Madison & Wall

REPORT

Following the Money: Sizing the Advertiser-Funded Creator Economy.

Part 01
November 2026



© 2026 Madison & Wall

Following the Money: Sizing the Advertiser-Funded Creator Economy.

Part 01
November 2026

The creator economy is frequently discussed as a broad, consumer-driven macro phenomenon – a world powered by fan subscriptions, digital tipping, merchandise, algorithm-driven platform payouts, and marketer engagements. While that broader ecosystem is growing alongside digital media consumption, it obscures the faster structural transition happening underneath: the migration of marketing budgets toward creators.

This study isolates and sizes the advertiser-funded creator economy.

Our central thesis is simple: marketing spend is driving the expansion and professionalization of the creator ecosystem. Creators are no longer just an experimental line item or a niche extension of PR and influencer relations. They have become an essential layer of the commercial advertising and media supply chain, serving simultaneously as media channels, creative production houses, commerce drivers, and performance engines.

The creator economy is usually discussed as if it were a single advertising channel. It is not. When marketers say they are spending on creators, they may be buying audience access, creative production, paid media amplification, affiliate sales, platform-native content, usage rights, agency services, technology infrastructure, or some combination of these activities.

That makes the category difficult to define and even harder to size. But it also explains why creator budgets are growing. Far from being a tactical add-on, creator spend is embedding itself into core marketing operations.

Creators initially gave brands a way to borrow an audience and authenticity. A marketer paid a well-known person, social media personality, athlete, celebrity, or niche influencer to talk about a product in front of that person's existing audience. That model still exists, and in many cases remains highly effective. But it no longer captures the full range of what advertisers are buying.

Today, brands engage creators across the entire funnel to achieve a diverse set of strategic objectives, including capturing high-intent attention, driving engagement, increasing conversions, driving sales, lowering customer acquisition costs, providing brand validation, unlocking cultural relevance, and building consumer trust.

Increasingly, brands are paying creators not only for who they reach, but for what they make. Creators have become a scalable source of platform-native creative assets that can be used across organic social posts, paid social campaigns, commerce media, affiliate programs, retail media environments, brand websites, email, CTV, and other digital surfaces. In this sense, creators are no longer just media partners; they are essential production partners.

This is the first part of a two-part study on the advertiser-funded creator economy, with a particular focus on the flow of advertiser money. In this initial report, we define the creator landscape, establish the major categories of spending, and size the market across countries, spending methods, and future growth. Because our ultimate goal is to analyze how marketer behavior will evolve as brands increase their use of creators, this report focuses specifically on the advertiser-funded creator economy rather than revenue generated directly from consumers. In the next report, we will examine the challenges that emerge as brands attempt to scale creator spending, our recommended solutions to those challenges, and the structure the creator ecosystem may ultimately take.

1. Why Creator Budgets Are Growing

Creator spending is accelerating because creators solve multiple structural problems for marketers simultaneously. **The first is creative volume.** Modern advertising requires far more creative assets than the traditional campaign model was designed to produce. A brand may need different versions of an ad for TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Amazon, retail media networks, connected TV, and commerce pages. It may need those assets refreshed constantly and tested across formats, hooks, audiences, and platform-specific styles.

Traditional production models can still be valuable for major brand campaigns, but they are often too slow or too expensive for the day-to-day needs of performance media and platform-native advertising. Creators can fill that gap. They can produce quickly, cheaply, and in formats that feel natural to the environments where consumers are spending time. AI has further expanded this process by allowing brands to localize, variant-test, and scale these creator-generated assets at unprecedented speed.

The second driver is authenticity. Creator content often feels more conversational, personal, and contextually relevant than traditional brand creative. That does not mean all creator content is authentic, or that audiences fail to recognize sponsored material. But it does mean creator-led content can often better match the language, pacing, visual style, and audience expectations of the platforms where it appears.

The third driver is audience access. Many creators have built meaningful relationships with communities that brands struggle to reach directly. The goal is not just reach but also engaging consumers in the context where they're most open to suggestion, or where they're paying the most attention. This is true of celebrities and mega-influencers, but also of smaller creators with deeper credibility in specific categories, communities, or fandoms. For some campaigns, the value of a creator is broad reach. For others, it is trust within a narrow niche.

The fourth driver is the changing structure of media itself. Organic reach has become less predictable across many platforms, while paid amplification has become more central to campaign execution. That has changed the economics of creator marketing. Brands are no longer only paying for a creator to post something to their own audience. They are increasingly paying for the right to use creator content as an input into paid media systems and then allocating separate media budgets to distribute that content at scale.

As a result, creator spending is no longer confined to social, PR, or experimental budgets. It can come from brand marketing, performance media, shopper marketing, commerce, affiliate, creative production, experiential, talent partnerships, or agency budgets. That breadth also means creator growth is increasingly being funded by reallocations from elsewhere in the marketing budget, a dynamic we return to later in this report.

2. Scope & Boundaries

The phrase "creator economy" can obscure more than it clarifies. For some, it refers to influencers paid by brands for sponsored posts. For others, it includes YouTube ad revenue, Twitch subscriptions, Patreon, Substack, TikTok Shop, creator merchandise, affiliate commissions, live shopping, digital courses, creator-founded brands, and a long list of adjacent revenue streams. All those activities may be part of the broader creator economy, but they are not all part of the advertiser-funded creator economy, which is what we're trying to describe.

For advertisers, the more useful question is not simply how much money creators earn. It is what marketers are actually spending money on when they say they are investing in creators. To answer this, our study draws a strict boundary between consumer-funded income and advertiser-funded spend. **For the remainder of this report, references to the "creator economy" mean the advertiser-funded creator economy unless otherwise stated**.

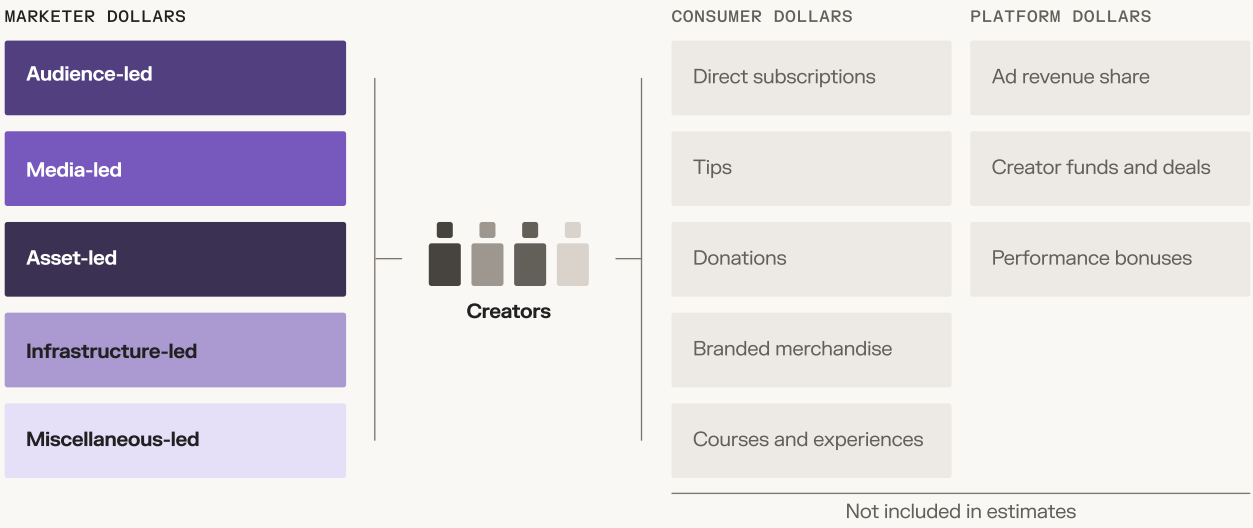
What we exclude: Consumer-funded creator income, such as direct subscriptions, tips, donations, merchandise purchases, courses, and other direct payments from fans. We also treat platform-funded creator income, such as ad revenue shares or creator funds, as separate from advertiser-funded creator spending. Inclusion requires a marketer-directed creator campaign, not merely advertiser funding somewhere upstream. Furthermore, the identity of the marketer does not determine inclusion; creator-owned businesses are treated like any other advertiser when they purchase third-party promotional services.

