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# Creator economy in 3D

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# What's inside

Introduction	3
Clarifying the creator-influencer divide	4
Where the consumer-creator bond translates to brand trust	6
Building a stronger creator-brand partnership	9
How top brands differentiate their strategy	13
How Deloitte can help	15
Get in touch	16
Methodology	17
Acknowledgements	18



# Introduction

The creator economy is helping to fundamentally change the way consumers engage with brands, media, and purchasing channels. What used to be an incremental opportunity for messaging engagement now represents a \$250 billion revenue opportunity that is set to nearly double over the next five years.<sup>1</sup> With the right creator's recommendation, Deloitte found three out of five consumers surveyed are likely to positively engage with or make a purchase from a brand.<sup>2</sup>

However, many brands are approaching the creator economy with *influencer* marketing strategies, which could fall short of tapping into the creator economy's full potential. While influencers are adept at providing brand exposure across a wide assortment of audiences—content creators often help brands penetrate deeper into niche communities and bridge a more personal connection with their audience.

Brand marketing executives who are looking to expand the impact of their social campaigns could have much to gain if they understand the relationship between consumers, creators, and brands and adjust their strategies accordingly. Deloitte's study drives into the heart of these interconnecting relationships by surveying more than 2,000 consumers, more than 500 creators, and 500 brands, and blending those insights with Deloitte subject-matter experience. In this study we show:

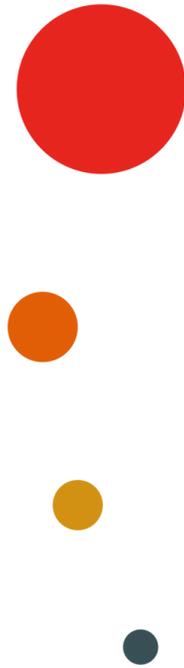
- What differentiates content creators from influencers
- What drives consumer trust in creator-brand endorsements
- How brands can forge stronger and longer-lasting relationships with creators
- How successful brands are leading the way



# Clarifying the creator-influencer divide

Many brands use “creator” and “influencer” interchangeably—and there are, in fact, many areas of overlap between the two: Both produce content, act primarily on social media channels, and seek to monetize their work.

But content creators tend to be better suited for specific objectives, have a deeper depth of audience penetration, and appeal to consumers on a different level than influencers. We outline these differences in the below table (page 5).



# Content creators vs. influencers: Key differences

The following table is the Deloitte perspective on the relative differences between content creators and influencers. It is crucial to note that these differences are not absolute but represent **general tendencies** of these two categories, and this table should be used as a primer.

The dimensions disclosed in the table are an important first step for brands looking to execute a successful creator strategy. But for brands to help get the most out of their creator partnerships, it is important they understand the underlying drivers behind the consumer-creator bond and how this translates to brand trust.

	Content creators	Influencers
Marketing objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drive deeper relevance within niche communities and sub-communities</li> <li>• Drive bottom-middle funnel consumer purchasing behavior, specifically in-app, ultimately resulting in speed to sale</li> <li>• Might not lead to mass scale of sales</li> <li>• Drive higher audience engagement and foster true connection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drive broader relevance across diverse range of audiences</li> <li>• Boost brand visibility and awareness—particularly for tentpole moments</li> <li>• Drive top-middle funnel consumer behavior and long-term consideration</li> <li>• May lead to mass scale of sales</li> </ul>
Targeting and reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better suited for reaching niche or interest-based audiences</li> <li>• Exist in nontraditional social media platforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective at reaching a wider range of audiences</li> <li>• May have platforms beyond social media (e.g., website, brand, merchandise)</li> </ul>
Audience appeal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatable and personal connection with their audience</li> <li>• Educate and entertain their audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aspirational draw to their audience</li> <li>• Celebrity-like lifestyle and appeal</li> </ul>
Working relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creator drives co-creation with brand. Desire more control over partnered content—stronger desire for creative freedom</li> <li>• Run many aspects of the business themselves—skilled in content production</li> <li>• Passionate about the content they create and will continue to create regardless of brand deals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While personal brand/image is prioritized, more willing to co-create with the brand or share branded assets and/or messaging</li> <li>• Content likely focuses more on brand deals; aspirations to be marketing vehicle for brands</li> <li>• Face of their business, but usually work with larger teams that handle other aspects (e.g., management, production)</li> </ul>

