



NEXT GEN INFLUENCE

Trends defining a new era
of brand and creator collaboration



AGENDA

- INTRO
- THE RIGHT TO REINVENTION
- RELATABLE REALISM
- INFLUENTIAL ALLIES
- CREDIBLE CREATIVITY
- EXTREME INFLUENCE
- METHODOLOGY
- ABOUT WE ARE SOCIAL

INTRODUCTION

➤ CREATOR CULTURE TODAY IS RAPIDLY EVOLVING

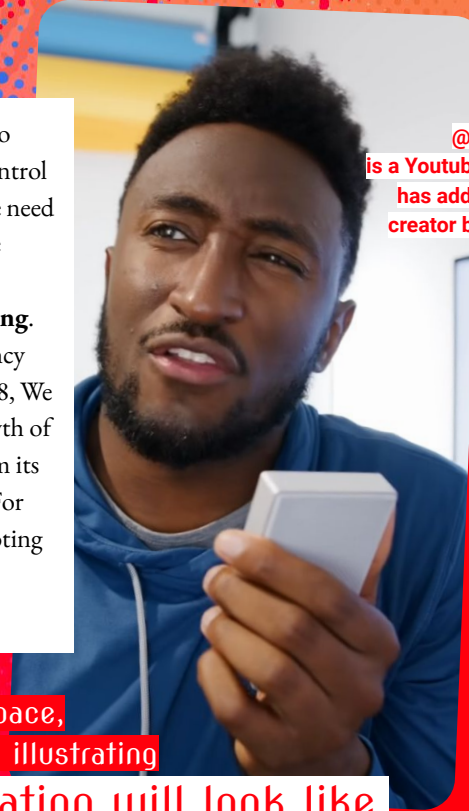
A parent **explaining** the health benefits of ketamine. A Manhattanite it-girl, swapping ‘NYC’s best cocktail bars’ for **Connecticut’s best horse riding spots.** A puppet show in which **children’s dolls are sent to rehab** for stealing a Marc Jacobs bag. One glance at the content made by today’s creators, and we see a culture in flux. Everything from tone, to topics, to production norms have changed in the decade since influence’s infancy.

In the context of dramatic industry growth – We Are Social **reported** a 17% increase in influencer investment last year alone, reaching a projected **\$56 billion** within the decade – creators and brands are having to keep pace with an increasingly professionalised landscape. But it’s not just the scale of the creator economy that’s changing – the wider tectonic plates of culture are shifting, and the values of creator culture along with it. The demands of being ‘always online’ is shaping how creators work and how audiences engage.



Creators are getting **burned out** and retiring from the industry and viewers are thinking critically about what makes content draining or energising. Beyond people's screens, a cost of living crisis has made it harder for them to live (or even imagine) their dreams – and this is reflected in the dreams they want to see played out on social. 2023's 'deinfluencing' showed an agile creator economy in the face of economic shifts, but also called into question **how brand and influence work best together**. And while the lust for original and authentic content has never been stronger, what that looks like has never been murkier.

As brands pour more attention and money into social, new tensions are cropping up: brand control vs. creator control; authenticity vs. efficacy; the need to declare content as sponsored vs. the genuine endorsement which influence requires. **It's a vibrant arena, but the ground is still shifting.** As the world's leading socially-led creative agency that's been working with influencers since 2008, We Are Social has helped brands navigate the growth of the creator economy for the last 16 years – from its baby steps to its present existential teenhood. For today's brands and creators, there's no sure footing without one eye trained on the next gen of influence.



@mkbhd
is a Youtuber who
has addressed
creator burnout



To help brands navigate this space,
we have uncovered five trends illustrating
what that next generation will look like.

THE RIGHT TO REINVENTION

As creators swap consistent personal brands for constant evolution, brands are considering how these more fluid followings can be put to use

THE RIGHT TO REINVENTION

➤ Social loves a 'journey'.