What we include: Spending deployed to creators, agencies, platforms, technology vendors, and media networks to achieve marketing, commerce, or brand objectives. This includes brand-funded creator campaigns, influencer sponsorships, creator-produced assets, affiliate commissions funded by marketers, creator agency and talent management fees, rights to reuse specific creator-produced assets, broader name, image, likeness, and intellectual-property licensing, product seeding, and supporting technology infrastructure.

In the following graphic, our estimate of the creator economy only involves the marketer dollars (the left side of the graphic). Creators have multiple revenue streams that aren't included in this sizing exercise.

The Creator Economy: Marketer Money Only

What is included in the Madison & Wall definition



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

3. A Taxonomy of Creator Spending

To provide a rigorous market sizing, we segment the advertiser-funded creator economy into five distinct commercial Buckets:

1. Audience-led spend: Audience-led creator spend is the traditional influencer model. The advertiser pays for access to a creator's audience, credibility, fame, or cultural relevance. This can include sponsored posts, product integrations, brand ambassador relationships, endorsements, dedicated review videos, podcast reads, livestream integrations, product placement, and long-term partnerships.

This model is still highly relevant. For many brands, the creator's own audience is the point. The advertiser is paying to enter a relationship that already exists between the creator and their followers.

Audience-led spend can be structured in several ways. Some campaigns use fixed fees tied to deliverables, such as a specified number of posts, videos, stories, product mentions, or organic promotional appearances. Others use longer-term ambassador relationships, often with category exclusivity and incentive compensation. Some use affiliate structures, where the creator is compensated based on traffic, sales, or other measurable outcomes so long as the creator generates the traffic or transaction through their own content distribution channels.

The economics vary widely depending on the creator's reach, category, platform, market, exclusivity requirements, usage rights, production burden, and expected performance. Celebrity and mega-influencer deals can be expensive and slower growing. Smaller creators may offer more efficient engagement, lower production costs, and more targeted audience access.

2. Media-led spend: Media-led creator spend refers to the paid amplification of creator content. This includes boosting creator posts, running creator content as paid social ads, paid distribution through whitelisted or permissioned creator handles, partnership ads on Meta platforms, YouTube paid extensions, and creator-led retail media activations. Almost all of this occurs on digital platforms, but we include any paid creator amplification across all channels.

This is one of the most important growth areas in the market, connecting creator marketing directly to the broader paid advertising ecosystem. The content may look and feel creator-led, but distribution is controlled by paid media systems.

Crucially, for the purposes of our market sizing, this Bucket includes the total cost of the raw media inventory deployed by marketers behind these campaigns. If an advertiser runs a paid social campaign using a creator's face, handle, or asset, the full media cost associated with the creator-led ad units is captured here. While this significantly expands the total market size, it reflects the true scale of capital flowing through creator-driven ad units rather than just the isolated creative fees.

3. Asset-led spend: Asset-led creator spend is the creator-as-production-studio model. In this case, the advertiser is paying for content and collateral rather than primarily paying for distribution to the creator's audience. This Bucket also includes payments for the right to reuse a specific creator-produced asset in brand-owned or paid-media environments. This is essentially the "creator as agency" model.

This can include short-form videos, UGC-style ads, product demos, tutorials, testimonials, unboxings, "get ready with me" content, category explainers, social-first product shots, creator-hosted videos, livestream clips, paid social assets, and platform-native creative variations. The creator may or may not post the content to their own account. When the creator is separately compensated to distribute the asset organically, that portion of the engagement is classified in "audience-led spend." The brand may use the asset in paid media, organic channels, ecommerce pages, retail media environments, CTV, email, websites, in-store screens, or other owned and paid surfaces. This includes rights attached to a specific piece of creator content; miscellaneous spend includes broader licensing of the creator's identity, likeness, brand, or IP.

This part of the market is especially important because it changes the strategic role of creators. If creators are hired for content production, then creator spend can grow even when organic reach is under pressure. The creator becomes part of the creative supply chain.

For many advertisers, this is a practical response to the rising demand for creative volume. Brands need more content, faster refresh cycles, more platform-specific assets, and more testing inputs. Creators can often deliver those assets at a lower cost than traditional production models, while making content that feels more natural to social and commerce environments.

4. Infrastructure-led spend: Infrastructure-led creator spend includes the agencies, talent managers, marketplaces, software platforms, measurement providers, and other intermediaries that support creator campaigns. This includes true third-party support services and platforms, rather than support services set up by creators themselves to facilitate their own business or peer businesses.

This part of the ecosystem is fragmented. Talent agencies represent creators and negotiate deals. Creator agencies help advertisers with strategy, creator selection, contracting, compliance, campaign management, measurement, and reporting. Media agencies may manage paid amplification. Creative agencies may incorporate creators into production workflows. PR agencies may manage seeding and earned media programs. Technology platforms may provide creator discovery, workflow management, payments, rights management, brand safety, affiliate tracking, attribution, or CRM-style relationship management.

As creator budgets grow, the infrastructure around the category becomes more important. Large advertisers need ways to find appropriate creators, negotiate contracts, manage legal and disclosure requirements, secure usage rights, prevent category conflicts, measure performance, process payments, and coordinate campaigns across markets and platforms.

Some of this work is handled manually by agencies and talent representatives. Some is being automated by software platforms and marketplaces. Over time, the balance between services and technology will be an important factor in how the economics of the creator economy develop.

5. Miscellaneous spend (i.e., everything else): This final category captures adjacent brand investments that do not map directly onto standard digital media or production pipelines but are intrinsically tied to creator IP. This includes marketer spending on creator-hosted live events, experiential activations, gifting and product-seeding programs, creator-branded product collaborations and licensed merchandise arrangements, broader creator name, image, likeness, and intellectual-property licensing, virtual creator deployments, and other emerging engagement types. For purposes of this taxonomy, the fair value of goods or services provided as compensation is classified in Bucket 5, even when the creator is required to produce content or post organically. Any separate cash payment is classified according to the underlying service purchased.

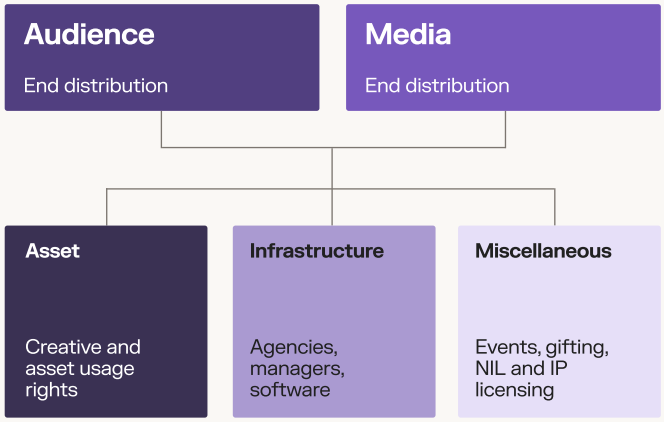
The five buckets are distinct, but creator engagements are not

For purposes of sizing the market, we classify every dollar into one of five mutually exclusive Buckets. This prevents double counting and allows us to measure how marketer spending is changing over time.