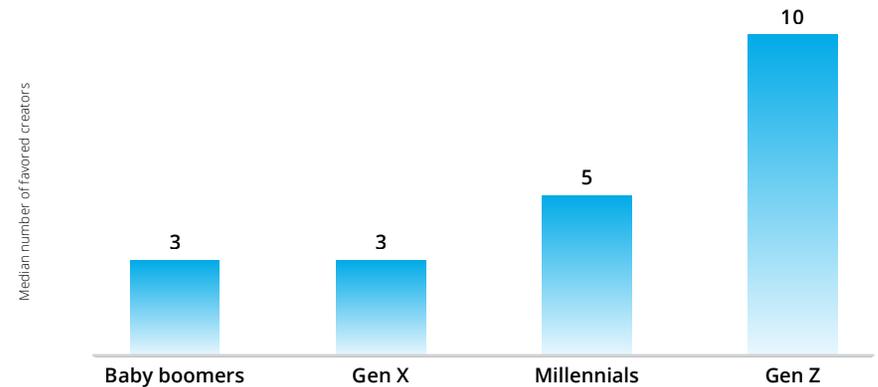
# Where the consumer-creator bond translates to brand trust

Content creators are a growing media channel in the entertainment landscape. Gen Z and millennials spend 26% to 37% more time on social media than previous generations.<sup>3</sup> This increase in social media time means the average person is engaging with many different voices in content from leading studios, micro networks, and amateur user-generated content, to full-time content creators.

## Certain creators have more sway than others

Among the hundreds or thousands of voices that often fill consumers' social media feeds, we found the average consumer has five *favored* content creators.<sup>4</sup> These creators are the social media equivalent of a favorite TV show, perhaps with less regular schedules. This trend also appears to be increasing with each generation, with the median Gen Z social media user surveyed having 10 of these favored creators (figure 1).

Figure 1: Median number of favored creators by generation



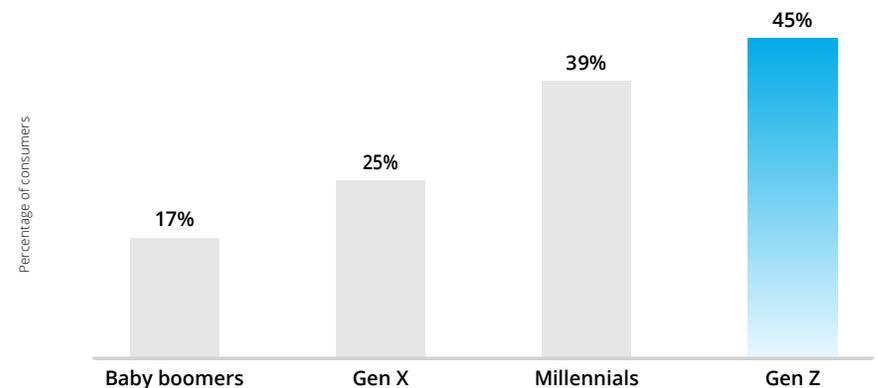
Source: Deloitte 2023 Creator Economy in 3D: Consumer Survey  
n = 2004

Question: About how many content creators do you actively follow across different platforms? i.e. you actively look for new updates or content from this user

Deloitte defines **favored creators** as creators that consumers **actively seek out for new updates and content**, as opposed to creators that consumers engage passively on their feed.

These favored creators provide a network of engagement nodes for consumers that commands their active attention in a sea of content, but also provide a more personal and relatable media experience than traditional media: 77% of consumer-creator relationships we surveyed could be traced to either a shared interest or desire to learn from that creator.<sup>5</sup> Consumers also increasingly admire these creators—with 45% of Gen Z following creators out of admiration for their lifestyle (figure 2).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: Consumers following creators out of lifestyle admiration by generation



Source: Deloitte 2023 Creator Economy in 3D: Consumer Survey  
n = 2004

Question: What are the top reasons you follow the creators that you do? (select all that apply)

## Favored creators can have a significant impact on consumer-brand trust

The deeper connection between consumers and their favorite creators has a direct translation to consumer-brand trust. When a favored creator recommends a brand, three in five consumers surveyed reported they are more likely to positively engage with that brand, including purchasing that brand's product, exploring their other products, and recommending that brand to others.