Whether that's Jamie Pandit's odyssey into a **proud trans woman** or Hannah Kleeberg's **growth** from heartbroken to **hyped** supper club influencer, personal evolution makes for good storytelling. But in today's creator economy, this focus on 'the journey' has complicated our idea of authenticity. Particularly as 'influence as we know it' enters its second decade – its child stars growing up, its mainstays ageing out – audiences are now used to watching people change. If the old ideal of influence was to have a single, unwavering personal brand, being a chameleon has come to feel authentic.

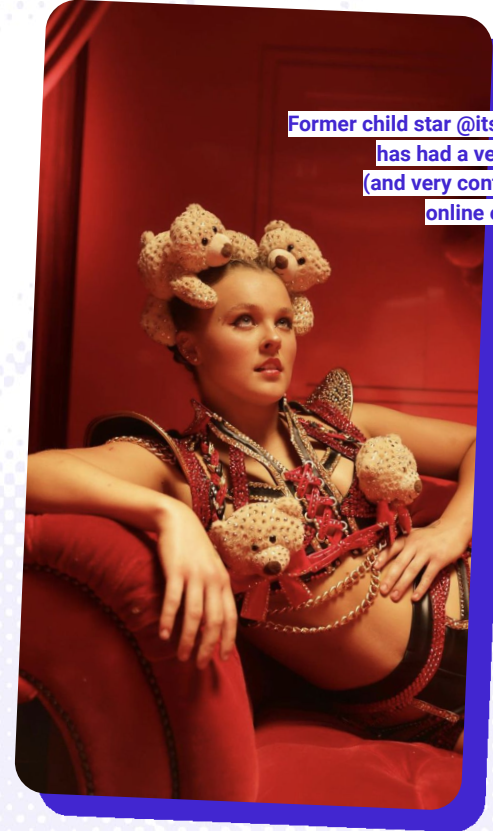


@justjamiepandit

> Audiences are getting used to watching creators evolve, live on screen

This is particularly true for creators whose persona centres around a given life stage – the entrance into motherhood; the early throes of pop stardom – reinventing yourself live on camera feels normal. And since shaking up your identity also means shaking up your audience, creators are playing with this delicate balance: planning their evolutions to win new viewers, without losing resonance with a core fan base.

For savvy brands, this potential for longer lasting creators is a new opportunity. With careful consideration of how a creator's audience might change, there's space for longer, deeper audience connections.



Former child star @itsjojosiwa has had a very public (and very contentious) online evolution

WHAT'S DRIVING IT?

> The history and nostalgia of influence

The history and nostalgia of influence has put a focus on the long-term change of OG creators, eg. legendary Viners, then and now, “being known as the girl who smells like beef isn't always fun #vine.”

> A more age-inclusive culture

A more age-inclusive culture means the creator economy doesn't force people out after a brief window of youth, allowing creators to stay around for longer.





WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

➤ Respected evolutions

Creators like **Julie Vu** have won the love of their audiences for making content that narrativises and visualises ‘the journey’ of her trans evolution, as much as the destination.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»» Dramatic plot twists

From **Charlotte Crosby**, raunchy reality TV stars turned wholesome momfluencer, to **Sophie Aris**, fitness guru turned lazy girl, creators are leaning into stories of radical personal change.



@charlottecrosby

WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»»» Expansive life stages

Influence has been around for longer, and creators' life journeys are being followed for longer periods of time. This comes through in the reinvention of child stars. It's sometimes executed poorly – like **Jojo Siwa**'s cringeworthy evolution from a precocious child on Dance Moms to poseurish **internet celebrity** – but sometimes persuasively, as with Troye Sivan's **growth** from young YouTuber into global pop sensation.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

- As creators progress through life stages and personal reinvention, it's changing the rules of engagement for brands.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

> Long-term brand support.

As longer-term careers are normalised amongst creators, brands should think about how to partner with them through lifestyle transitions. Sure Deodorant took this approach in its partnership with Sophie Aris, the former fitness influencer who **publicly stepped back from the gym and influence writ large**. The deodorant brand partnered with Aris in her new, revamped life to show how their product is as suited to **new mothers** as fitness fanatics.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

»» Plan for shifting audiences.

