

Ogilvy  
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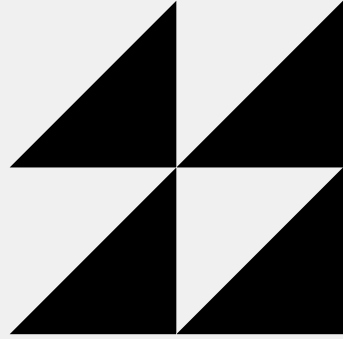


# 2026 Influencer Trends

You should care about

Ogilvy

# AGENDA



TREND 1:

Creator Commerce and the Rebirth of the Virtual Influencer



TREND 2:

Community-Powered Content Engines Fueling the Next Wave of UGC



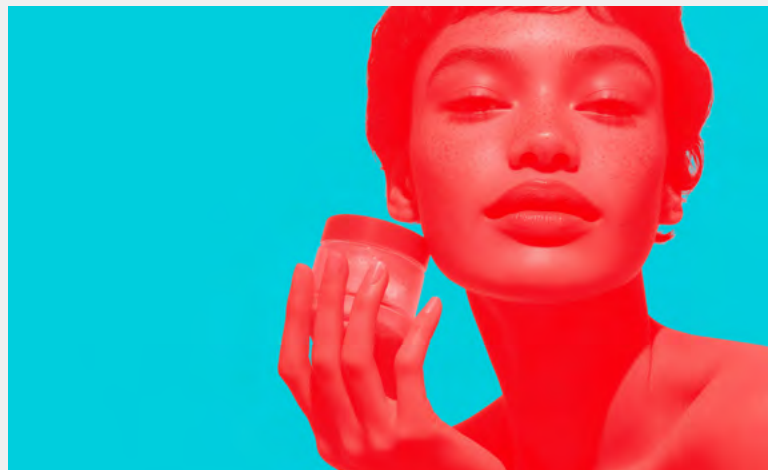
TREND 3:

From Small Screens to Serialized Influence: 2026 Creators Are Building Worlds, Not Posts



TREND 4:

Thumbs Up: New Expectations for Influencer ROI



TREND 5:

Equity Partnerships: and the Sports Creator Boom



TREND 6:

Social Beyond the Feed: IRL and Private Messaging Come to the Fore



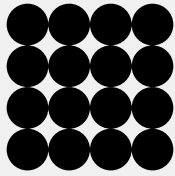
# ALL CHANGE IN THE CREATOR ECONOMY



When it comes to consumer and brand marketing, the Creator Economy is no longer optional or experimental — it's a foundational pillar of modern marketing. Globally, it now represents \$250 billion and, according to Goldman Sachs, is on track to nearly double to \$480 billion by next year. What began as local brands sending free products to influencers has evolved into the world's largest brands allocating hundreds of millions in marketing spend directly to creators. And marketers are taking note. Fernando Fernandez, Unilever's new CMO, for example, is reportedly shifting more than 50% of Unilever's \$10 billion marketing budget toward social and creator-led channels.

With that pendulum swing, the flood gates have opened to institutional dollars and uncharted growth; but with higher budgets come higher stakes. The next evolution of creator economy investment brings with it unimagined opportunity, and the need to closely manage and monitor risk in equal parts. Influencer marketing can no longer survive on reach and engagement vanity metrics — impact is everything, ROI is mandatory, and earned community growth is the holy grail. Influence has become a **trust infrastructure**, while simultaneously a suspiciously scrutinizing and demanding taskmaster. Brands need to think about the tectonic shifts happening in the digital landscape and what spaces are right for them to grow authentically and impactfully.



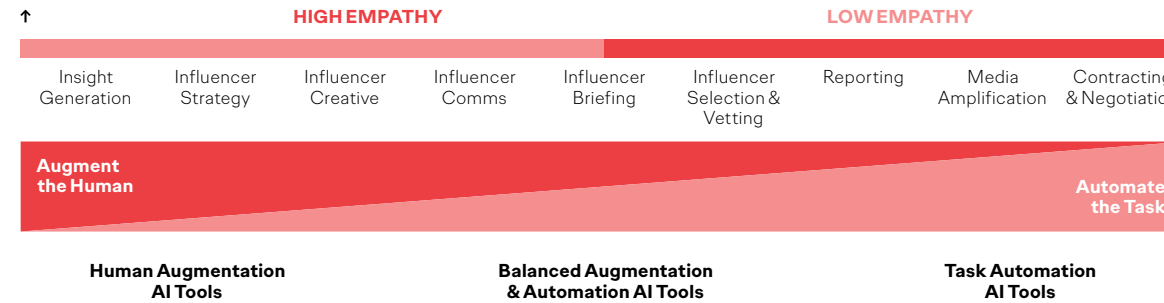
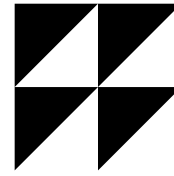


## Trust Sells, But Do We Trust Sellers?

Mining the future potential of the Creator Economy isn't going to happen by doing more of the same thing. Influencer marketing is now a Mixed Media Modelling channel in its own right and will demand comparative results as such.

This will usher in the exponential growth from social commerce built on the back of the influencer trust infrastructure we've laid years before. We will require influencers and affiliates to drive bottom line ROI directly through multiple platforms proving ROI in different forms. TikTok Shop, the most globally recognized Social Selling platform reports that 58% of its 1.6 billion users made purchases through the platform this year, and it is driving towards a projected \$100 billion in annual revenue.

But at what percentage does TikTok transition from being primarily a "Social Content" platform to a "Social Commerce" platform? Furthermore, how would a sales-first platform approach impact the trust infrastructure necessary for impactful creator marketing results? Businesses need to curate their MMM platform choices delicately. They must also consider how and when new, purpose-built commerce platforms, such as Whatnot, will integrate to complement an increasingly fragmented customer journey.



## AI: Scaling Creativity, Not Replacing Trust

AI is reshaping the creator landscape. From ideation to content production, from contract negotiation to community management, automation will increasingly handle process and execution. Human creativity however will remain *the* differentiator: strategy, cultural insight, community engagement, and in-real-life virality cannot be automated.

AI lowers barriers to entry, enabling anyone to create content at scale. But with scale comes saturation. Audiences are already showing signs of fatigue with a flood of AI slop hitting

our feeds and engagement dropping. The good news is that AI doesn't kill creativity; *it raises the bar*. Trust remains the cultural currency. Savvy audiences still value real people over AI or brand voices, and they will reward authentic originality, honest entertainment, and real community connection that empowers individuals to shape and claim a significant part of their continually evolving identity. This is built not solely on social engagement, but more critically through their fierce loyalty, advocacy, and trust.

Human creativity is your connection to community and culture; AI is your vehicle to scaling at speed

The implications of AI and influence for brands are profound. As a result, CMOs are rethinking how teams are structured and budgets allocated. Centralized versus local ownership, always-on versus campaign-led strategies, and balancing brand building with direct performance — these are questions every marketing leader must address in 2026.

At Ogilvy, the evolution of our creator capabilities has been ongoing area of focus and excitement. We are synergising AI intelligence and efficiencies through our proprietary platform WPP Open Pro, while putting human insights and creativity of the world's most awarded influence agency at the forefront. We are designing connected ecosystems of influence that drive real advocacy and measurable impact.

In a landscape of exponential growth, commoditized production, and rising scrutiny, the next evolution of the Creator Economy is clear: the winners will be those who find opportunities to build and protect trust, not just chase attention.

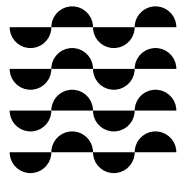
Read our thoughts on those key opportunities to watch this year.

- The Ogilvy Influence Team

1.

CREATOR  
COMMERCE  
AND THE REBIRTH  
OF VIRTUAL  
INFLUENCERS





David Ogilvy famously declared, **“We sell – or else.”** While the social selling phenomenon emerged long after his era, no other quote could more aptly describe the essence of today’s rapidly evolving Creator Economy.

The **“We sell”** component serves as a blunt and direct commercial objective, refocusing marketing from mere social impressions back to the ultimate goal of commercial growth. The **“or else”** then adds a crucial layer of accountability, compelling brands and businesses to adapt to this new economic landscape. Collectively, these four concise words convey the immediate, results-driven urgency that live selling now creates for products and brands.

The social selling economy has not-so-quietly exploded under our noses and while most brands are still happy creating the usual ‘social cut downs’, creator-led and indie brands are leveraging affiliates on commerce platforms to drive unprecedented revenue without lifting a finger themselves.