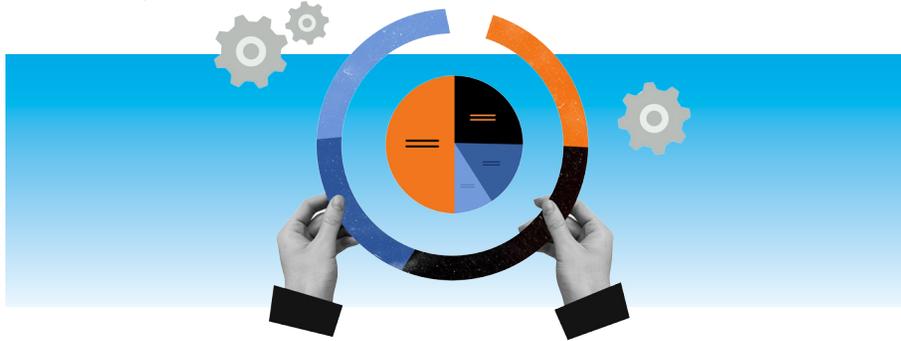
To leverage this trust, brands should understand the core of this consumer-creator relationship and how these features manifest in a targetable way for marketing campaigns.

## The drivers of creator-endorsed brand trust

There are a myriad of factors that can influence different areas of positive brand engagement, but Deloitte research found that the factors with the broadest influence across the board could be boiled down to two takeaways for brands:<sup>7</sup>

1. Target creators who look and behave like your target audience.
2. Target creators with passionate followers.





## Target creators who are relatable to your target audience

While there are many ways consumers can identify with a creator, we found the strongest drivers that influence consumer-brand trust rest in a relatable lifestyle and shared interests.

These creators are relatable to your audience because they are your audience. When these creators recommend a product, that creator's recommendations are empowered by an authentic relevance that is grounded in that connection.

This connection is a force that can drive greater down-funnel effectiveness with content creators than with influencers. While influencers may have greater reach and star power, they tend to lack that direct relatability that content creators have with their audience.

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### Relatable means...

- They share a socioeconomic background.
  - They identify with the creator's hobbies or interests.
- 



## Target creators with a passionate following

Consumers surveyed are more likely to follow brand recommendations from creators depending on how frequently they view that creator's content—and whether they follow that creator beyond their primary platform.<sup>8</sup>

These factors help provide firm and observable guideposts for brands looking at potential creator partnerships. First, a platform and creator's viewer metrics can provide a clear indication of how often visitors are engaging with that creator's content and how many of those users are repeat visitors. For content creators, their marketing power lies in depth of engagement, not breadth of engagement. Depth can be critical, especially when remembering that audiences tend to need repeated exposure for message retention and to enter these spaces to build lasting relationships.

Second, brands should consider creators with a strong community outside their primary platform—particularly platforms where creators may provide supplementary content to their followers. This cross-platform engagement is not necessarily about reach but is an indication of that consumer's *investment* in the creator.

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### Passionate followers...

- View that creator's content more frequently.
  - Follow that creator outside their primary platform.
-

# Building a stronger creator-brand partnership

Executing on a strong creator-brand partnership involves a foundation of trust and respect for that creator as both a creative individual and a growing business. Treating creators as just another marketing channel can restrict the creator, undermine the creative process, bungle the final output, and jeopardize a continued relationship with that creator. Conversely, a strong creator-brand relationship is likely to keep a creator with your brand and deliver better results for your marketing campaigns.

Our creator survey found three primary areas brands can control that strengthen the creator-brand relationship (figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

- Creative agency
- Strong business case
- Long-term support

Figure 3: Three pillars of stronger creator-brand partnerships



01

## Creative agency

- Brand lets me maintain creative freedom
- Easy to secure brand approval



02

## Strong business case

- Brand-audience fit
- Adequate compensation
- Timely compensations



03

## Long-term support

- Brand supports my long-term growth

## Creative agency can be key for successful creator-brand partnerships

Creative expression is the engine behind a creator's brand, content, and the connective tissue between a creator and their audience. But recognizing, supporting, and *facilitating* the creative factor is also a key element in strengthening a creator-brand partnership. Creators surveyed reported they are more likely to continue a partnership with a brand when they feel:

- The brand allows them to maintain their creative freedom.
- It's easy to secure approval for brand-sponsored content.