For brands who want to make themselves relevant to a new audience, think about partnering with influencers who are following a similar path. Brands like Gucci have taken this approach: to move its own brand away from outmoded ideas of men's and women's fashion, **Gucci** partnered with Harry Styles as he piloted his increasingly gender fluid dress sense.



@harrystyles

RELATABLE REALISM

As everyday life gets harder, creators
and brands are aligning themselves
with achievable lifestyles
over aspirational ones

RELATABLE REALISM

➤ Lifestyle content is opening up to new kinds of aspiration.

Aspirational content – visualising the dream life – is the bread and butter of influence. But **research** has found that social comparison is only effective if the goal you're striving for is within the realm of possibility. That body, holiday, or relationship has to be something viewers could imagine themselves attaining. Luxurious escapism still has its place as influential entertainment – just ask [Nara Smith](#). But today, truly *aspirational* content – the stuff viewers model their lives after – is having to change shape to stay realistic. With soaring cost of living, new challenges in forging romantic connections, and the ever-present chance that much of today's housing could be **underwater** in a few decades, most people are striving for stability, not luxury. It's why the last decade's dream job was a lofty Big Tech salary, but today's most sought-after job is a **steady government role** with a decent pension.



➤ Vision of ‘the good life’ are becoming about more than just glamour

In this context, creators peddling ‘the good life’ are having to reappraise what that life looks like to make it feel relevant for real people. This has opened up more space for creators who position funny or calming lifestyles, not wealthy ones, as aspirational – like @shabazsays, who makes wealthy lifestyles the butt of his jokes. And for the still-strong current of glamorous content, this often means adding in a humanising layer – like influencer Jake Shane, who’s hanging out with [celeb BFF](#) Sofia Richie one minute, and earnestly documenting his [OCD diagnosis](#) the next.



WHAT'S DRIVING IT?

> Widespread cultural uncertainty

From economic uncertainty and unstable employment, to geopolitical conflict and warfare, to the ongoing ravages of climate change.

> Normalised cultural criticism

Normalised cultural criticism of influencers and celebrities 'being out of touch' since the cost of living crisis.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

> Neighbourhood goals

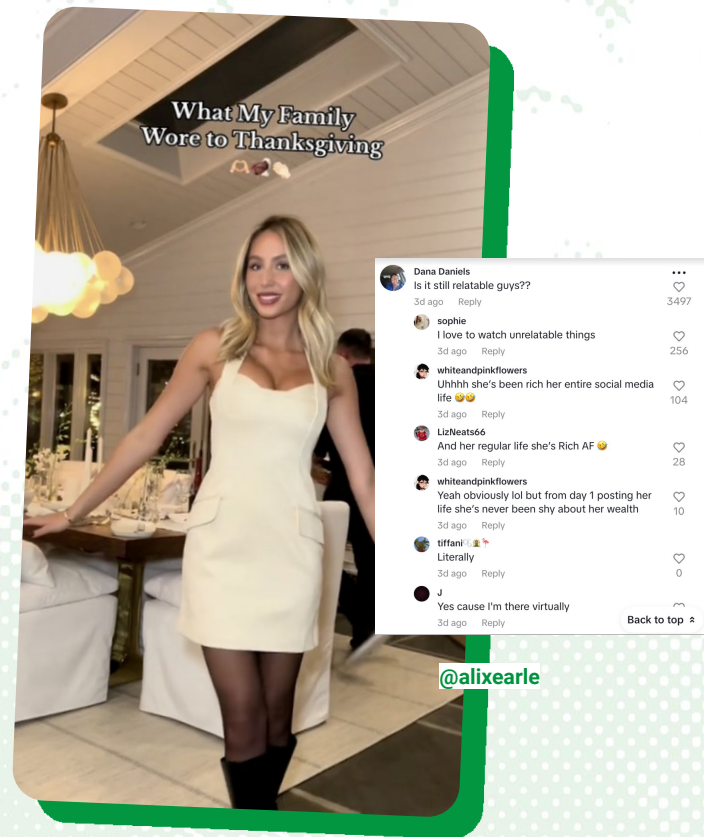
People are engaging with regional creators (e.g., [@hart_of_shetland](#)) for lifestyle content that's more relatable to non-capital city audiences, and also because they offer alternative perspectives.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