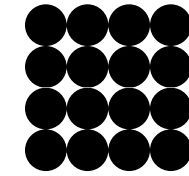
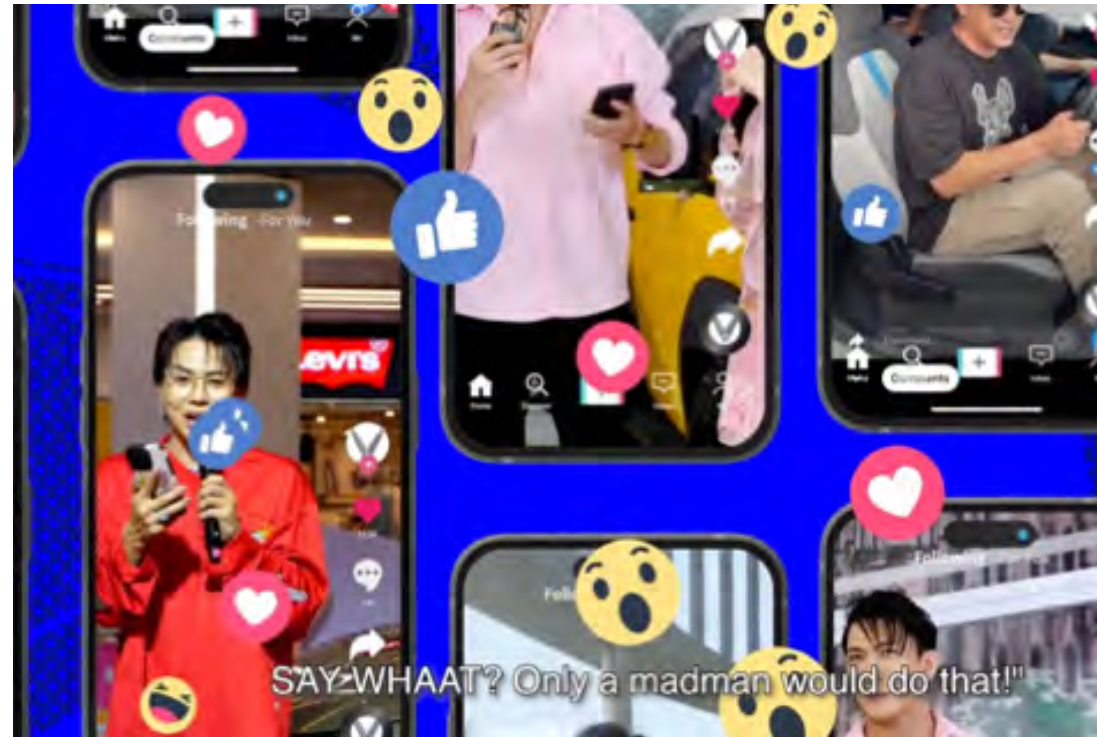
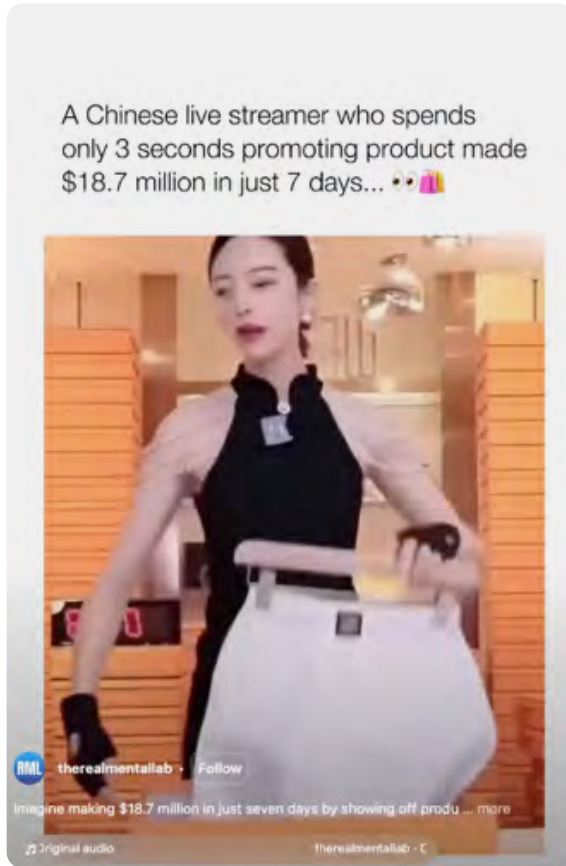
**The Facts:** A study by Mordor Intelligence (2025) clocks the global Social Commerce market at \$1.6 trillion USD already in 2025 and is expected to reach \$6.23 trillion by 2030 at a CAGR of 30%. For context, the Global eCommerce industry as a whole is worth \$5-6 trillion, meaning Social Commerce is already 1/3, and growing quickly...

TikTok Shop is the most globally recognized pioneer of social and live selling, having developed a suite of tools like Creator Centre, Product Marketplace, and a transparent affiliate payment model to support influencer matching and product placement. But here’s the reset; surprisingly TikTok Shop, with \$100 billion in Gross Merchandise Value (GMV) globally in 2025 is proportionally, the tiny tip of the global iceberg.

By region, APAC dominates the social selling industry with \$625 billion across its variety of platforms, led predominantly by China’s pioneering integration of livestreaming (just one subset of social selling) comprising 30% of all total eCommerce sales in the market. In

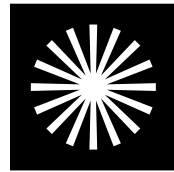
comparison in the US livestreaming equates to just 6% of eCommerce sales. Back in 2020, Alibaba ran a live-streamed presales campaign during a popular Chinese shopping event, generating \$7.5 billion in total transaction value in just 30 minutes. Famously, Chinese live streamer Zheng Xiang Xiang who spends just 3 seconds holding up each of the products in every live stream sold \$18.3 million USD in one week.

The biggest brands are tapping into Creator Commerce with Beauty, Fashion & Tech, all sectors that are low hanging fruit for this channel. In Asia, Creator Commerce has scaled to sell cars and even houses on social platforms.



## Ogilvy Vietnam Case Study

Partnering with influencers on TikTok, Shopee, and Facebook, VinFast achieved remarkable results for its VF3 EV. In just 66 hours of live streaming, generating over 62 million views, the company secured an astonishing 27,649 pre-orders and \$5 million in revenue. This success was particularly notable as VinFast managed to overtake established car brands like Toyota, Kia, and Hyundai, despite having no car available for test drives.



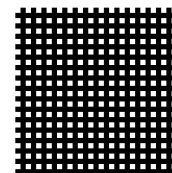
## The Rebirth of Virtual Influencers: AI Influence at Scale

AI will impact every stage of the influencer marketing journey, from content creation to contracting and negotiations with influencers. But no area is quite as different, dynamic and transformative as the lower-funnel, social selling influencers. The robots are coming.

Over the last 5 years, we've seen virtual influencers rise, and we've seen them fade. The likes of @Lilmiquela and @Lu from Magalu (created by Ogilvy) are two examples of an emerging trend that never gained traction due to an obvious detachment from reality.

But with the advance of AI, the world is about to change. Virtual creators are now scaling fast [58% of US users follow at least one virtual creator (Forbes survey)] and with AI livestreaming, they are interacting, responding to questions, and forming real relationships.

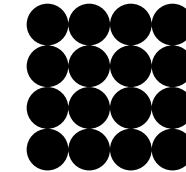
AI influencers are not without challenges, of course - 37% of marketers doubt AI creators can build trust (HyperAuditor, 2025) - and many questions remain around the ethics of declaration of its use. As a result, human influencer partnerships will still create critical value, particularly towards your upper-funnel brand building and mid-funnel relationship building stages. Commerce however is where things get interesting...



## Your 24/7 Front Line Virtual Influencer Sales Force

In June 2025, a livestreaming event in China quietly rewrote the rules for virtual influencers. Two hyper-realistic, AI-generated avatars based on their real human founders, collectively generated over \$7 million in product sales in a single seven-hour session. (CNBC).

The signs are there that future marketing programs will include an infinite layer of AI Influencers providing the more functional and detailed lower funnel selling on repeat while you sleep, speaking to an infinite amount of different demographics, including AI avatars that visually adapt to their audiences, sell the product, provide product detail, engage with audience questions, and essentially act as the shop window.



## Curated by Humans, Run by Agents:

Human Creator partnership will provide originality, creativity, and connection. AI influencers will supplement their human counterparts with scale at speed, while AI Agents will execute operations and analyze performance of live sellers, edit and scale mass content, negotiate contracts, fulfil purchases and respond to audiences etc. On short, the Creator Commerce machine will be constantly running.

# 5 CATALYSTS FOR YOUR CREATOR COMMERCE EMPIRE:



1.



## Master Your Platform

TikTok Shop is just the start. There are several platforms of live shopping that have different strengths and weaknesses. While Whatnot is an emerging platform developing in the US, Amazon, Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Esty among many more, are all primed to develop their own live selling facilities and thus are worth keeping an eye on. In Asia, Shopee, Lazada, Alibaba and Line are all emerging platforms.