In practice, however, creator engagements rarely stay within a single Bucket. The same campaign can involve a creator's audience, the production and licensing of an asset, paid media amplification, agency or technology support, and other forms of compensation. The Buckets describe where the money ultimately sits in our estimates, not separate creator ecosystems.

Everything in the Creator Economy Connects

Audience and media are consumer-facing; asset, infrastructure and miscellaneous support them



EXAMPLES OF CROSSOVER ENGAGEMENTS

- **Audience + Media**
  A sponsored post runs on the creator's feed, then the brand boosts it as paid social.
- **Infrastructure + Media**
  An agency plans and buys the schedule; the creator's spot runs purely as paid inventory.
- **Asset + Media**
  A creator-as-production-studio video is licensed, then re-run across retail media and CTV.
- **Miscellaneous + Audience**
  Product seeding produces unpaid posts that live only on the creator's own feed.
- **Misc. + Infrastructure + Audience + Media**
  An event generates creator posts; agencies then amplify the best of them as media.

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

This interconnected structure is important. Audience and media are generally the consumer-facing outputs, while assets, infrastructure, and miscellaneous spending often support, enable, or feed those activities. A single creator program can therefore generate spending across several parts of the ecosystem, even though each individual dollar is assigned to only one Bucket in our estimates.

To alleviate as much confusion as possible regarding what is included, what is excluded, and how spending is classified across the five mutually exclusive Buckets, the following scenario guide applies these definitions to common and ambiguous creator engagements.

Audience-Led Spend Pays for a Creator's Reach and Trust

Included when a marketer pays to reach followers; consumer money is excluded

THE TEST
Is a marketer paying to reach the creator's own followers?

INCLUDED **Podcast host reads a sponsor's script** Taps follower trust and organic reach	INCLUDED **Brand pays for a Reel, plus a click bonus** Pay tied to organic audience engagement	INCLUDED **TikTok Shop tag earns an affiliate commission** Audience monetization funded from acquisition budgets	INCLUDED **Brand pays a B2B podcaster to interview its CEO** Buys access to a niche business audience
INCLUDED **Tech firm pays its engineers to post on LinkedIn** Incremental pay tied to creator-style posting	EXCLUDED **Fan sends a streamer $100 in gift tokens** Money comes from a consumer, not a marketer	EXCLUDED **Consumers pay creators for access or content** Consumer money, not marketer promotion	EXCLUDED **Creator sells their own CPG brand in stores** Promoting one's own product is running a business

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Media-Led Spend Pays to Amplify Creator Content

Included when paid distribution carries creator-made content; standard ad buys are excluded

THE TEST
Is paid distribution carrying content a creator made?

INCLUDED **Brand runs paid social with a creator-made ad** Paid amplification of creator content	INCLUDED **Brand boosts a creator's post past their audience** Buys added distribution for creator content	EXCLUDED **Voice actor reads an ad in a creator's podcast mid-roll** Uses neither the creator's voice nor audience	EXCLUDED **Pre-roll ads target specific creators' channels** Standard ad inventory; targeting creators alone doesn't count

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Asset-Led Spend Treats Creators as a Production Studio

Included when a brand pays for creator content or reuse rights; creators' own work is excluded

THE TEST
Is the brand paying for creator-made content or the right to reuse it?

INCLUDED
50 micro creators film unboxings for the brand's account
Creators used as a production studio

INCLUDED
Creator builds a branded level inside a video game
Creator as a creative production resource

INCLUDED
Creator ghostwrites executives' LinkedIn posts for $5K/month
Content studio work, whether paid or organic

INCLUDED
Brand licenses a creator video for 30 days of ads
Pays for the right to reuse a creator asset

EXCLUDED
Creator signs a book deal or self-publishes
Pays for the creator's own work, not promotion

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Infrastructure-Led Spend Buys Tools and Agency Support

Included when marketers pay intermediaries; creators' own costs are excluded

THE TEST
Is a marketer paying an agency or platform to plan, run or measure creator work?

INCLUDED
Agency retainer keeps creators on call for pitches
Pays an intermediary for access and coordination

INCLUDED
Creator SaaS fee covers sourcing, contracts and reporting
Tech used to run and measure creator campaigns

EXCLUDED
Podcaster pays a host to distribute to Apple and Spotify
Creator's operating cost, not marketer spend

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Miscellaneous Spend Covers Events, Gifting and Licensing

Included when marketers pay for presence, likeness or seeding; platform funds are excluded

THE TEST

Is a marketer paying for a creator's presence, likeness, advice or a product-for-post trade?

INCLUDED

Brand names a creator "honorary creative director"

Consulting on cultural relevance and IP

INCLUDED

Company pays a creator to speak on stage

Buys a live appearance

INCLUDED

Company pays a creator to host a group vacation

Live event fee

INCLUDED

Hotel gives a vlogger a free stay in exchange for a Reel

Paid in product, counted as product seeding

INCLUDED

Game sells a character skin using a creator's likeness

Licensing fee for name, likeness or IP

EXCLUDED

Platform creator fund pays for hitting a view goal

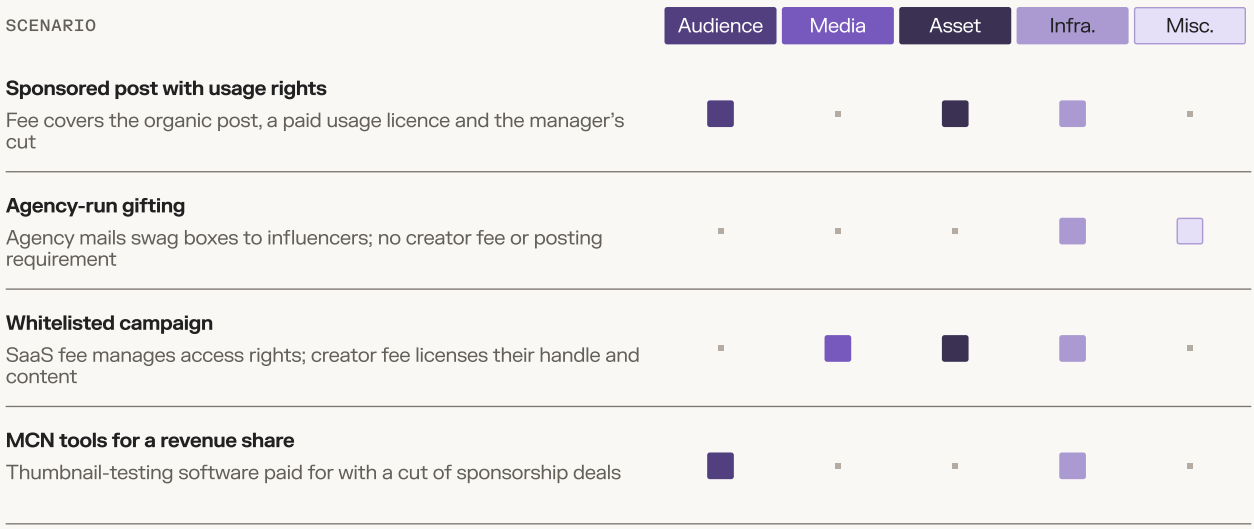
Platform operating cost, not a campaign

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

One Deal Can Span Several Spending Categories

Each portion of a payment counts in the category it funds



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Finally, it's useful to see how the creator economy overlaps with the paid advertising economy. Some of the spending components – specifically media-led spending – are a subset of the advertising economy. The other components of the creator economy, however, represent spending outside the bounds of the traditional advertising economy.

