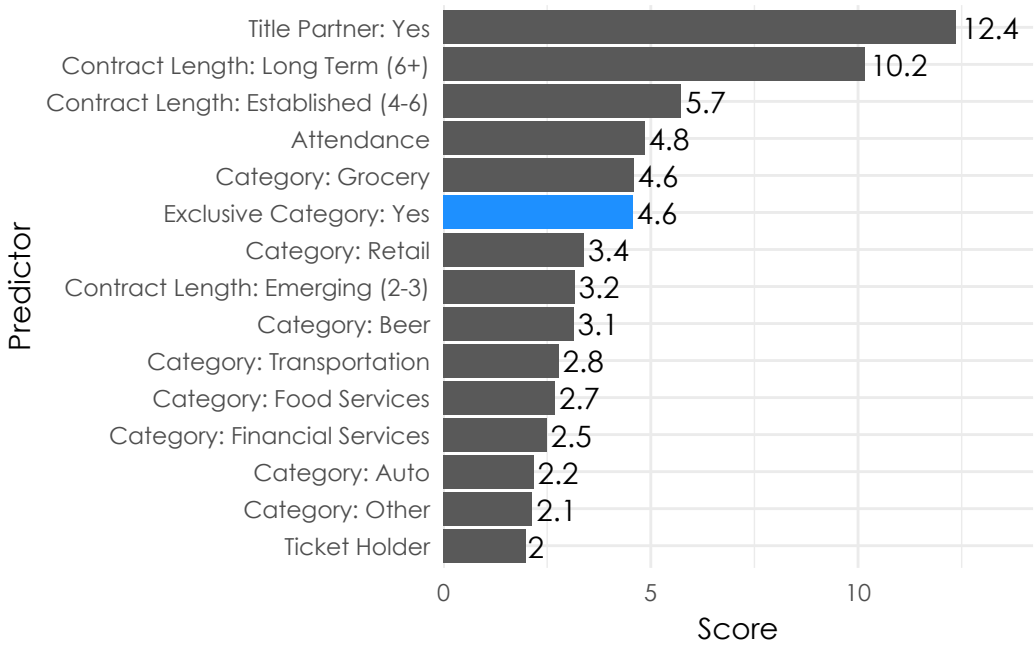


Figure 10: Variable Importance

Conclusion

Title partner status emerges as the most influential factor in the first step of the sponsorship funnel, where fans must see and recall the brand. This represents a powerful lever for brands and properties, though inventory is limited. Sponsorships perform well over time, and cultivating long-term, meaningful relationships benefits both brands and properties.

Category naturally affects recall, with some sectors more salient to fans than others, which should inform realistic expectations. Fan engagement through attendance and season ticket ownership also contributes positively to recall, reflecting greater exposure to in-person and physical assets.

Importantly, this analysis underscores the value of category exclusivity. Sponsors who are the sole representative in their category receive heightened attention, making exclusivity a relevant strategic consideration for both brands and properties.

Future research could explore additional factors influencing recall, such as league-specific effects or levels of sponsorship spend. Other potential analyses include the impact of category exclusivity on brand equity or product usage. Wakefield's current dataset includes league information, but imbalances prevent its inclusion in this analysis.