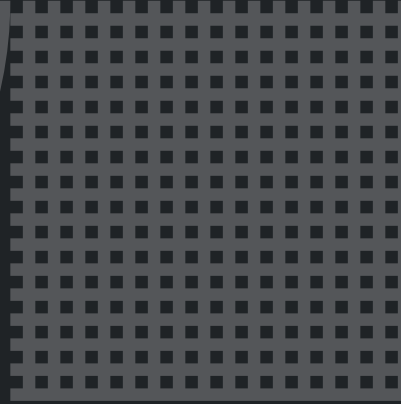
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## Integrate Intelligently

No marketing channel exists in a vacuum. As much as you want to seem cutting-edge or first-to-market by diving into live shopping before your competitors there needs to be a reason and strategy for success. In other words, if livestream shopping doesn't tie into your wider marketing strategy or objectives, it's probably just a distraction. This must start with your program.

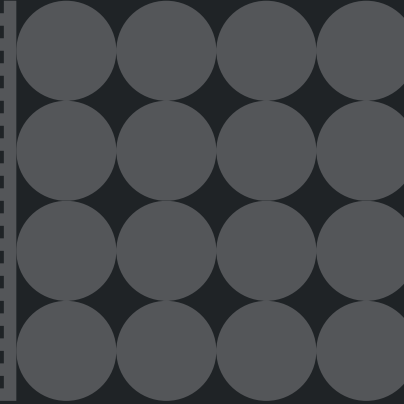
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## Selection Scrutiny

Not all creators are created equal. Just because you're a successful creator on TikTok, does not mean you automatically have selling swagger on TikTok Shop. When working with live hosts, you must still pick a host that matches your brand values, and who has genuine credibility in the subject areas. Their energy for the product will rub off on their results, and results matter most!

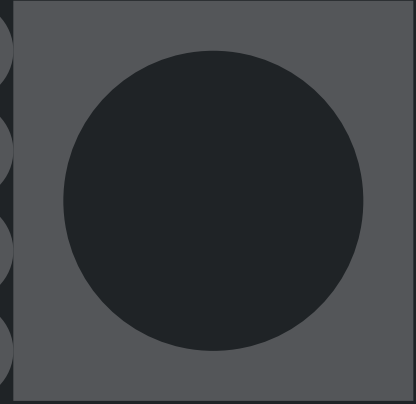
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## Creatively Clinical

The beauty of influence marketing is that creators bring an authenticity and new level of trust to social audiences that brands simply cannot obtain on their own. Relevance and storytelling over time drives relationship building, paving the way to long term advocacy. Creator Commerce flips that entirely. Creative, yet factual, detail-orientated storytelling gives audiences the information they need at the speed and urgency they need to make that final step of the customer journey.

5.



## Invest in Analysis

Livestreaming is nuanced. The slightest change in tone or a missed comment can impact performance. There are a plethora of AI analytics platforms that help assess how to improve performance, allowing you to fine tune for different platforms, creators and audiences. It's worth the investment.

**Talk to a real expert:** Ogilvy's Creator Commerce practice offers advanced multi-platform capabilities designed to help our clients launch and sell live. A structured methodology combined with Talent, Tools and Platform Partnerships provide a worry-free route to GMV.

2.

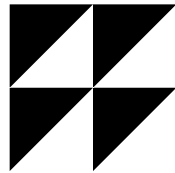
COMMUNITY-  
POWERED  
CONTENT ENGINES  
FUELING THE NEXT  
WAVE OF UGC



**“If each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants.”**

David Ogilvy’s recognition of hiring experts has always been profound. He was referring to employees— but the idea feels just as relevant for today’s marketing teams and their creator partnerships.

Modern marketing requires brands to maintain resonance with fast-moving, multi-faceted and culturally diverse audiences, all while staying within brand guidelines and budget constraints. The brands winning today are building creator and community-enabled content ecosystems that extend their voice, relevance, and cultural intelligence far beyond what any single internal team can achieve. Done right, these community-powered content engines bring the velocity, volume, and variety of content required to drive performance and generate demand in a social-first world at scale.



## Creating Content at the Speed of Culture

Influencers today are equipped to produce studio-quality content at speed, positioning them as ideal partners for brands that need real-time relevance. By contrast, traditional marketing workflows are often slowed by multi-layered approvals and rigid processes. Trends can rise and fall within days. To keep up, brands need partners who can create at the speed of social and culture itself.



## In Social, Not Just On Social

Arguably more important than speed, however, is fluency: a deep-rooted understanding of the social playground. It’s no longer enough for brands to be *on* social, brands have to be *in* social. Ingrained in the social language used, in content and popular content that inexplicably go viral, in conversations that happen every day providing deep insights into the mindset and emotion of our audience.

No combination of algorithms, AI prompts or A/B testing can outperform the authentic creativity of those who live and breathe their life *‘in social’*. Studies (TikTok 1st party meta-analysis and 3rd party research) show that branded creator content drives higher brand recall, stronger video view rates, and greater engagement than brand-only (non-creator) ads— precisely because it looks, sounds, and behaves like content people already choose to watch.

Platforms themselves continue to validate this shift. In mid-2025, TikTok introduced ‘Content Suite’ (TikTok One Content Suite ), allowing brands to surface organic content mentioning their brand and amplify this UGC as Spark Ads.

## Ogilvy Case Study ‘Vaseline Verified’

**“INGENIOUS”**  
verge

**Vaseline Verified**

**“The Vaseline Verified tick is a must-have”**  
yahoo!

**Context**  
Today, people are rediscovering the wonders of Vaseline jelly, finding ingenious new ways to use it. Shoe polish, spice guard, teeth whitener, pomade— viral Vaseline hacks are constantly shared online, almost daily.

**Challenge**  
With so many unofficial hacks out there with our name on it, we had to ask, do they actually work? And are they safe? Vaseline needed to step in and respond with the authority only we have.

**The Idea: Vaseline Verified**  
For the first time ever, we got scientists to test these viral hacks in labs.

In this campaign, our lab proof became the official Verification we used to engage directly with users and creators of hacks, stitching their hacks to officially verify them or debunk them — turning a social media trend into organic advertising content for Vaseline.

**87%** positive sentiments  
**450+** creators engaged  
**+13.9%** Retail Sales Value Growth\*  
**7.1 Million** organic views+reach

**+69%** Vaseline mentions  
**+1293%** hacks mentions  
**+43%** Underlying Econ Sales Growth\*  
**63.3 Million** total interactions

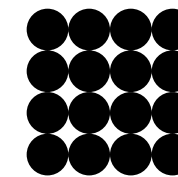
yahoo! CNET TODAY inki PRWeek New York City verge E! alire InStyle

We took into the trending world of hacks on social... By scientifically verifying hacks... Official Vaseline Verified status was shared... Aps made Verified hacks shoppable... Top creators were awarded with a trophy and re-commerce release... Even celebs and brands wanted to park, scoring collabs with Cole Walker, Doritos, and more.

## Know your Fans (and Fandoms)

Vogue’s Met Gala livestream had 14 million views on YouTube this past year, but creator-posted videos related to the topic were viewed over 550 million times. Gen Z and Gen Alpha increasingly see themselves as creators as much as consumers and take a participatory stance to how they engage online. Brands that understand how to leverage UGC, relinquish some control, and genuinely play *in social* stand to earn outsized attention from their communities.

Ogilvy’s award-winning Vaseline Verified campaign did just that. Partnering with the brand’s own R&D scientists, they put hundreds of viral Vaseline jelly tips sourced from online UGC to the test, debunked myths, and awarded a #VaselineVerified seal of approval to creators whose tips actually worked. The campaign generated over 136 million social views in its first three months and reinforced Vaseline Jelly’s status as the “Wonder Jelly”— all by elevating fan creativity.



## Scale Isn't Optional — It's the Winning Strategy

As trust in corporate messaging declines, scale has taken on a new meaning. It's not about shouting louder with the same old assets— it's about being present everywhere culture happens, through people audiences already trust.

As Unilever's CEO Fernando Fernandez puts it, *"Messages from brands coming from corporations are suspicious messages. So creating marketing activity systems in which others can speak for your brand at scale is very important... There are 19,000 zip codes in India. 5,674 municipalities in Brazil. I want one influencer in each of them. In some of them, I want 100."* (Barclays Fireside Chat with Fernando Fernandez, CEO)

This is the future of demand generation and where creators unlock a fundamental advantage: **creative diversity at scale**. Platform algorithms reward variation, not repetition. Meta has found that campaigns using diverse creative achieve 32% lower CPAs and 9% greater incremental reach— with >20 executions in a campaign potentially driving -29% incremental CPA. (Meta)

Brands need to build creator and community-enabled content systems that naturally deliver on speed, volume, and diversity — different faces, tones, formats, and cultural entry points— transforming a single narrative into hundreds or thousands of culturally relevant expressions, all working towards driving effectiveness on social.