The Creator Economy vs. the Advertising Economy

The creator economy and the advertising economy have “media-led spend” in common



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Scope of this study

To complete this analysis, we leveraged Madison & Wall’s global advertising datasets and market-level forecasting work, public company and platform disclosures, public data analysis, and extensive interviews with stakeholders across the creator ecosystem, including advertisers, agencies, creator specialists, talent representatives, technology platforms, and other participants across the value chain.

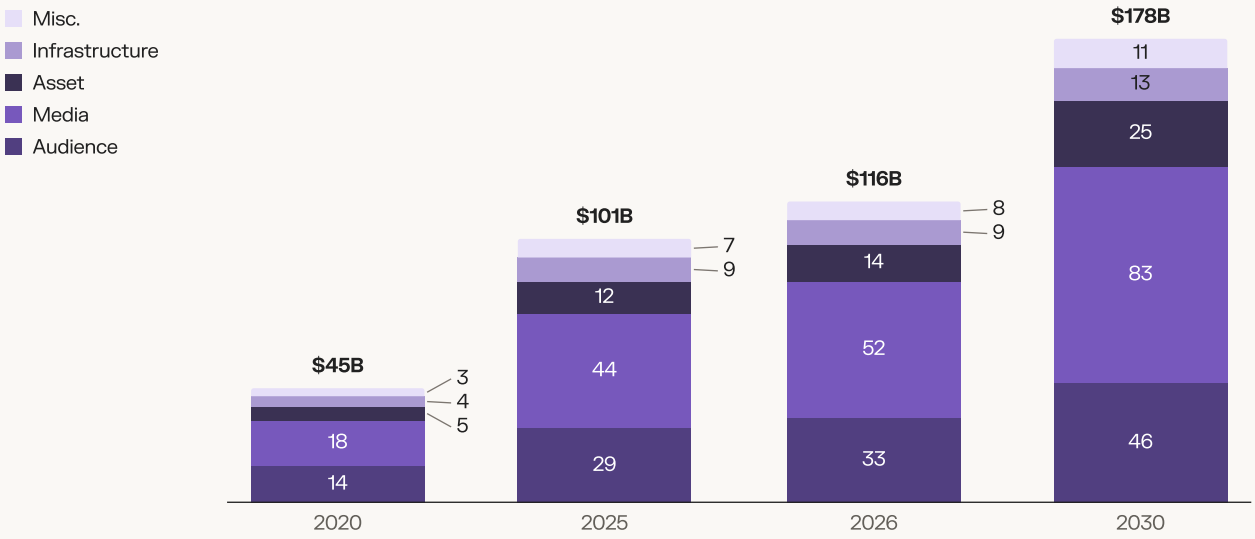
4. Key Findings

Creator spending will reach $116 billion globally in 2026: The global creator economy will grow by 15% in 2026, reaching $116 billion, up from $101 billion in 2025. We expect marketer spending on creator-related activity to reach $178 billion by 2030.

The factors driving the creator economy’s expansion are structural rather than temporary. Creators are becoming more important across media, content production, commerce, and brand strategy. As a result, creator-related activity will account for an increasingly significant share of marketer budgets over the remainder of the decade.

Creator Spending Will Reach $178B by 2030

Creator economy spending $ billions



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Media-led spending Is Now the Largest Segment: Media-led spending includes paid amplification of creator content and campaigns that use creator-produced collateral across broader media buys.

This segment has built on the audience-led model upon which the creator economy was originally founded. Media-led spending now represents nearly half of total marketer spending in the creator economy, reflecting brands' desire to combine creator identity and authenticity with the reach and scalability of paid media.

Paid amplification allows marketers to take content that performs well with a creator's audience and distribute it to a much larger group of consumers. This makes creator campaigns easier to scale than programs that depend exclusively on a creator's organic reach.

Audience-led spending Remains a Core Part of the Market: Audience-led spending is the second-largest segment, representing engagements in which brands pay creators primarily to reach and influence their existing audiences.

This is the legacy model upon which the creator economy was built, and it remains one of the most important ways brands work with creators. Consumers often respond well to recommendations delivered by creators who have built trust, authenticity, and a sense of community with their audiences.

The number of creators and consumers participating in these ecosystems also continues to increase. However, audience-led spending is growing more slowly than media-led and asset-led spending because organic creator campaigns are difficult to scale.

Finding, contracting, managing, and coordinating large numbers of individual creators remains one of the creator economy's biggest operational challenges. Each engagement may require separate negotiations, approvals, content reviews, and performance measurement.

Asset-led spending Represents 12% of the Market: Brands are increasingly hiring creators to produce lower-cost content that can then be used across paid campaigns, social accounts, websites, ecommerce pages, and other owned properties. In these engagements, the creator's audience may be secondary or entirely irrelevant. The principal value is the content itself.

This shift is also contributing to slower growth in parts of the traditional creative agency business. Creators and AI-powered production tools are increasingly competing for budgets that historically would have gone to agencies, production companies, and other creative vendors.

As it becomes easier for brands to coordinate networks of smaller creators and use them as distributed content studios, asset-led spending will become an increasingly important part of the creator economy.

Infrastructure spend accounts for 8% of total spending: This includes the net revenue retained by creator agencies, technology platforms, management companies, and other intermediaries.

This does not mean that only 8% of creator spending passes through agencies and technology platforms. A much larger share of creator activity may involve an intermediary.

However, our estimates are net and mutually exclusive. We therefore count only the portion retained by those intermediaries as infrastructure spending. Money collected by an agency or platform and subsequently passed on to a creator is classified according to the underlying creator service rather than counted twice.

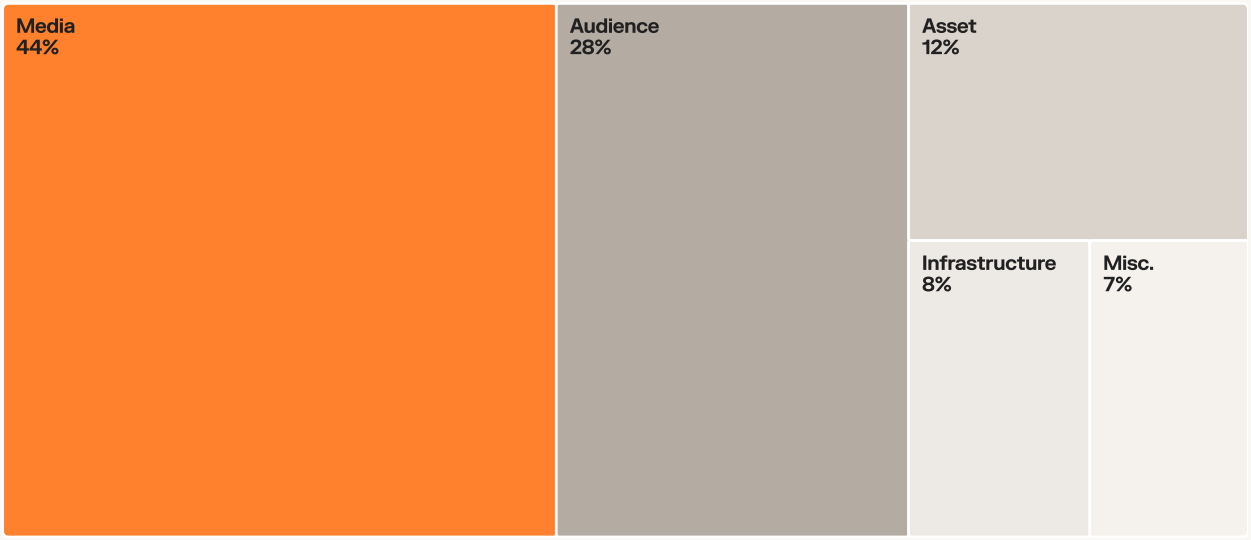
Infrastructure is growing more slowly than the overall creator economy as some brands develop more direct relationships with creators. Nevertheless, agencies and technology platforms remain important for discovery, contracting, campaign management, measurement, payments, and compliance.