» Elite self-awareness

Elite influencers used to be coy about their privilege in the hopes of seeming relatable. But today, audiences have space for lavish influencers who are self-aware about their status – like Alix Earle, who makes a point of owning up to the [privileged upbringing](#) she had before her TikTok fame.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»»» Satire > striving

In the wake of [@shabzays](#) virality, creators have been finding more love from dressing down aspirational content than making it themselves – like [@itsuzannelambert](#) satire that inspired countless users **of all ages** to poke fun at the **lofty aspirations pushed by influencers** or [@annadanielocook](#), whose deadpan landlord roasts and housing crisis explainers show the true lifestyle of low-income Londoners.





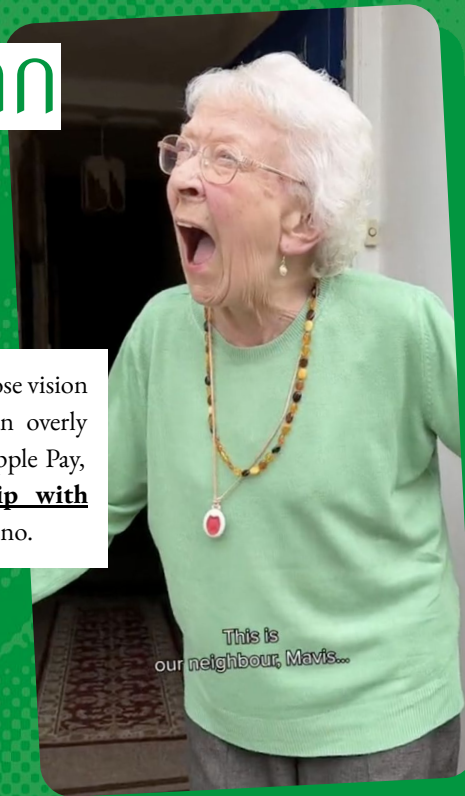
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

- Aspirational lifestyle content is a harder sell in today's economic climate, meaning brands have to think carefully about how they position themselves and their products

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

> Achievable dreams

When making lifestyle content, brands can partner with creators whose vision of 'the good life' is more achievable and wholesome, rather than overly luxurious or far-reaching. It's something we see with brands like Apple Pay, who swapped narratives of grand purchases for a **partnership with @bricks.and.disorder** showing the brand's role in a humble, DIY reno.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

» Relaxed lifestyles

Lifestyle brands can partner with creators that pursue 'soft' versions of passions or pastimes – like National Trust did when it rebranded hiking as chill through its partnership with [@softgirlswhohike](#), or like bakery chain Greggs did by celebrating the work of [Ugly Vegan](#), a food blogger known for championing ugly, low-effort meals over ornate cooking.




@uglyvegan



National Trust - Lyme
showing you that hiking doesn't
have to be hard.

@softgirlswhohike



INFLUENTIAL ALLIES

For today's creators,
allyship is less about expressing values,
and more about content that disrupts the status quo

INFLUENTIAL ALLIES

➤ For creators, talking about values doesn't constitute allyship anymore

Few would say today's society has nailed 'equality', but advocating for a fair and equal world for all is a popular party line. In keeping with this, in recent years we've seen creators engage in acts of altruism to demonstrate their "nice guy" credentials – a trend embodied by Mr. Beast's **loud charitable endeavours**, like funding mass sight-restoration surgery for the blind. But in this context, there's **increasing concern** that philanthropy is being used for the purpose **of online clout**. As audiences become sceptical of moral posturing, creators are shifting away from talking about values, and are instead opting for work that actively disrupts or challenges the status quo – whether by reclaiming online spaces for the under-represented or helping audiences imagine alternative societies or other possible futures.



➤ Creators are helping viewers visualise other possible worlds

For example, **AI TikTok creators** are reimagining history from a decolonised perspective, asking questions like **“What if India ruled Great Britain?”**, finding tongue-in-cheek ways to challenge people to think through a non-Eurocentric lens. For creators, performative altruism is out; allyship and passing-it-on is in.