# CONTENT LOYALTY PROGRAMS – THE NEW WAVE OF UGC

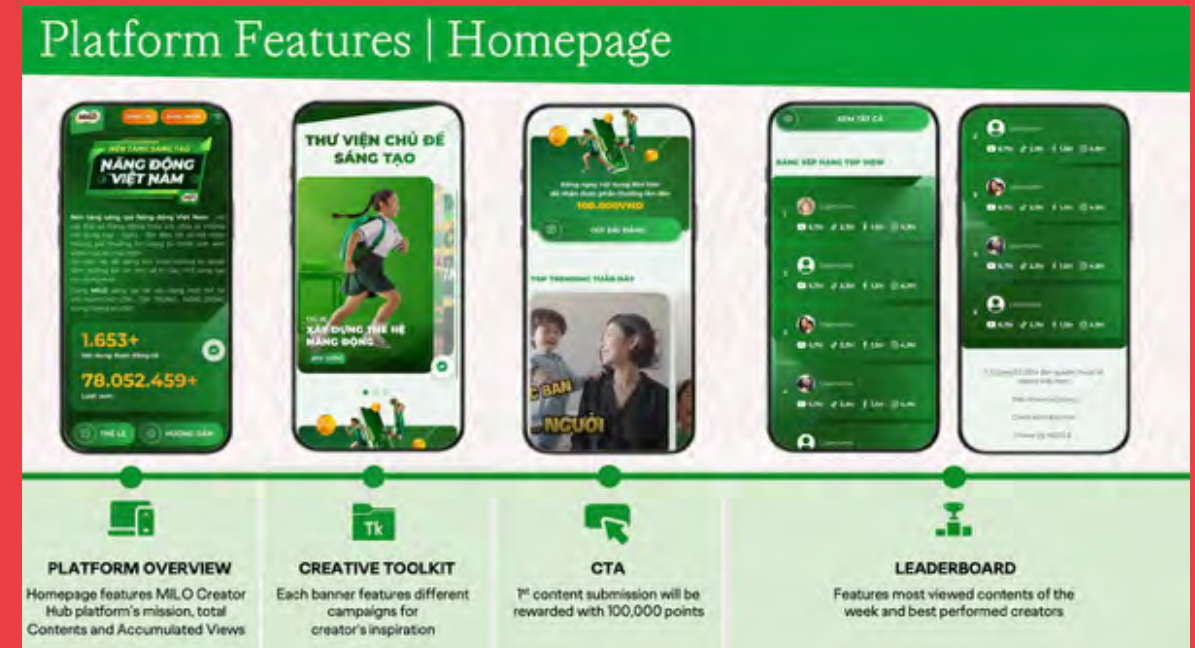
For years, in an attempt to secure retention and loyalty the “**Customer Loyalty Program**” was the mark of a truly loved brand, offering discounts and bonuses for those who stacked up enough points through purchases. Even now, airlines and hotels expertly encourage the more affluent Millennial traveller to save up for otherwise unattainable upgrades, and retail club cards help Boomers save on their weekly grocery bills.

But in today social-first world, where creating content comes second nature to today’s social-native Gen-Z, and where first-to-trend

bragging-rights have become legitimate social currency, brands that create “**content loyalty programs**” will be the first to leverage a world of willing creators and their untapped earned reach potential.

Brands will use existing CRM platforms to create online portals for any user to upload UGC to collect points, prizes, early-access products and exclusive fan experiences, claiming that big pay out one day, all while building presence for brands “*in social*” conversations that matter.

## Ogilvy Case Study: Nestle Milo – Creator Hub



In Vietnam, Milo is an iconic brand with a strong loyal following. We wanted to elevate that advocacy while rewarding our most loyal content creators. We built an app ecosystem allowing every consumer to sign up and create content, securing points based on performance in order to redeem Milo merchandise.

The content loyalty app not only takes in content submissions and facilitates content approvals—it tracks the performance of posted content and allows Milo to boost the post or even buy content outright. The program received 2,638 user sign-ups and drove over 78 million views from content posted in its first year.

# HOW TO START BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY-POWERED CONTENT ENGINE TOMORROW

There's no one single way to building a community-powered content engine. Brands can activate this through a range of approaches: cultivating a core group of long-term creators, unlocking organic fan-led UGC, empowering employee advocates, scaling affiliate content, and even designing proprietary content loyalty programs. Regardless of the model, successful systems are underpinned by a set of fundamentals:



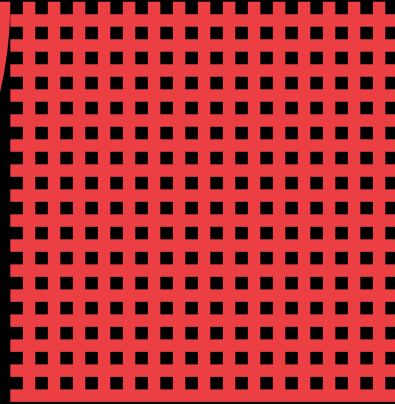
1.



Design for Creator  
(and Content)  
Diversity

Look beyond follower count and into the spectrum of creators relevant to your brand, their content styles and formats, and select for diversity. Develop long-term partnerships and provide a rich on-boarding experience that sets clear but flexible content expectations.

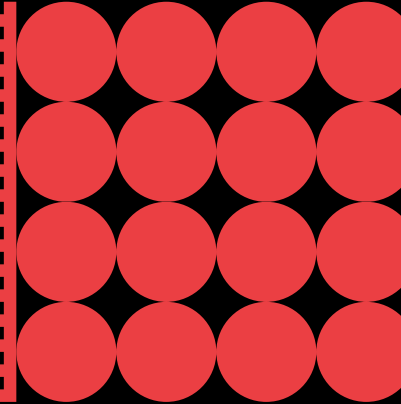
2.



Design for speed  
to post, not speed  
to approve

The nature of trends are we don't know when they will happen. Set your creators the challenge of spotting and reacting to trends that work for both the brand and their content authentically.

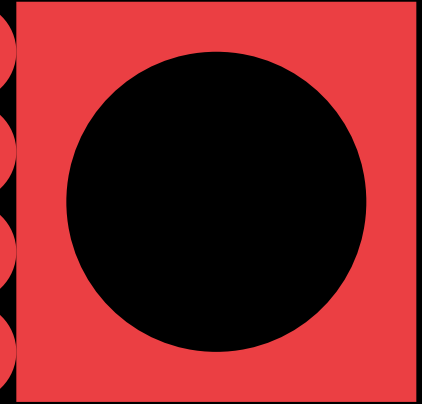
3.



Build systems  
to capture and  
scale UGC

Develop a clear process to identify, rights-manage and amplify high-performing content quickly to maximise effectiveness. This can also be your insights engine into fan behavior in and around your brand.

4.

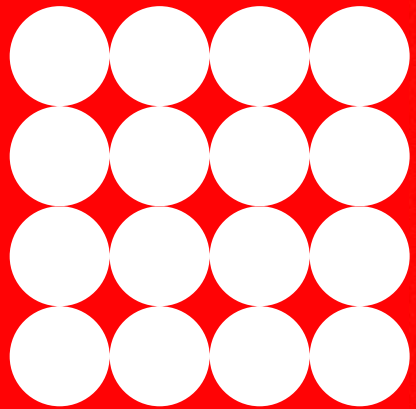


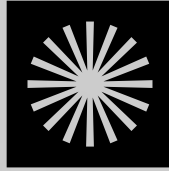
Consumer loyalty  
program? Think  
Content Loyalty  
Program

The next wave of UGC and always-on conversations will come from content loyalty from your everyday consumer. Start planning how a content loyalty program might look like for your brand.

3.

FROM SMALL SCREENS  
TO SERIALIZED INFLUENCE:  
2026 CREATORS ARE  
BUILDING WORLDS,  
NOT POSTS





2024 and 2025 taught us something fundamental about how audiences behave.

## People do not just scroll. They return.

Nearly half of Gen Z now prefer YouTube and social video platforms over traditional television and paid streaming. Gen Alpha goes even further, often turning on YouTube as their first entertainment choice in the living room — the same way previous generations turned on cable. For younger audiences, YouTube is not a feed. It is a destination.

In a landscape defined by information overload and ongoing political uncertainty, this behavioral shift matters. Audiences are opting out of fleeting dopamine hits and gravitating toward content that feels comforting, familiar, and worth showing up for repeatedly. This is the swing from transactional clips to serialized entertainment — and it is the defining evolution of influence.

Audiences today want continuity. They want formats they recognize, voices they trust, and narratives they actively choose to follow. What we are seeing is creator-led content that behaves more like television than traditional influencer marketing. It feels like appointment viewing instead of interruption.



THE BIGI  
COLLECTIVE

# BUMBLE'S NEW BACHELORETTE



A clear example of this shift is Chicken Shop Date with Amelia Dimoldenberg x Bumble. What began as a simple YouTube format evolved into a recurring series with a distinct point of view. Bumble's partnership was not a one-off placement; it was sustained collaboration embedded into a format audiences already loved. The brand earned attention by being entertaining first and promotional second.

This evolution is now extending beyond social platforms and into mainstream streaming. In 2025, Netflix republished Mark Rober's most popular YouTube videos as Mark Rober's CrunchLabs. These were not new originals. They were existing creator episodes repackaged for a new audience — and they performed, reaching number one in Kids and number five overall on Netflix. The takeaway is clear: creator content

with built-in audience loyalty can travel across platforms at scale.