While brands may approach creators with certain stipulations around the nature of sponsored content, creators surveyed indicated a strong desire to express themselves in their voice. Brands could see more success when they think of their role more as a creative adviser, not a director. In fact, not only do creators surveyed indicate a stronger willingness to work with brands that respect their creative freedom, but brands surveyed report higher success when doing so.

### How high-ROI brands differentiate their creative relationship with creators

Successful brands in the creator economy recognize the importance of empowering the creator's creative voice—and they embrace this philosophy both in how they *look* for creator partners and *work* with those partners.

While marketers understand the importance of a creator's artistic vision, high-ROI (return on investment) brands surveyed are 1.4 times more likely than low-ROI brands to place the highest importance on that creativity as a driving force in choosing a creator partner.<sup>10</sup> High-ROI brands also place a much stronger emphasis on how they approach creativity in their working relationship with their creator partners. Compared to their low-ROI surveyed peers, 1.3 times as many high-ROI brands place utmost importance on taking creators' ideas and feedback into account, and 1.4 times as many high-ROI surveyed brands place the same importance on *actively seeking out feedback from these creators*.<sup>11</sup>



High-ROI brands are brands that reported a **40% or higher ROI** on revenue growth from their creator initiatives.

Low-ROI brands are those that reported an **ROI of 20% or less**.

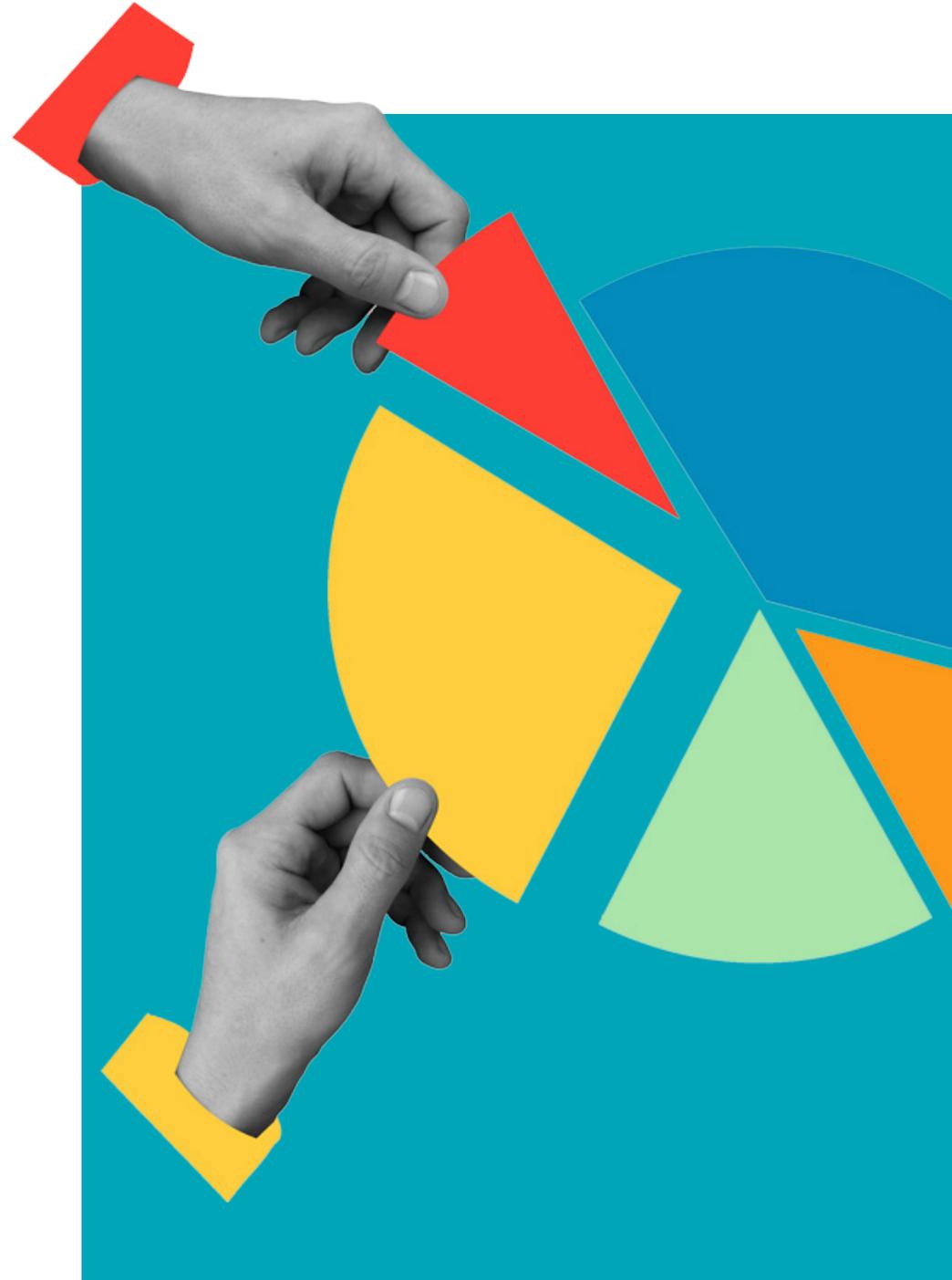
## Don't lose sight of creators' fundamental business needs