Miscellaneous spending Represents the Remaining 7%: This category includes live events, barter arrangements, name, image, likeness licensing, and other specialized forms of creator engagement that do not fit neatly into the four larger segments.

These activities will continue to grow in absolute terms. However, they are likely to represent a smaller share of the total market as audience engagements, content production, and paid amplification become more standardized and easier for marketers to execute at scale.

Media-Led Spend Makes Up 44% of the Creator Economy

Creator economy spending % of total, 2026



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Asset-led spending Will Grow the Fastest: The changing structure of the creator economy can be seen in how the five segments have developed over the past five years and how we expect them to evolve through 2030.

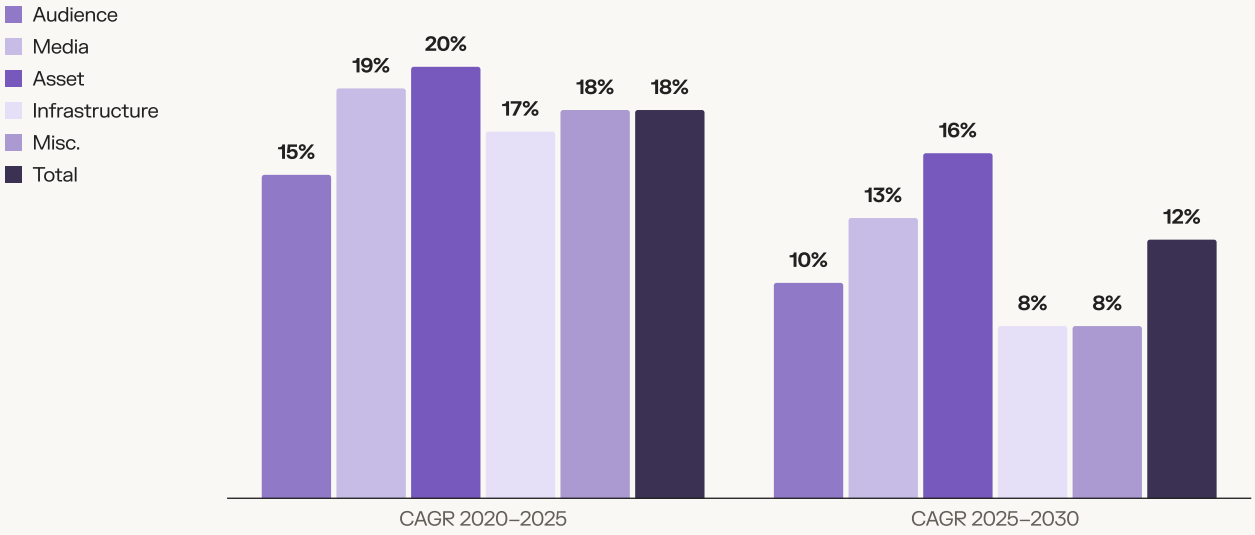
Asset-led spending has been the fastest-growing segment, increasing at an average annual rate of approximately 20% over the past five years. Every major segment has expanded, including audience-led, media-led, infrastructure-led, and miscellaneous spending, but brands' use of creators as content production resources has grown particularly quickly.

We expect asset-led spending to remain the fastest-growing segment over the next five years. Marketers differ in how they intend to organize their broader creator strategies, but there is widespread agreement that creators can produce content more quickly and cheaply than many legacy production processes.

Creators can generate the initial collateral, while AI tools can subsequently adapt, augment, and version that content for different audiences, platforms, formats, and markets. This combination makes the creator-as-studio model especially attractive to large marketers facing growing content requirements.

Growth Slows From 18% to 12% a Year After 2025

Creator economy growth CAGR %



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

The United States dominates global creator spending: The U.S. accounts for 43% of global creator spending. Its share of creator spending is higher than its approximately 35% share of the global advertising economy. This reflects the extent to which large U.S. brands have incorporated creators into their media, production, and marketing strategies.

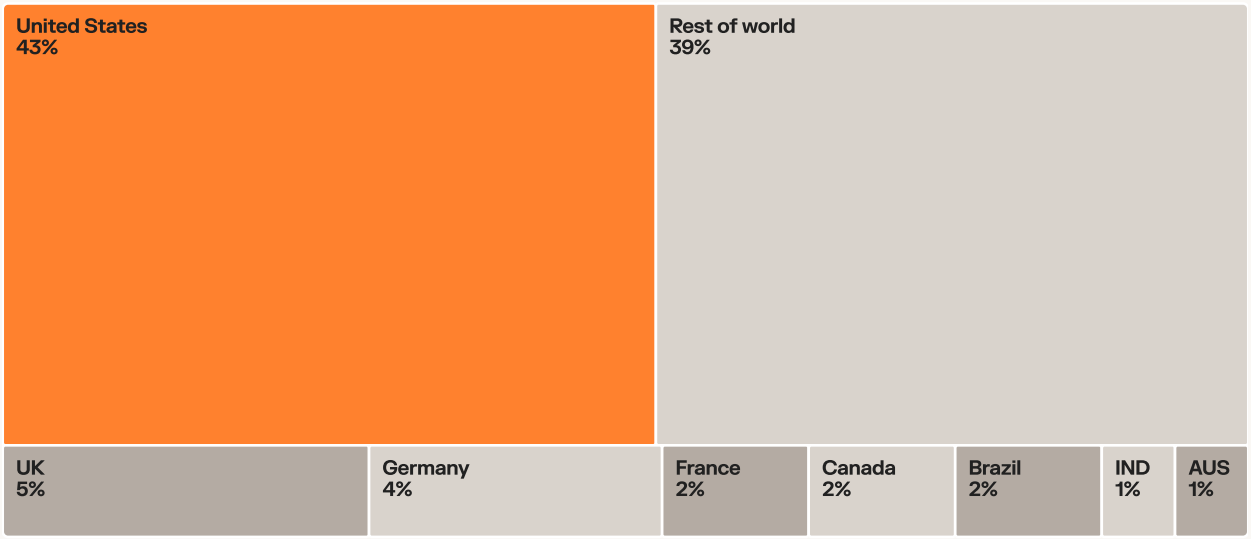
Creator activity is also well developed across Western Europe, Australia, Latin America, and parts of Asia, but the scale of U.S. marketer budgets gives the country an outsized role in the global market.

Based on the maturity of its livestream-commerce ecosystem, China may be even further developed than the United States. However, China is included alongside a range of smaller and less mature markets in our “Rest of World” category. Collectively, these markets represent 39% of the global creator economy, making it difficult to isolate China’s individual contribution from the geographic totals presented here.