Importantly, this behavior is not limited to consumer entertainment. We see the same dynamics in B2B.

When tasked with positioning Viasat as the undisputed leader in connectivity within Business Aviation, the solution was not isolated posts but episodic storytelling. A three-episode podcast series anchored by influential industry voices generated 1.8 million impressions and more than 80,000 engagements, with overwhelmingly positive sentiment. The campaign succeeded because it rewarded return listening, not one-time exposure. Distributed across creator channels, Viasat's owned platforms, Out-of-Home at EBACE, and ongoing paid LinkedIn,



the format worked because it respected how decision-makers actually consume content.

For brands, this shift changes everything. Influence is no longer about reach alone. It is about retention, watch time, emotional connection, and story continuity. Creator IP now matters more than follower count, which is why 92% of brands prefer long-term creator partnerships over one-off activations.

AI is accelerating this evolution, not replacing it. By removing friction from production while

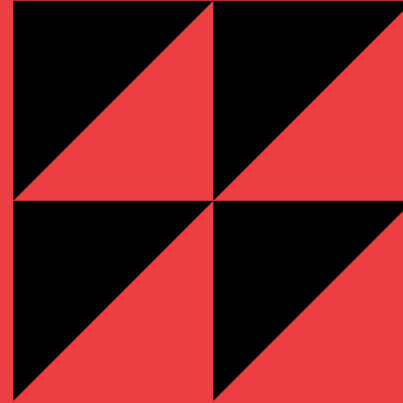
preserving creative voice, AI enables consistency at scale — the foundation of appointment viewing.

By 2026, the most important question for marketers will not be how many impressions a creator can deliver. It will be what kind of story you can build together — and whether audiences are willing to come back for the next episode.

This is not a trend. It is the new foundation of influence.

# WHAT THIS ACTUALLY REQUIRES FROM BRANDS

1.



Stop buying placements. Start backing showrunners.

The most effective brands will stop treating creators as just media inventory and start treating them as creative leads. Episodic content only works when creators are trusted to build tone, pacing, and narrative arcs over time. Brands that insist on message discipline in episode one rarely earn loyalty by episode five.

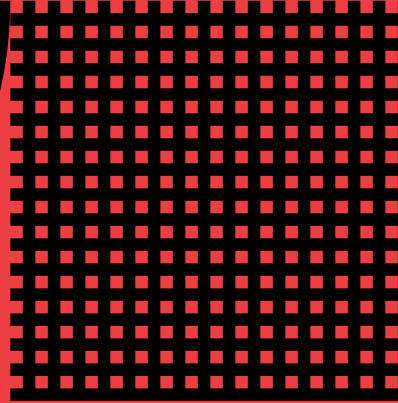
2.



Optimize for return, not reaction.

The real signal of success is not the first episode's reach. It is whether audiences come back. Brands should prioritize metrics like repeat viewership, average watch time across instalments, and comment continuity that shows familiarity with the format. Episodic influence compounds slowly, then all at once.

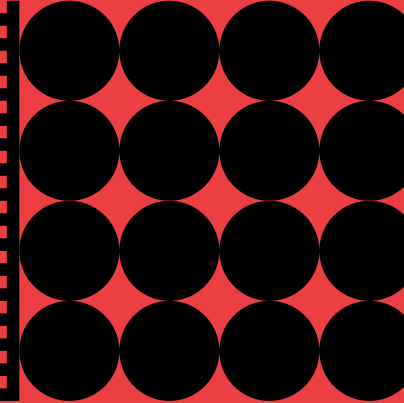
3.



Build formats that can survive without you.

The strongest brand partnerships help create repeatable formats that travel across platforms and seasons, even when the brand is not always visible. If the content collapses when the logo disappears, it was advertising, not intellectual property.

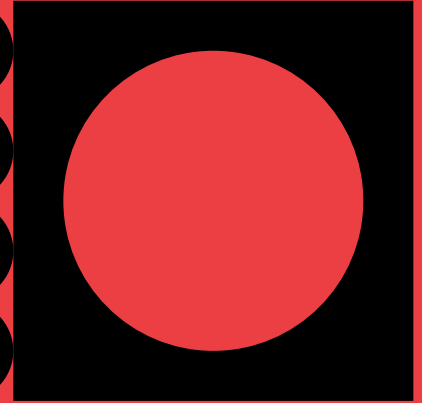
4.



Give creators room to be off-message.

Narrative trust is built through moments that are human, unexpected, and sometimes imperfect. Brands that overcorrect for safety flatten the very tension that makes episodic content worth returning to. Cultural relevance requires restraint as much as presence.

5.



Use AI to protect ambition, not replace it.

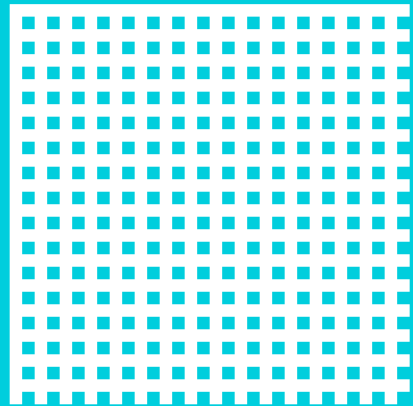
AI should remove friction, not personality. It works best when it absorbs the unglamorous work such as editing variations, localization, cutdowns, and pacing tests. This gives creators space to focus on story, tone, and voice, which are the real drivers of appointment viewing.

**By 2026, the key question for marketers will not be how many impressions a creator can deliver. It will be what kind of story you can build together. This shift is not a trend. It is the new foundation of influence.**

*\*TechStock? \*\*Hobo.Video*

4.

# THUMBS UP: NEW EXPECTATIONS FOR INFLUENCER ROI



# 50%

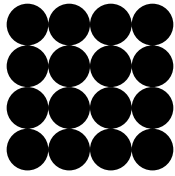
of marketers still can't prove whether influencer marketing works and 44% are running campaigns without clear KPI's (Research by SAMY, 2025).



The global economic landscape of 2026 presents a strategic inflection point for influencer marketing and the brands, agencies and creators that operate within it. Amid rising pressure for precise performance measurement, accelerated content production, AI innovation, and risk mitigation, one demand has surged above all else: demonstrable ROI.

Economic uncertainty hasn't dampened appetite for creator investment — it has sharpened it. Influencer marketing is no longer a peripheral “nice-to-have”; it now holds its own strategic seat at the mixed media and marketing table, expected to deliver strategic and measurable business outcomes, not just buzz.

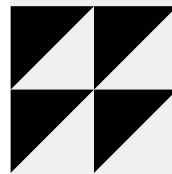




## Unprecedented Investment & Maturing Strategies

Brand budgets reflect this shift. According to recent data (Creator IQ), 22% of organizations now spend over \$5 million annually on influencer marketing, underscoring both scale and intent toward measurable impact. Meanwhile, industry benchmarks suggest influencer marketing delivers an average of \$5.78 in revenue for every \$1 spent, with optimized campaigns yielding returns as high as \$11–\$18 per \$1 invested. These figures explain why 92% of brands plan to partner with influencers in 2026 (Vogue Business) — even as overall budgets face pressure.

As a result, the increased investment requires increased justification. Today's leaders find themselves needing to rewrite their measurement frameworks to match the same commercial rigor demanded of paid media, search, and direct response channels. But this increased scrutiny on spend justification doesn't tell the full story. It's not just about spending more; it's about spending smarter.



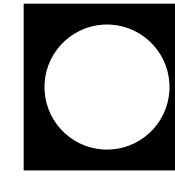
## Evolving Measurement: Beyond Vanity Metrics

As creator marketing matures, so too does the sophisticated measurement of its impact. *We now know that reach without connection no longer correlates accurately with purchase behavior* and the days of relying solely on awareness metrics are over. For years, influencer success was evaluated using reach, impressions, and likes — that proverbial thumbs up metrics that signaling the 'nice-to-have' attention, but stops short of quantifiable preference, advocacy or influence to purchase, and a long way off assuring of any commercial value. In 2026, those metrics are just the

opening-round ante. If you're looking to go all-in with your marketing budget, today's high stakes game is ROI.

The traditional debate of whether creator marketing drives awareness or performance has dissolved.

It has now been replaced by a nuanced, multi-tiered approach. New platform capabilities and AI-assisted technologies are creating fresh measurement opportunities.



## Metrics That Matter for 2026

The focus is now on tangible outcomes. Core metrics now include:

### Direct Revenue & Conversions

UTM, Affiliate links & codes, Sales, Conversion Rate, CPA, average order value (AOV), and return on ad spend (ROAS)

### Customer Lifetime Value

(CLTV) Long-term value extends measurement beyond short spikes in activity and quantifies the reinforced trust from influencers

### Brand Health & Lift

Earned Media Value (EMV—83% consider it key for non-direct ROI), Quantitative brand lift studies, Sentiment analysis, Brand recall, Audience Growth Rate, Share of Voice (SOV).