While creative freedom and long-term support are differentiators, brands shouldn't forget that creators' needs are still grounded in their fundamental business needs. For creators surveyed this boils down to three questions:

- Does your brand fit their audience?
- Are you paying them fairly?
- Are you paying them in a timely manner?

Brand-audience fit is a core business consideration for creators, but also ties directly back to the fundamental marketing value of the partnership. The value of content creators is directly tied to their authenticity with their audience, and brands likewise need an authentic connection with that creator.

Finally, paying creators competitive, fair, and equitable market value (especially when engaging creators from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups), and paying them on time, are the foundation of a successful creator-brand partnership. Competitive pay should be increasingly important to consider as the creator space gets more crowded.



## Forge a stronger relationship through long-term support

Brands can strengthen their relationship if they think of it somewhat like a business-to-business partnership; in other words, brands succeed when their creator partners succeed. Many brands already put this into practice. Most brands surveyed provide creators with assistance on the creative process, content development, networking, and brand management (figure 4).

## How high-ROI brands differentiate their long-term support

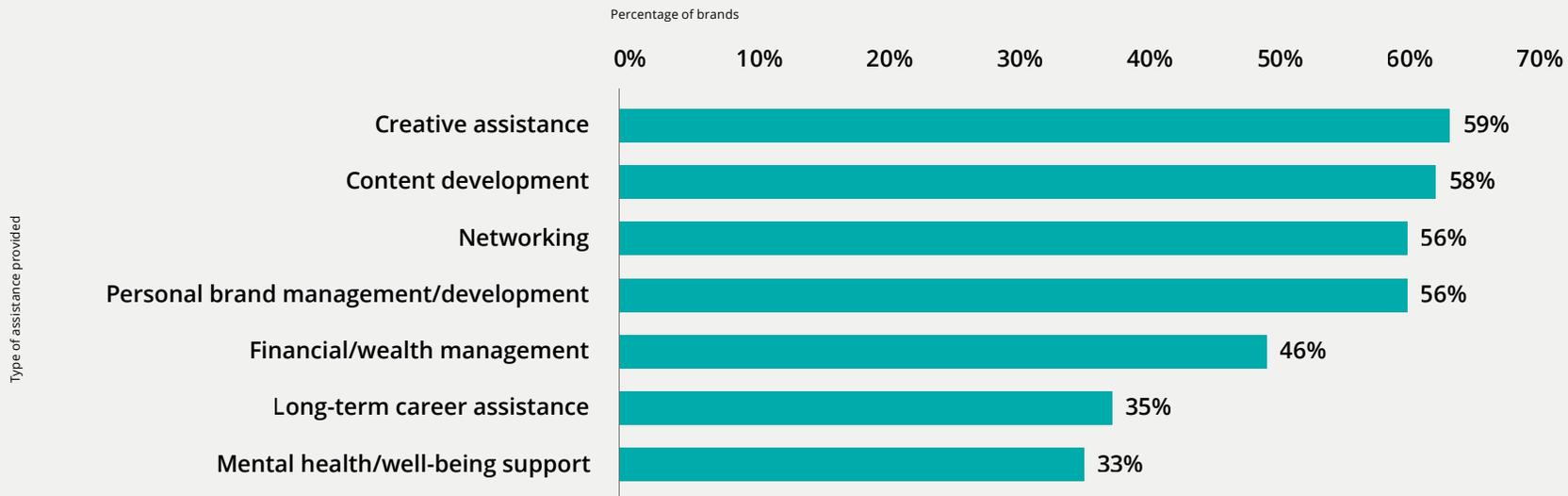
Through providing support for the long-term growth potential and overall well-being of their creator partner, brands can differentiate and thus gain a preferential status among creators.