Nevertheless, China’s creator ecosystem is notable for the maturity of its creator-led commerce models and the extent to which content, audience engagement, and transactions have become integrated.

U.S. Revenue Is 43% of the Total

Creator economy spending by country % of total, 2025



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

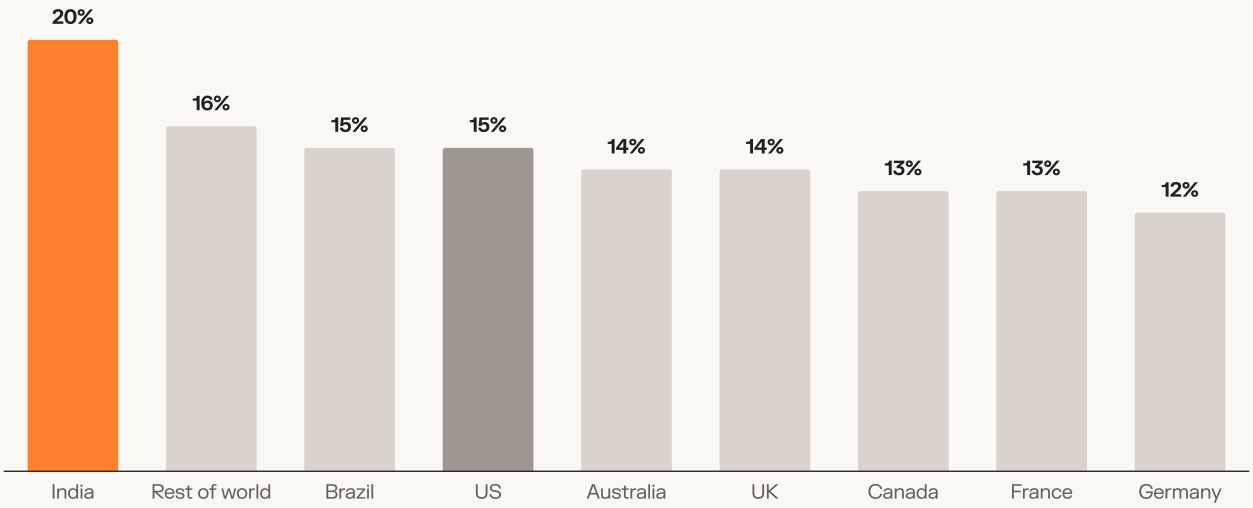
Growth is relatively consistent across markets: Creator economy growth rates are relatively concentrated around the global average of 15% in 2026. Many of the marketers deploying the largest creator budgets are multinational companies. These businesses are applying similar creator strategies across multiple countries, producing a degree of consistency in growth rates across major markets.

There are still notable differences. India is expected to grow by 20% in 2026, supported by strong economic growth and an expanding advertising market.

France and Germany are expected to grow somewhat more slowly than the global average. European consumers place significant value on the authenticity and recommendations that creators can provide. However, slower economic growth constrains the overall expansion of marketer budgets.

India Grows Fastest at 20% in 2026; the U.S. Grows 15%

Creator spending growth by country % year over year, 2026



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

The creator economy is growing faster than advertising: Comparisons between the creator economy and the advertising economy require an important distinction. Our advertising market estimates measure the revenue earned by sellers of advertising. They generally exclude agency fees, technology fees, creative production costs, and other non-working components of advertiser budgets. Our creator economy estimates measure the total amount marketers deploy toward creator-related engagements. This includes spending on creator audiences, content production, infrastructure, barter arrangements, licensing, and other activities.

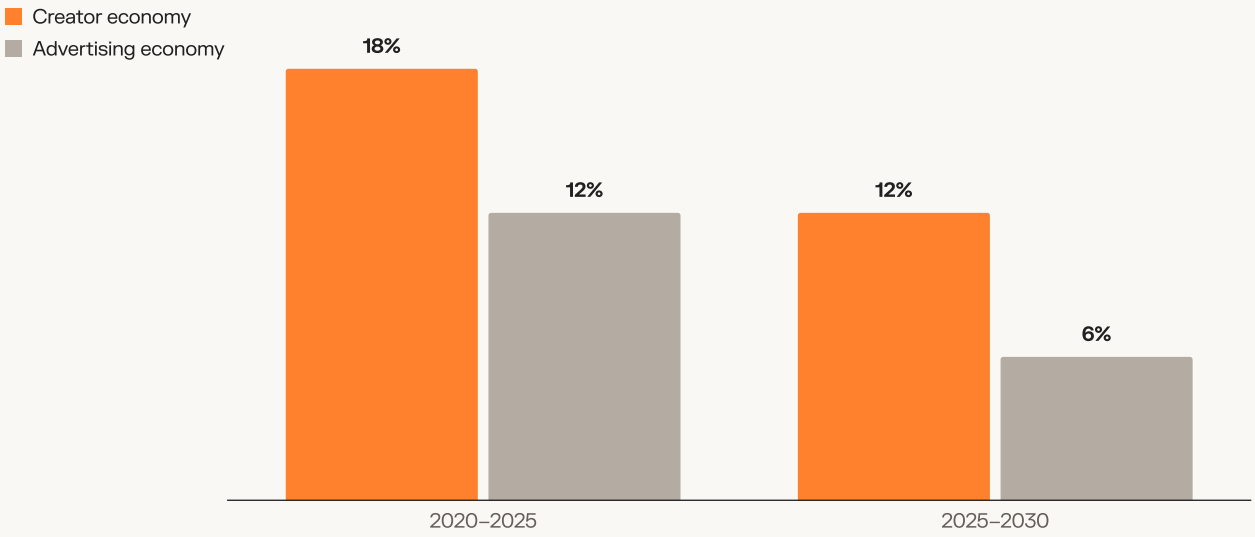
The two markets overlap most directly within media-led spending, where creator content is amplified through paid advertising. Much of the remaining creator economy sits outside conventional advertising revenue.

The comparison is still useful because the money ultimately comes from the same marketers and competes within the same broader budget pool. Over the past five years, the creator economy has grown at a compound annual rate of 18%, compared with 12% for the advertising economy.

We expect the creator economy to continue outperforming advertising through 2030, growing by an average of approximately 12% annually from 2025 through 2030 as creators capture a larger share of media, production, and marketing budgets.

Creator Spending Will Grow Twice as Fast as Advertising

Creator growth vs. ad revenue growth CAGR %



Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

5. Where the Money Is Coming From

Creator spending is growing much faster than the broader advertising market. But that does not mean brands are simply adding creator budgets on top of everything they were already spending. In many cases, creator growth is being funded by taking money from other parts of the marketing mix.

This was a consistent theme across our interviews. Marketers generally operate within finite budgets, particularly when overall spending is under pressure. Before asking for incremental funding, teams often reallocate money from existing channels.

> "80% of the time we are cannibalizing another budget, whether it's TV or [something else]."
>
> A senior operations executive at a tech-enabled influencer marketing company

The money is coming primarily from three places: traditional media, digital performance media, and creative production. This helps explain why creator spending is expanding across several of the Buckets identified earlier in this report rather than behaving like a single new media channel.

Traditional media is one source of budget

Traditional media is one source of funding for larger creator programs. As consumer attention has shifted toward digital platforms, brands have increasingly moved portions of television, print, radio, and out-of-home budgets toward social and creator activity.