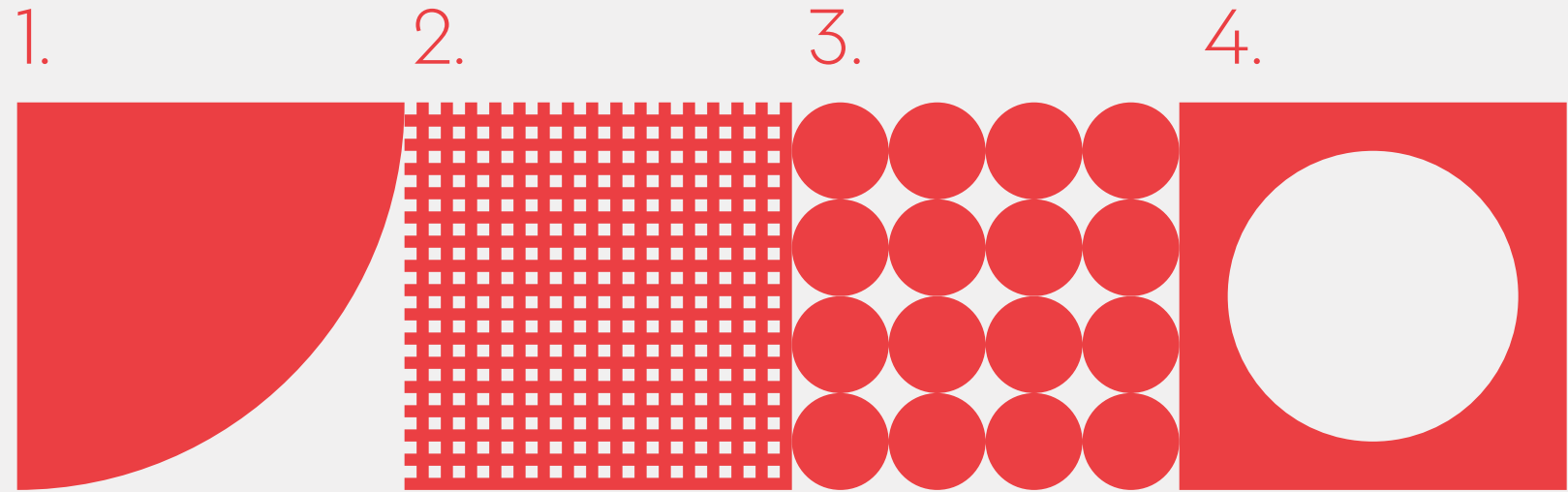
### Engagement Quality & Perception

Saves, Shares, Video Completion Rate (70-80% VCR benchmark), Comment Sentiment Analysis now outweigh basic raw likes.

This shift reflects a broader trend: companies are no longer asking, "Does creator marketing work?" but "How can we build optimal infrastructure to guarantee its success?," demanding advanced cross-channel insights, agile data management, and sophisticated attribution models.

# FOUR PIVOTAL ENABLERS TO SUPERCHARGE YOUR CREATOR ROI IN 2026

Fueled by increased AI utilization, influence measurement shifts decisively towards ROI indicators like revenue, CPA's, affiliate links, and long-term brand lift. The objective: more strategic accountability, and commercially disciplined campaigns, with influencer data seamlessly integrating into overall analytics. These are our 4 key enablers to look out for in 2026:



## 1. Long-Term Creator Partnerships Over Single Posts

Creators are no longer just media channels but strategic brand partners and consultants. Data shows ROI compounds over time as creators deepen their brand familiarity, and audience resonance leading to more natural integrations and higher audience recall.

## 2. Whitelisting and Paid Amplification

This powerful tactic allows brands to run ads through an influencer's account. Blending the trust of creator-native content with precise paid media targeting. These ads feel less intrusive, consistently outperforming traditional branded ads on CPC and ROAS.

## 3. AI-Driven Predictive Analytics

AI transcends discovery, becoming a standard for ROI forecasting. AI tools now analyze consumer behavioral insights and historical data to predict creator performance, enabling real-time campaign adjustments and automated performance-based payouts.

## 4. Social Commerce and Shoppable Posts

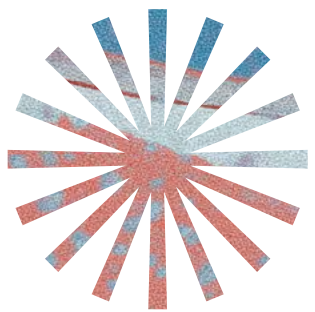
Integrated shopping features (e.g., TikTok Shop, Instagram Checkout) transform social platforms into frictionless storefronts. Influencers can now drive direct purchases within content, shortening the buyer journey and boosting conversion rates. For brands, this delivers real-time sales data tied directly to specific creators, making ROI clearer than ever.

2026 marks the **Era of Influence ROI** — where influencer programs are evaluated with the same commercial rigor as paid search or performance media. Brands that succeed will be those that integrate sophisticated measurement frameworks, advanced tools, and data-driven attribution models into every stage of planning and execution.

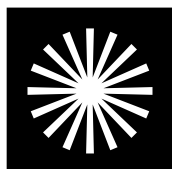
Vanity is not enough. **Impact is mandatory, measurement is strategic, and influence drives accountable growth.**

5.

EQUITY  
PARTNERSHIPS:  
AND THE SPORTS  
CREATOR BOOM



David Ogilvy reminded us that “a brand is the consumer’s idea of a product.” In 2026, that “idea” increasingly belongs not to corporations, but to the creators and athletes who co-own, co-design and co-defend these ideas. The last decade of influencer marketing was built on rented attention—sponsored posts, short-term ambassadorships and logo heavy campaigns. The next decade will be driven by performance and ownership.



## From Rented Reach to Co-owned IP

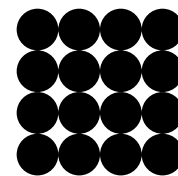
They are not collabs bolted onto a marketing calendar; they are businesses where the creator’s equity, values and experience are structurally baked in. This is the shift from creators as *media* to creator as *infrastructure*. For brands, it’s both an opportunity and a threat: if you don’t design meaningful ways to share ownership—financial, creative, or cultural—creators will simply build competing brands themselves. The next wave of growth will come from shared ownership. Equity, not impressions, will be the most powerful incentive.



## Creators are the new entrepreneurs

When it comes to top creators, they know their worth, and they know selling their image and community as the one-off face of a campaign for a few posts at a time is not scalable; non-compete exclusivity makes sure of that. They want control, they want opportunity, they want ownership. The fastest growing “influencer plays” aren’t posts, they’re PLC’s.

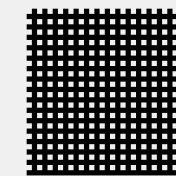
Creator founded and creator led brands are outperforming category averages because they are built with audience trust from day one. Prime, cofounded by YouTubers, KSI & Logan Paul, reportedly surpassed over \$1 billion in retail sales within two years of launch, outpacing legacy leaders like Coca-Cola in social share of voice. Hailey Bieber’s Rhode (\$1 billion), Mr Beast Feastables (\$250+ million) Chamberlain Coffee (\$50 million), are just a few examples of how creator-driven brands turn fandom into customers and distribution networks. Fans believe the creator had a hand in the formula, the fit, the flavor, the experience. And in many cases, they’re right.



## Why Equity, Why Now?

Three forces are converging:

- 1. Maturity of the Creator Economy**  
Creators understand their own commercial power more than ever and the tech platforms now exist to help them launch on their own. A flat fee post looks disproportionate compared to 100% of compounding wealth from product ownership or even partially commissioned product sales.
- 2. Trust is an increasingly scarce asset**  
As AI slop, ad saturation, and mass creator content increases, trust is harder to earn. Over 70% of Gen Z say they trust creators and athletes more than traditional ads or even celebrities (The Drum). When access to trust can no longer be bought, brands must incentivize and build it authentically.
- 3. Technological and platform risk provides both opportunity and risk**  
eCommerce platforms have made selling creator products easier than ever, but with that rapid innovation, both creators and brands know algorithms can change overnight which puts risk on single channel strategies. Creator x Collaboration that owns products, IP, teams or platforms gives both sides security and long-term security against possible market movements.



## New Models of Creator Equity

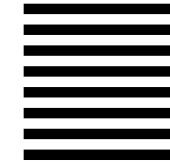
Creator Equity can take many forms—financial, creative, reputational. The most effective partnerships combine all three. We’re seeing four dominant models emerge:

- 1. Creator Founded Brands (Built Around a Person)**  
The creator is a true founder, with meaningful ownership, product responsibility and long-term commitment.
- 2. Creator as Cofounder of a New Line or Venture**  
Established companies incubate new products or subbrands around a creator’s insight, creativity and audience. Think beauty or fashion lines that graduate into standalone brands.
- 3. Equity for Direction Partnerships**  
Creators join as investor advisors or “Chief Creative Partner” with a minority stake in exchange for ongoing storytelling and product development feedback.
- 4. Community Backed and Co-owned IP**  
Some creators are building IP (shows, formats, games, leagues) where fans can participate through NFT style participation, crowdfunding or exclusive memberships. Brands can then coinvest.