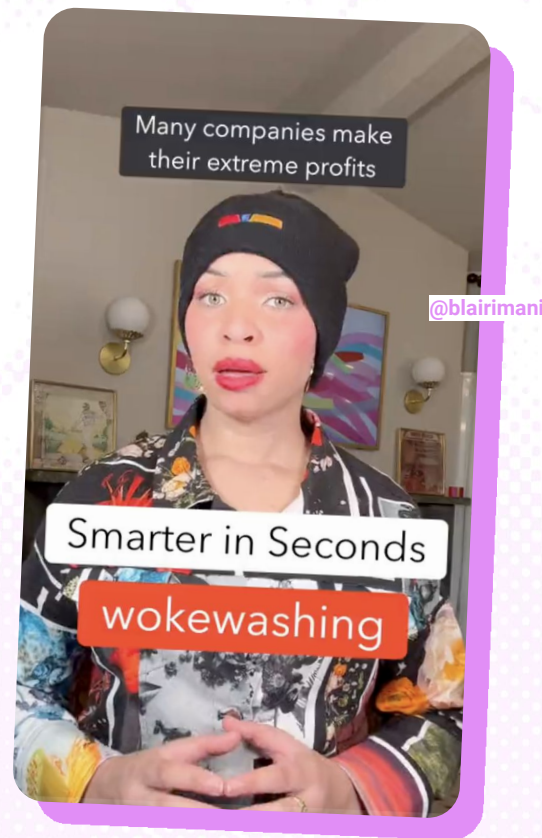
WHAT'S DRIVING IT?

> Pushing back on profiteering

As communities become better versed in the nuances of diversity, equity and inclusion, they're more confident in calling out people profiting off communities rather than tackling the root causes of the problem.

> Representational progress

In many spaces, anti-wokeness and **diversity fatigue** are still undercutting representation. But in more progressive parts of the internet, under-represented communities have reached a tipping point whereby representation is expected, not a "nice to have".



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

> Passing the mic

US actress, writer, and producer Issa Rae has launched **Ensemble**, a company dedicated to connecting diverse and underrepresented creators with brands. As the Creator Economy expands, she aims to bridge the gap between the intention to support diversity and taking actionable steps, by financing and supporting a more varied group of creators. This follows efforts from **TikTok with its Collective programme** that helped 33 non-traditional fashion influencers connect and “speed-date” with luxury fashion brands across the four major fashion weeks.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

» Reclaiming the narrative

There are a growing number of creators whose goal is to showcase multifaceted identities. **Raphael Vicente** spotlights the rich culture in the favelas – spaces often portrayed as violent and hyper-masculine, but whose reality is creatively inspiring, diverse, and more unified than stereotypes suggest.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»»» Challenging accepted truths

Kahlil Greene, a Gen Z Historian on TikTok, uses his platform to challenge and educate through the analysis of obscure history moments as well as contemporary cultural moments – **from Mexico's first Black President** to the **Black History of Cowboy Carter** as well as **advocating for reparations**.





WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

- As creators swap values for actions, brands will have to think more about how to tangibly demonstrate their positive impact.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

> Reparations, not representation.

With influencers advocating for reparations, brands should go beyond representation and support minority-owned businesses as well as working collaboratively with the under-represented communities all year round. Initiatives such as **Buy From A Black Woman – sponsored by H&M – help companies do the right thing** by providing income to Black-owned businesses.



@buyfromablackwoman

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

»» Compassionate collaborations

Consider collaborating with the industry and other brands to make a real difference. The **Unignorable Adbreak** where ten of Australia's most well known brands came together in support of differently abled representation by including differently abled people in key scenes in their advertising.



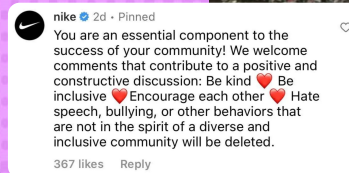
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

»»» End-to-end support

When working with marginalised individuals, accurate and nuanced representation is just a first step – after-care is a key component of a culturally-sensitive activation. Nike modelled this in their work with Dylan Mulvaney: while the trans influencer has previously been **left in the lurch** by brand partners during anti-trans backlash, **Nike** responded to anti-trans threats with posts encouraging users to be ‘kind’ and ‘inclusive’.