Brands surveyed that recognize creators are small-business operations, with all the challenges that accompany that, have shown impact by offering financial and wealth management tools and services to their creator partners. In fact, 65% of high-ROI brands surveyed provide financial/wealth management services to their

creator partners, a rate nearly 1.75 times their low-ROI surveyed peers.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, 44% of high-ROI brands surveyed offer long-term career assistance to their creator partners, a rate 1.69 times as often as their low-ROI peers.<sup>13</sup>

Both factors help underscore the growing importance of having career expertise within your team to guide creators through their long-term growth and strengthen their relationship with your brand. Understanding a creator’s long-term goals, and helping them reach those goals, is not just beneficial for the creator, but also can drive future value for the brand.

Figure 4: Types of long-term support provided by brands



Source: Deloitte 2023 Creator Economy in 3D: Brand Survey  
n = 500

Question: Which of the following support services, if any, do you offer for content creators you partner with? (select all that apply)

# How top brands differentiate their strategy

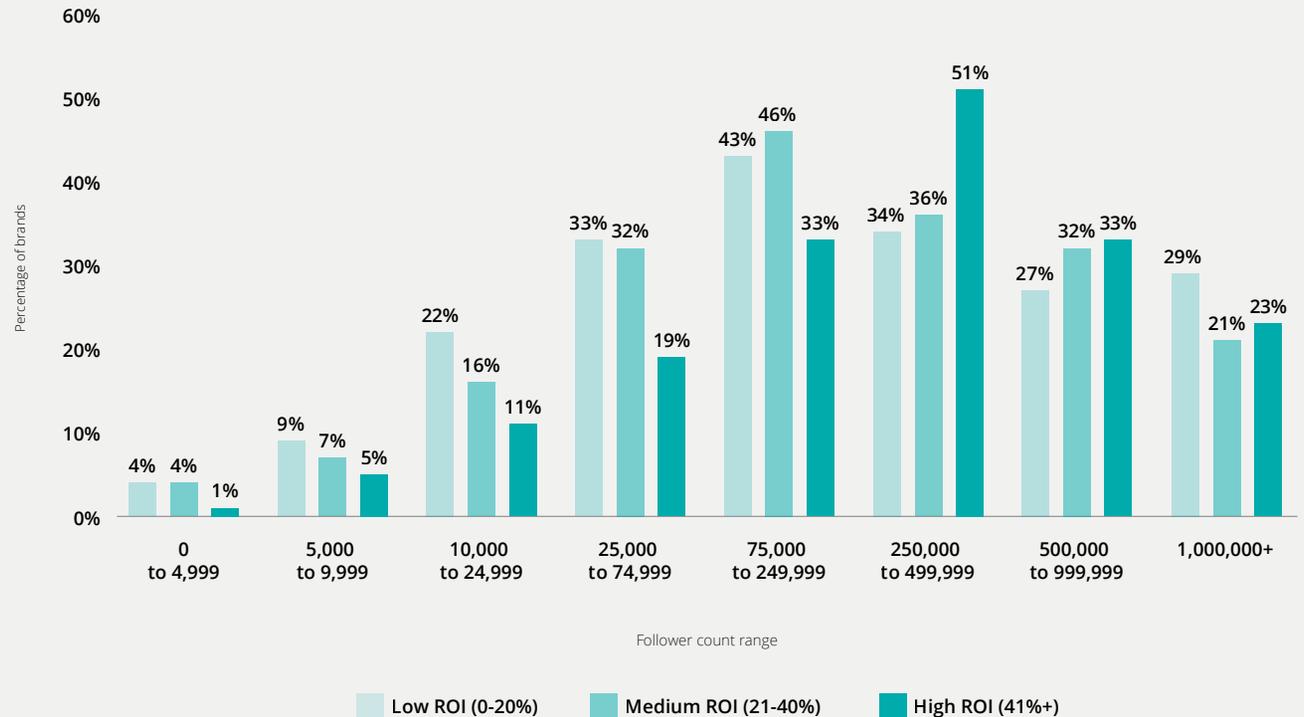
When looking at how high-ROI brands surveyed differentiated their strategy and approach to the creator economy, we found they distinguish themselves in three key areas:

1. They diversify their partnerships across a higher number of creators.
2. They balance between follower reach and impact.
3. They invest more of their social media budget into creators.