The common thread: the creator’s upside is tied to the brand’s long-term performance, not just short-term campaign metrics.



## The Sports Creator Boom: Athletes as Lifestyle Brand Owners



Nowhere is the shift from endorsement to equity more visible—and more underleveraged—than in sport. Sport remains one of the few live entertainment categories still growing in scale and cultural relevance, from the Premier League and IPL to the WSL, UFC, Formula 1 that dominate livestreams and are moving into on-demand platforms like Netflix and Twitch to access new audiences.

Athletes have become powerful media platforms in their own right, enjoying year-round relevance that stretches far beyond their sport to encompass fashion, wellness, gaming, food, beauty, and even politics. Over 80% of college athletes are active on at least one social platform, averaging 2–3x higher engagement rates than macro influencers with similar followings (Captiv8), and the newly formed US NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) market alone has surpassed \$1.2 billion annually with projections above \$2 billion by 2027 (Opendorse)— formalizing what is already true worldwide: athlete influence is a serious business.

The most progressive brands are moving past logo placements towards equity based partnerships where athletes and sport creators take real stakes in products, teams, and platforms—from footballers cofounding fashion or fragrance lines, cricketers in India cofounding fitness and gaming ventures, to women’s football and basketball stars taking ownership positions in beauty, wellness, and athleisure brands.

Caleb Williams (US college football) While still a college athlete, Caleb used his USC profile to launch his own merch and creative IP while taking equity positions in categories like men’s grooming and digital collectibles. He has cocreated product lines and platforms, demonstrating how top college athletes can move directly into ownership and brand building.

Although performing in a less mainstream sport (gymnastics), Olivia “Livvy” Dunne has monetized her massive TikTok/IG presence, cocreating activewear collections with Vuori, and runs recurring merch drops around her personal brand.

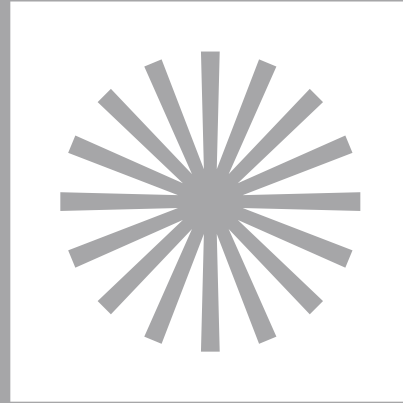
The same pattern is emerging in “alternative” markets beyond the US and Europe. In Asia, young athletes are rapidly becoming fullstack creators whose value extends well beyond competition results:

Yuzuru Hanyu, an Olympic figure skater from Japan established his own company and effectively created his own performance brand: solo ice shows including broadcast licensing, branded merch and limited-edition collaborations around these shows that are staples on Japanese fan forums and now micro industries on reseller platforms in their own right.

For brands, the opportunity is clear: use athletes and sports creators not just as reach, but as equity partners who help shape and share in the longterm value you build together to build loyal audiences for life.

# HOW TO DESIGN YOUR CREATOR EQUITY PLAYBOOK

1.



## Relinquishing Ringfenced Control

Decide which categories, markets, or new lines are worth building with creators from the ground up, and limit equity partnerships.

2.



## Select Partners for POV, Not Followers

Prioritize creators and athletes with a clear role in culture, strong engagement, and a believable link to your category—especially women and emerging sports stars already talking about lifestyle, wellness or style, not just performance.

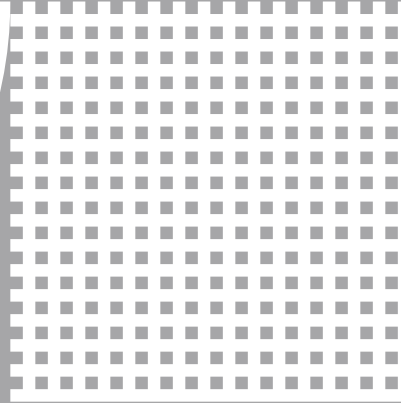
3.



## Keep Structures Simple, Fair and Clear

Use straightforward equity or revenue share models with basic vesting, explicit expectations, and shared crisis protocols so both brand and creator understand how they win, what they own, and how they exit.

4.



## Use Sports as a community incubator

Pilot equity style deals with a cohort of athletes across pro, college and alternative sports, cocreating products, academies, or formats that would make sense for the community, even if your model is different elsewhere.

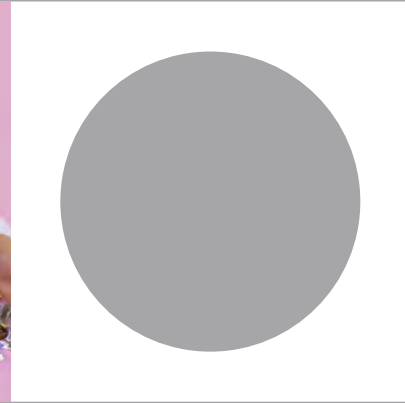
5.



## Start with Positioning, Not Product

Build trust in your newly formed collaboration and purpose in your positioning through content first, long before you ever push a product. This not only builds excitement but creates identity and community that translates into advocacy.

6.

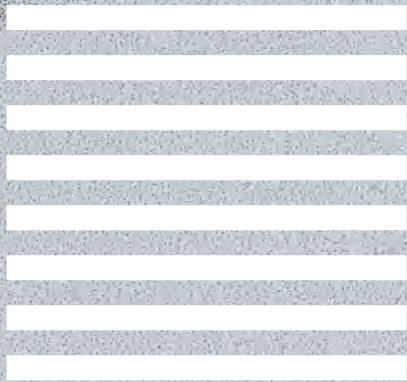


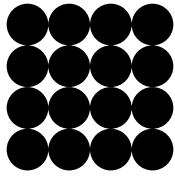
## Measure the Compound, Not the Sales Spike

Look beyond launch day sellouts to track shifts in brand preference, repeat purchase, owned communities, and cultural presence over 12–36 months—the real indicators that shared ownership is building lasting value.

6.

SOCIAL  
BEYOND  
THE FEED: IRL  
AND PRIVATE  
COMMUNITIES  
COME TO  
THE FORE





The Guardian reported that there are now over 1.3 billion videos on TikTok labelled as “AI-generated” content. Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri predicted in a recent Instagram post that “we’re going to move from assuming what we see is real by default, to starting with skepticism. Paying attention to who is sharing something and why. This will be uncomfortable – we’re genetically predisposed to believing our eyes.”

In this new information economy, a powerful countertrend is emerging: users are actively pushing back, seeking a healthier, more intentional relationship with technology. This growing intentionality is underscored by a rising tide of online skepticism, fueled by the proliferation of AI-generated content across our social feeds.

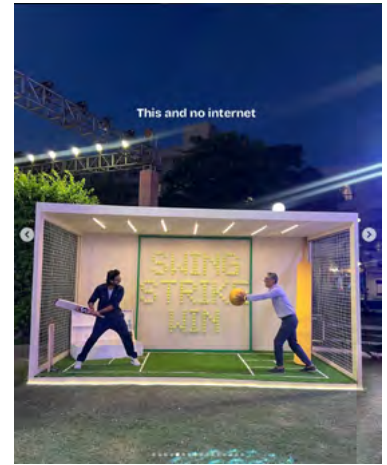
This has resulted in people seeking more of what social used to be – a space where they can trust that they are engaging with authentic, human interaction – with influencers often responsible for creating and fostering these spaces.



We have seen this manifest as a significant surge in **IRL (In Real Life) community and fandom meet-ups**, as well as in-person events driven by influencer communities. In an era where digital authenticity is questioned, these interactions serve as a way to foster more meaningful relationships with their community, transforming online followers into genuine advocates by offering undeniably human-led experiences.

Concurrently, **private communities**—like Discord servers, Patreon groups, Twitch subscriptions, and increasingly, Substack newsletters—are becoming pivotal hubs for creators. These curated spaces offer a sanctuary from other AI-fueled social platforms, providing environments that prioritize genuine human interaction and content. They foster deeper loyalty over mass virality, allowing for richer, more authentic conversations, exclusive content, and the development of unique creator IP (podcasts, books, live events, video series). Ogilvy data indicates that **55% of users now prefer engaging with creators in private, curated online spaces**, leading to a **20% increase in brand loyalty for brands active within these communities**.

“Dark social” channels like WhatsApp and Telegram groups are emerging as incredibly potent – albeit challenging – avenues for influence. In a landscape of growing skepticism, these private messaging platforms cut through the noise, offering direct, intimate access to highly engaged community groups. This direct, often one-on-one or small-group communication inherently feels more human and trustworthy, creating significant opportunities for both B2C and B2B brands. While authentically penetrating these spaces requires nuance and trust, they represent one of the most powerful tools in a brand’s arsenal when done right, precisely because they promise a more human and authentic exchange.



# What does this look like for brands?: Ogilvy Case Study

Brands are beginning to explore the power of bringing creators together in person to build relationships, share brand values and insider information that ultimately builds advocacy and retention.