This is particularly relevant for large, established advertisers with substantial legacy media budgets. These marketers can justify creator investment not only as a way to reach consumers differently, but also because creator campaigns can combine some of the brand-building role of traditional media with greater opportunities for engagement and performance measurement.

"Some of the more traditional brands have that traditional marketing mindset, I do think that they've peeled away a lot of money from television to fund this influencer social bucket. A lot of times it comes from social as well, though, so I think it's just reallocating marketing dollars."

A strategic brand partnerships executive at a creator marketing company

The same pressure can extend to CTV and other digital video budgets. Creator content can increasingly compete for dollars that marketers previously would have treated as conventional brand or performance media, particularly when that content can subsequently be amplified through paid platforms.

"Fortune 500 brands that have bigger spends, they'll probably pull it from other areas. They'll be able to make the argument that this is also going to impact our performance media budget. So let's take some of the money that you're using currently for just regular media buys, and let's use it to actually get multiple different pieces of creative content that we can then utilize to optimize our media spend and our performance play. So typically, it's going back and pulling, I would say, from performance budget or potentially also going back and pulling from bigger brand budgets on TV spend."

A senior ad sales executive at a full-service influencer marketing agency

Digital performance media is another source of budget

For digitally native and DTC brands that have smaller traditional media budgets, creator spending often competes directly with paid social, programmatic media, performance networks, and even search spending.

Brands constantly compare performance across digital channels. If acquisition costs rise or a media source becomes less efficient, marketers can redirect those dollars toward creator content, creator whitelisting, or paid amplification.

In some cases, the reallocation happens within social itself. Instead of spending the entire budget on ads produced by the brand and distributed through corporate accounts, marketers can use some of that money to license and amplify creator-produced content. The media budget has not disappeared; the creative input into that media has changed.

"We're starting to see a shift away from just dumping everything in those paid social channels through performance marketing efforts and to influencers where it's becoming anywhere between a quarter to 50 percent of the social budget … It's a 50-50 split down the middle whether it's just reallocation for better efficiency [or new money]."

A senior director of brand partnerships at a specialist creator agency

Search can face similar pressure. In categories where paid keywords become expensive, some brands are shifting spending toward creator content that can capture consumer interest through product education, reviews, tutorials, and other high-intent content.

Creative production is another source of budget

The third major source is not media at all. Creator spending is increasingly competing with traditional creative production budgets. This is particularly important because asset-led spending is the fastest-growing segment in our forecast. Brands are using creators to produce more content, at lower cost per asset, for use across paid media, social platforms, ecommerce pages, websites, email, and other marketing environments.

Instead of relying only on a traditional agency or production company to create a small number of highly polished assets, a marketer can hire multiple creators to produce a larger number of platform-native variations.

"Brands have a hard time investing more today in creative agencies … Creative production is expensive, especially with creative agencies. Going to creators is cheaper. It's a way to diversify your creative that you have live at a lower cost per unit than going to your creative agency. The creator-led content is a cost benefit to brands because it saves them money on creative production. It also allows them to just very simply diversify their creative output instead of having just the voice of whoever is making the ads at the agency. They can have a dozen different voices, and maybe one of those voices is a winner."

A senior digital and social media strategy executive at a major media agency

The result is that creator growth should not be viewed simply as the emergence of another advertising channel. Creator spending is taking share from several existing pools of marketer money at once. Audience-led and media-led activity can compete with traditional and digital media, while asset-led spending can compete with agencies and production companies.

This also helps explain how the creator economy can continue growing faster than advertising overall. Much of its expansion does not require marketers to create entirely new budgets. Instead, creators are capturing a larger share of media, production, and marketing budgets that already exist.

The Future of the Creator Economy

The creator economy is no longer a narrow category built around influencers selling access to their followers. It has become a broader system through which marketers buy audience, content, media distribution, infrastructure, and intellectual property. That shift explains both the size of the market and its continued growth.

Brands are not simply spending more on sponsored posts. They are integrating creators into paid media, creative production, commerce, and broader marketing operations. As these uses become more standardized, creator-related spending will continue to grow faster than the overall advertising market and capture a larger share of marketer spending.

However, continued growth will require the creator economy to operate very differently than it does today. The second part of this study will examine what begins to break as brands try to scale creator spending significantly beyond current levels. The challenges include fragmented workflows, inconsistent pricing, slow contracting, limited measurement, unclear ownership of data and IP, brand-safety concerns, disclosure requirements, creator fatigue, and the operational burden of coordinating large numbers of individual participants.

The follow-up to this piece also considers potential solutions to these problems and how they may reshape the market. Technology platforms, agencies, talent managers, media companies, and the large social and commerce platforms will all compete to become the primary operating layers for creator spending. The winners will be the companies that can reduce complexity while preserving access to creators, content, audiences, and performance data.

The creator economy of the future is therefore unlikely to be defined by a single channel or business model. It will increasingly function as an integrated layer across media, production, commerce, and marketing infrastructure. The central question is whether the ecosystem can build the systems required to absorb that spending without undermining the qualities that made creators valuable in the first place.

Appendix 1 Methodology Overview

As described in the report, we segment the creator economy into five Buckets:

- Audience-led
- Media-led
- Asset-led
- Infrastructure-led
- Miscellaneous

To size the various Buckets and the total creator economy from an advertiser's vantage point, we used five methods:

- Ad Revenue
- Category
- IRS Gap
- Agency
- Influencer Sampling

Some methods only capture a small component of the creator economy, while others capture the entirety. By taking multiple approaches to the data, paired with contrasting emphasis on different Buckets, we sought to create multiple layers of analysis, which can help to de-emphasize any one approach and reduce the impact of potential limitations of any given method.

The resulting total market estimate is an average of the methods that contribute to each given Bucket.

For a visual breakdown of the methods and the types of spending they cover, please reference the Methodology Map in Appendix 2. Additional written detail for each method is in Appendix 3.

Appendix 2 Methodology Map

Methodology Map

Sizing methods by taxonomy and activity

		SIZING METHOD				
TAXONOMY	ACTIVITY	1 Ad revenue	2 IRS gap	3 Category	4 Agency	5 Influencer sampling
Audience	Paying for creator's organic reach	■		■	■	■
Media	Paid amplification of creator content	■		■	■	
Asset	Creator-as-production-studio (paying for content and collateral)	■		■	■	■
Infrastructure	Fees to creator tech platforms	■		■	■	■
	Fees to creator agencies	■		■	■	■
Miscellaneous	Sending swag or branded merchandise to creators for brand awareness		■	■		■
	PR activities using creators as ambassadors		■	■	■	■
	Production costs associated with creator spend		■	■	■	
	Bringing creators to events for promotion		■	■		■

Note shaded blocks show the activities captured by each sizing method.

Source Madison & Wall © 2026

Madison&Wall

Appendix 3 Methodology Detail

1. Advertising revenue method

Starting dataset

This methodology begins with the Madison & Wall Advertising Revenue Model, which tracks advertising revenue earned by sellers of advertising inventory across the world. The dataset is segmented by medium (Search, Social, Commerce Media, Other Digital, Television, Outdoor, Audio, Publishing, Directories & Direct Mail) and includes quarterly and annual data from 2016 through the first quarter of 2026, with forecasts through 2030.

Process

The advertising revenue model measures revenue earned by media owners rather than total advertiser spending. As a result, our advertising totals are increased using IRS datasets to represent marketer spending rather than publisher revenue. To these totals, we apply medium-level creator penetration rates derived from our interview program. Interviewees were asked to estimate both the allocation of advertising budgets across major media and the proportion of activity within each medium that incorporates creators.