## Top brands balance between creators' individual reach and impact

High-ROI brands surveyed understand how to rightsize their targets for follower count more effectively than low-ROI brands surveyed—especially when balancing the need for a sizable followership for scalability with a small enough followership to ensure impact. The majority of high-ROI brands surveyed prioritize creators within the 250K to 500K follower count range—nearly 1.4 times as often on average than their lower-ROI surveyed peers (figure 5).<sup>14</sup>

Figure 5: Creator follower size by brand ROI



Source: Deloitte 2023 Creator Economy in 3D: Brand Survey  
n = 500

Question: For a single platform, which of the following follower count ranges do you prioritize for creator partnerships? (select all that apply)

Importantly, high-ROI brands surveyed do not exclusively pursue higher follower counts: 33% of high-ROI brands partner with creators in the 75K to 250K follower count range, which is actually more frequent than these brands partner with creators in the 1 million-plus follower category.<sup>15</sup>

### Expand your creator reach with more creator partnerships at a time

High-ROI brands surveyed differentiate themselves from their less successful peers in the number of creators they partner with at a time. While the median low-ROI brand partners with only three to five creators at a time, high-ROI brands partner with six to 10 or more.<sup>16</sup>

The creator economy operates effectively in how it reflects and shapes culture—which fundamentally runs based on the networks of shared values, experiences, and interests of groups of people. Knowing this, successful

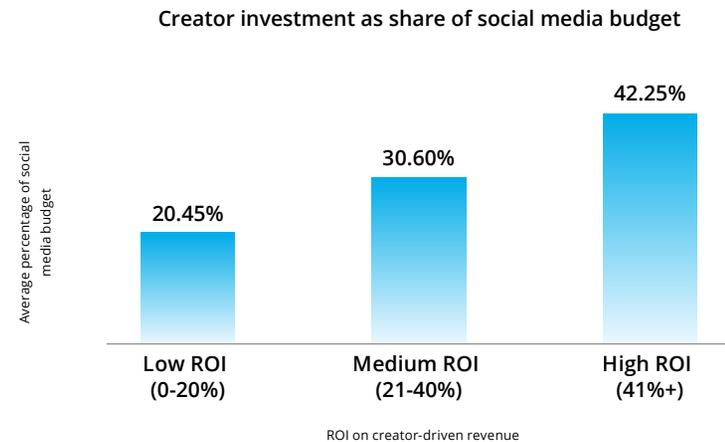
brands surveyed acknowledged the need to build networks of multiple creators to maximize their reach and impact across the various niches within a particular audience.

### Lean in to your creator investments

Successful brands surveyed differ meaningfully in the scale of their investment in the creator economy. High-ROI brands surveyed invest an average of 42% of their social media budget toward content creators—more than twice the average of their low-ROI peers (figure 6).<sup>17</sup>

Higher investment in content creators can allow brands to compete in many of the critical areas we saw high-ROI brands succeed in: They can pay their creators competitive rates, diversify their target audiences across a higher number of creator partnerships, and are able to invest in other meaningful resources for their creator partners.

Figure 6: Brand investment as a share of social media spend



Source: Deloitte 2023 Creator Economy in 3D: Brand Survey  
n = 500

Question: Roughly what percentage of your social media (SM) marketing budget is dedicated to content creator partnerships?

# How Deloitte can help

Content creators are helping to transform the media landscape—anchoring consumers within networks of communities that present brands with an opportunity for a deeper and more personal level of advertising and engagement. However, brands should approach creators from the same place of authenticity and connection to truly leverage the connection creators have with their audience. Deloitte brings years of marketing and industry experience to bear in helping brands assess their readiness and capacity to engage the creator economy. Deloitte can assist further at every step of the process, including helping brands identify and engage the right creators, evaluate leading strategies to suit that brand's objectives, and execute on that strategy.



# Get in touch



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# Methodology

This series of three surveys provides insight into how consumers, content creators, and brands in the United States are engaging with each other within the content creator economy. The surveys were fielded by an independent research firm July–August 2023 and surveyed 658 content creators, 500 brands, and 2,004 consumers. Consumer data was weighted back to the most recent census data to give a representative view of consumer sentiment and behaviors. Our generational definitions are as follows: Gen Z (1997–2009), millennial (1983–1996), Gen X (1966–1982), boomers (1947–1965), and matures (1946 and prior). Creators were sampled according to a representative distribution of follower counts, including an 150-count oversample of creators from traditionally underrepresented groups (based on race, gender identity, and/or disability). Our brand sample targeted brands that reported a minimum annual revenue of \$250 million or more.