Knowing that consumers are actively moving into these spaces, brands can find meaningful ways to give back to these communities through exclusive access, education, or entertainment. Co-creating with these communities is essential to ensure the brand is welcomed into the space and positioned as a facilitator to the community's own ambitions.

In 2025, Ogilvy launched **Ogilvy Creator Camps**, a combined launch and event model to support brands running creator events, training and immersion sessions.

We are already seeing many brands using this model to launch their yearly Creator Programs. Cadburys Dairy Milk brought together 30 of Pakistan's top creators for their program onboarding. While The Coca-Cola Company ran Creator Summits across their global markets, inviting hundreds of passionate fans to immerse themselves in the brand.

In Shanghai, Ogilvy and Disney Studios leant into the growing trend and launched Film-Fan Run Clubs in China through private WeChat messaging groups, aligned to the interest groups of the target audience.

Through these groups, Disney Studios dropped exclusive product, arranged meetups and fostered conversation on discussion boards - all through direct messaging



# FOUR WAYS TO CONNECT WITH CONSUMERS, AS THEY SEEK SOCIAL BEYOND THE SMARTPHONE:

Simply showing up in these communities without a meaningful strategy is fraught with risk. As spaces that feel inherently free from brands and advertising, it is critical to navigate in a tactful way. Below are four ways that brands can begin to explore this hyper-valuable channel.



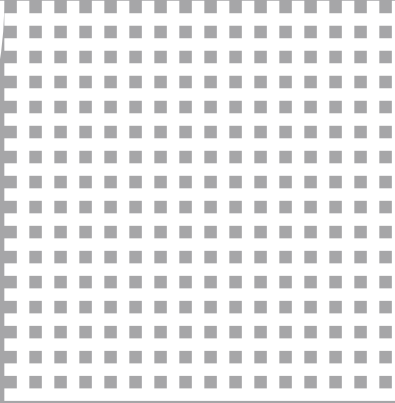
1.



## Facilitate Irl Experiences

Support and co-create in-person events, meet-ups, and fan gatherings led by your partnered creators. Offer exclusive access or unique experiences that provide undeniable human connection, thereby deepening the bond between community members and your brand through authentic engagement.

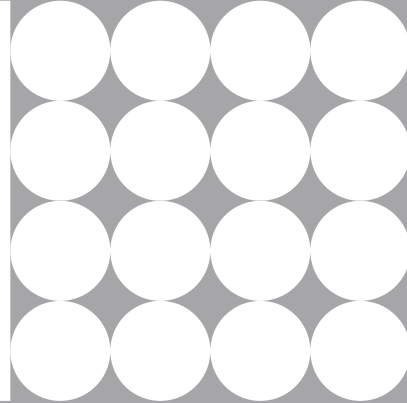
2.



## Engage In Private Community Platforms

Identify the Discord servers, Patreon groups, or Substack communities where your target audience and relevant creators congregate. Participate authentically, offer exclusive content or other value to the community, and foster real, unfiltered dialogue that builds trust with the consumer.

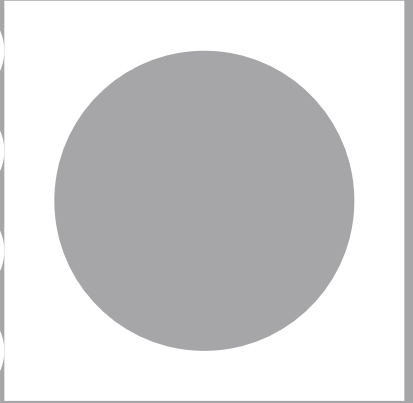
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## Sponsor Exclusive Content For Subscribed Members

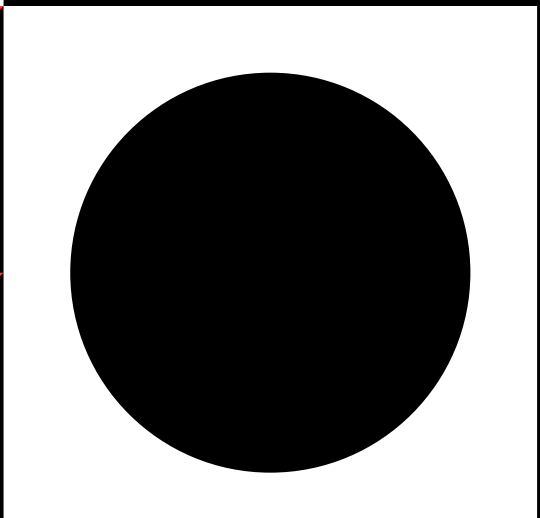
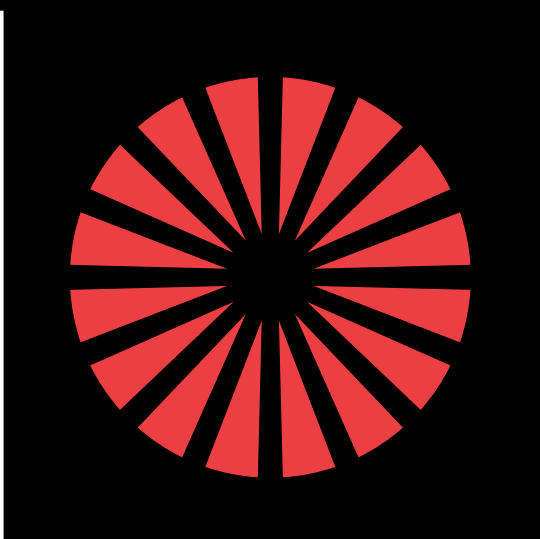
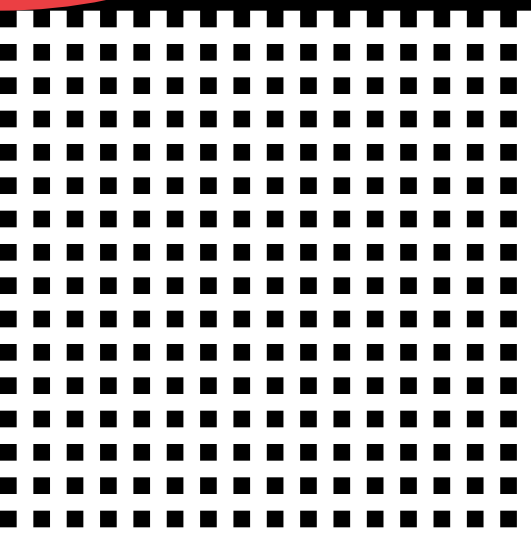
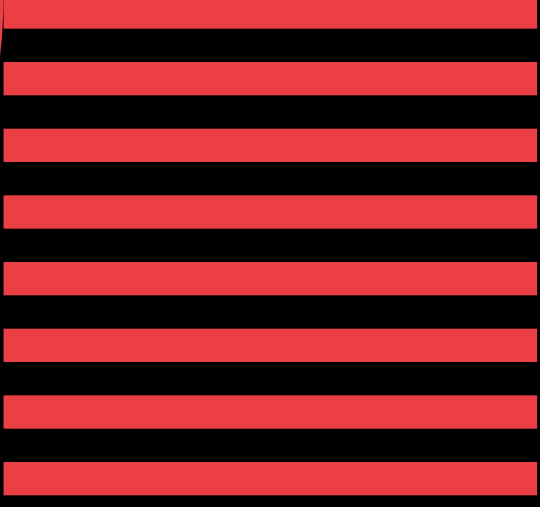
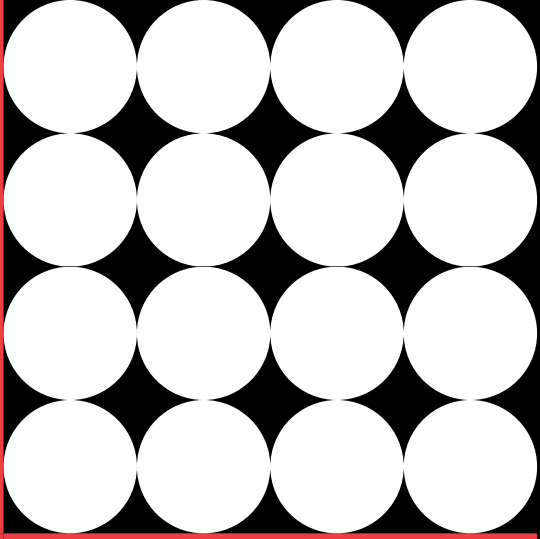
For platforms like Patreon or Substack, collaborate with creators to offer their communities premium, in-depth content that rewards their most dedicated followers and positions your brand as the facilitator of that value.

4.



## Strategically Explore “Dark Social”

For B2C, consider WhatsApp channels for exclusive promotions or customer service. For B2B, explore Telegram groups for thought leadership and direct engagement with industry professionals, always prioritizing value and permission.



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Sources:  
WPP Open, CreatorIQ, Statusphere, Stack Influence, Socialbook, Sproutsocial, Meltwater, Databox, Martech, Impact, Ogilvy UK social report.

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