Key assumptions

Historical creator penetration rates were estimated using interview responses, observed market development, and Madison & Wall's long-term knowledge of the advertising industry. Because interview participants were generally active users of creator marketing, penetration estimates were adjusted downward to account for advertisers that make limited or no use of creators.

Scope and implications

This methodology captures Audience-Led, Media-Led, Asset-Led, and Infrastructure-Led creator spending, with media revenue providing an anchor. Because it begins with advertising media activity, it does not fully capture miscellaneous creator engagements such as events, barter arrangements, gifting, or broader licensing.

2. Category method

Starting dataset

The category methodology combines the Madison & Wall Advertising Revenue Model with U.S. advertising expense data (primarily IRS-based, supplemented by BEA data) to construct advertiser spending by industry category.

Process

Unlike the advertising revenue approach, this methodology begins with advertiser expenditures rather than media revenue. Interview participants estimated the share of total advertising budgets involving creators at the company level rather than medium by medium. Responses were grouped by advertiser category and applied directly to category-level advertising expenditures.

Because the underlying dataset already measures advertiser spending, no gross-up adjustment is required. Category-level advertising expenditures are multiplied by category-level creator penetration estimates to derive creator spending by industry.

Key assumptions

Similar to the advertising revenue method, assumptions were made as to the evolution of the penetration rates beyond 2025 (historical and forecast). Estimates were moderated to account for advertisers that make limited or no use of creator marketing.

Scope and implications

Advertising expense data provides one of the broadest perspectives on advertiser activity because it captures many forms of marketing expenditure that are not reflected in advertising revenue alone. Results were reconciled against the advertising revenue methodology to ensure consistency, producing estimates that fell within a reasonable range.

3. IRS gap method

Starting dataset

The difference between advertiser-reported advertising expense and publisher-reported advertising revenue provides an important analytical input. Madison & Wall's advertising revenue model and the IRS's advertising expense data were used to estimate this residual, which represents advertising-related expenditures not captured as media revenue. One of the largest potential explanations for the residual (and most relevant to this report) is spend with the creator economy (excluding working media). For this method, direct creator spend is excluded to isolate emerging and miscellaneous spend in the creator economy.

Process

This residual was used primarily to estimate miscellaneous creator spending. Spending already captured in Audience, Media, Asset, and Infrastructure categories was excluded. The remaining residual primarily reflects production services, promotional materials, events, research, innovation, and other marketing expenditures that may involve creators but fall outside traditional advertising channels.

Key assumptions

Madison & Wall's internal estimates regarding the composition of the IRS gap were used as a starting point to estimate the creator-related share of these expenditures. An additional modest adjustment was incorporated to reflect creator activity that may fall outside IRS-defined advertising expense guidelines.

Scope and implications

This approach captures miscellaneous creator activity that would otherwise be omitted. The resulting estimate represents approximately 7–8% of the total creator economy, consistent with interview findings and broader market observations.

4. Agency method

Starting dataset

The Agency Method combines Madison & Wall agency datasets with a database of approximately 160 creator agencies, talent firms, and creator technology platforms. Organizations were grouped by type and analyzed using employee headcount, and the aggregate of the total scope of the creator agency space was leveraged to make these estimates.

Process

Revenue per employee was estimated at approximately $125,000, below the level observed for large global holding companies and U.S. independent agencies to reflect the broader mix of international and smaller independent creator agencies. Observed agency revenue was combined with Madison & Wall's broader agency datasets, adjusted to account for unobserved agencies, and calibrated using interview findings regarding agency utilization and average take rates.

Key assumptions

Key assumptions include revenue per employee, estimated market coverage, average agency take rates, and the percentage of creator spending that flows through agencies.

Scope and implications

This methodology provides an independent estimate of creator infrastructure spending and serves as a validation of the broader creator economy model.

5. Influencer sampling method

Process

Interview participants provided pricing information across creator tiers, campaign structures, and engagement models. The analysis confirmed a “top-heavy” market, with pricing falling rapidly below the largest celebrity tier before stabilizing across medium-to-small creator tiers.

To estimate activity at the top of the market, Madison & Wall analyzed the Instagram and TikTok accounts of the most-followed creators (including the top 50 on each platform) during recent quarters, recording monetized posts and sponsorship activity. These observations were combined with interview-derived pricing estimates to calculate spending via elite creators.

The remaining creator tiers were estimated using observed relationships between follower counts, monetization rates, pricing, and posting frequency. Results were cross-checked using an independent bottom-up framework based on creator counts, monetization rates, average sponsored posts, and pricing by tier.

Key assumptions

Principal assumptions include pricing by creator tier, monetization rates, posting frequency, and the relative size of each creator tier. Additional adjustments account for creator activity occurring outside Instagram and TikTok.

Scope and implications

This methodology provides a bottom-up validation of the creator economy and offers an independent estimate of creator compensation that complements the broader top-down market-sizing approaches.

International markets

While the five methodologies described above provide a robust estimate of the global creator economy, the composition of creator spending differs across markets. Our interview program consistently indicated that creators are used differently across regions based on consumer behavior, platform adoption, commerce infrastructure, and the maturity of local creator ecosystems.

Accordingly, we adjusted the allocation of creator spending across the five Buckets at the country level rather than applying a single global mix. These adjustments reallocated spending among the Audience-Led, Media-Led, Asset-Led, Infrastructure-Led, and Miscellaneous Buckets to better reflect regional market characteristics.

Across Latin America, and particularly Brazil, interviewees consistently described a more grassroots creator ecosystem that remains relatively labor-intensive. Creator campaigns often require greater coordination, relationship management, and local execution than in more mature markets, leading to a somewhat larger allocation of spending toward Infrastructure-Led and Asset-Led activity.

Across Western Europe, particularly Germany and France, respondents emphasized that authenticity and consumer trust remain especially important determinants of campaign success. As a result, we allocated a modestly larger share of spending toward Audience-Led and Asset-Led engagements, reflecting marketers' greater reliance on trusted creator relationships and locally produced creative assets.

In Asia, where live commerce and social shopping ecosystems are more mature, creator spending remains more closely tied to audience engagement and commerce activity. Consequently, a larger share of spending was allocated to Audience-Led engagements relative to the global average.

A second adjustment accounted for differences in market maturity. Although creator marketing is growing globally, interview participants consistently described international markets as following a similar evolutionary path at different speeds. To reflect this, we assumed that countries outside the United States generally lagged the U.S. by approximately one to three years in the adoption of creator marketing, depending on market maturity. Operationally, this meant applying creator penetration rates from earlier periods of the U.S. model when estimating creator saturation in less mature markets.

Finally, the relative size, maturity, growth, and mix of the paid advertising marketplace in each of the covered markets also informed our analysis of the creator economy. We heard repeatedly from brands that they are thinking of their creator and paid advertising spend holistically and linking planned budget growth rates together across creator and paid media spending.

This approach allows regional forecasts to reflect both structural differences in creator usage and differing stages of market development while maintaining a consistent global modeling framework.

About us

Madison and Wall is an advisory and consulting firm as well as a provider of data and research to technology, media, retail and services businesses supported by advertising. Led by *"Madison Avenue's de facto Chief Economist,"* who was described as *"the industry's most widely respected marketing analyst"* in Frienemies, we focus on servicing CEOs, CFOs, Chief Strategy Officers, Chief Revenue Officers and others who are responsible for deploying or stewarding capital in this sector.

Contact us

questions@madisonandwall.com

Find out more at
madisonandwall.com