# Acknowledgements

## Recognition and appreciation

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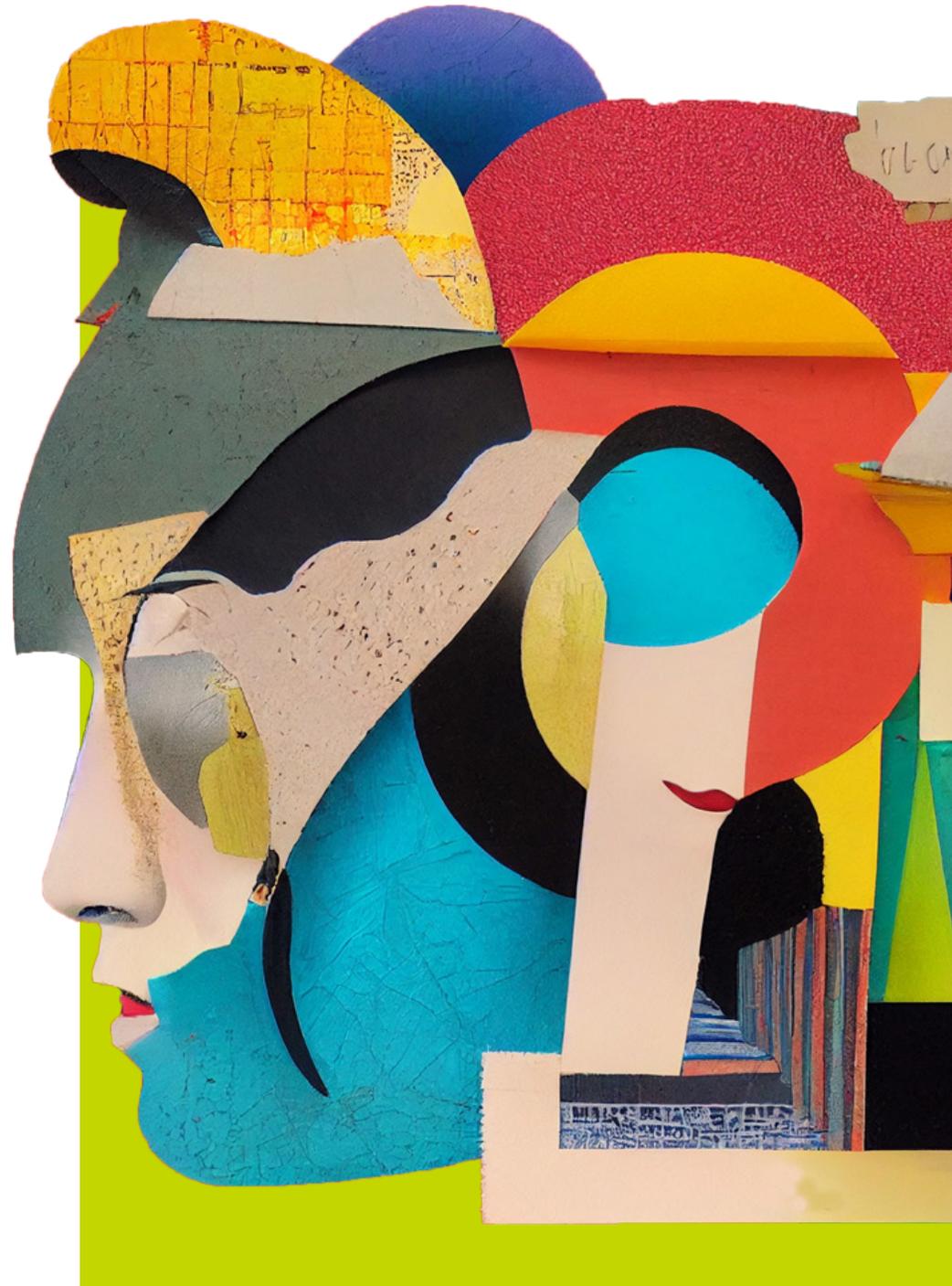
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## Endnotes

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