@dylanmulvaney





CREDIBLE CREATIVITY

Creator partnerships are allowing brands
to engage with culturally authentic
modes of creativity

CREDIBLE CREATIVITY

➤ It's not easy to be a brand on the internet

On one side, savvier audiences hate to have their viewing experience **interrupted** by ad content. On the other, lower barriers to entry have supercharged creative production – meaning more content vying for the same finite attention spans. In this context, the bar to creativity is higher. This is true for everyone, but it's hardest for brands, who have to be as entertaining as their human counterparts, without the grace given to humans for their flaws – it's why a creator like **Will Mahony** is beloved for his controversy, while **Balenciaga** was lambasted for its S&M teddy bear campaign.



➤ Today's brands don't always have the right to participate in 'very online' creativity

If brands of the noughties could get away with risqué subversion, today's brands are expected to be both morally and creatively exemplary at the same time. To strike this difficult balance (of being both institutionally upstanding and creativity inspiring) brands are leaning on creators that represent 'very online' creativity – particularly the creative approaches that are loved when done by individuals, but less persuasive when done by corporations.



Playstation's risqué ads of the noughties are a far cry from today's ad norms

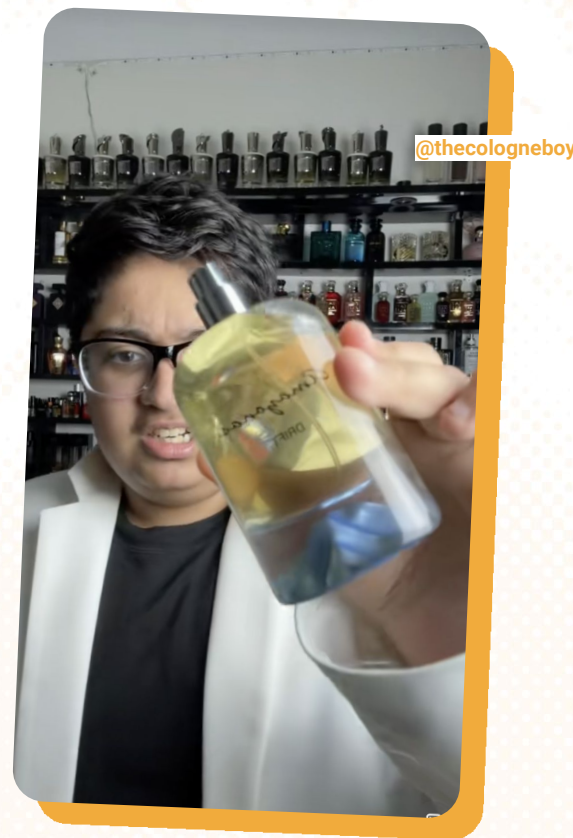
WHAT'S DRIVING IT?

> Platform dynamics

Platforms like TikTok have made the niche mainstream by giving niche creators more of a voice. This has shaped audience expectation, with bigger audiences tuning into niche content formerly reserved for 'very online' users.

> Ad hostility

There's less patience and attention spans for content across the board, but especially advertising that interrupts entertainment.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

> Subversive mouthpieces

We're seeing more and more subversive humour in creator content. While brands themselves might cause outrage for poking fun at topics like addiction, partnerships – like Marc Jacobs' work with playfully risqué creator [@sylvaniadrama](#) – gives brands more licence to participate in culturally authentic humour.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»» Fan-creators

‘Being a fan’ underpins the bulk of online creativity, whether it’s fanfic around Marvel movies or content about a creator’s **passions or collectibles**. But while many brands have fans, few get to be fans – unless they align themselves with creators who are themselves passionate about something in culture. Fashion brand Loewe does this by sponsoring celebrities, and then working with creators like **Evan Ross Katz**, a renowned stan of those same celebrities.



@evanrosskatz

WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»»» Humble humour

Being an influencer, to some extent demands being taken seriously – but being a creator more often requires taking the piss out of yourself. Self-deprecating humour, content, or personas are one of culture's most resonant tropes, which explains the cult following of **DJ Mandy**, a creator whose terrible mashups make her **'proud to be the worst DJ on the internet'**.





WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

- Creator partnerships can help brands tap into ‘very internet’ genres of creativity, in spaces that may have previously been out of reach.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

> Subversive partners.

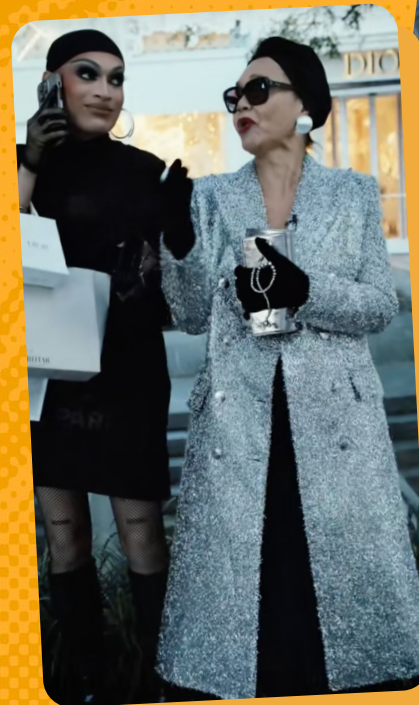
Brief creators to lean into the subversiveness around your brand. Whether it's environmental charity [@hellohububub](#) asking [@italianbach](#) to make some crude innuendos about oat milk to encourage people to choose non-dairy alternatives, or [@whogivesacrap](#) getting a well-known public toilet reviewer to talk about 'the perfect place to take a sh*t', brands have more leeway with naughtiness when a campaign starts with a creator known for subversive content.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

»» Fans by association

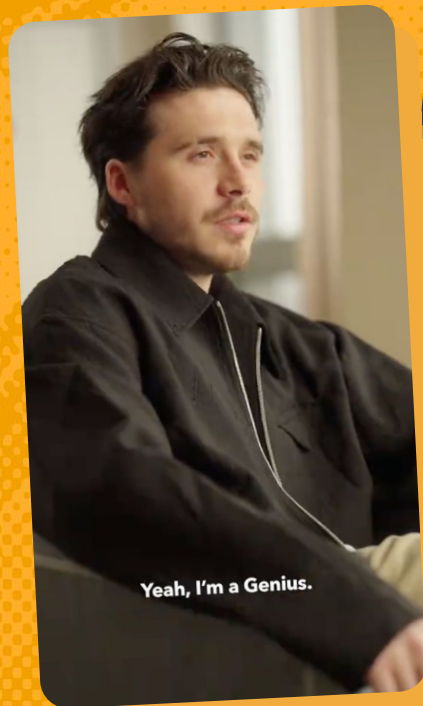
Culture-savvy brands are already acting like fans: it's why jewellery brand Alexis Bittar made a whole **mockumentary** pretending to be fans of a **fictional Manhattan fashion icon**. Partnering with creators who are avid fans of some pocket of culture can take this further, helping brands to participate more earnestly in the fandom practice that defines today's internet.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

Self-aware comedy

Work with creators to platform stories that poke fun at their human flaws – like the **Booking.com x Brooklyn Beckham** collab, in which the **famously flighty** son of the Beckhams serves up some tongue-in-cheek self-mockery.



EXTREME INFLUENCE

In an attempt to entertain and stand out,
creators and brands are pushing boundaries
to the extreme

EXTREME INFLUENCE

➤ The social web's best creativity is hidden within mounds of junk content.

The origins of the 'Dead Internet Theory' are hard to pinpoint, but its premise is clear: social has been overrun with bots and automatically generated content – optimised to grab attention, but lacking in soul. The real issue for creators is how to stand out in this junk-cluttered space. While the 'Dead Internet' might be the most extreme, it's one of many bundled wider conversations about the dwindling originality and meaningfulness of today's content. On social, users and creators alike are calling out the way that bots, trend cycles, and garbage content have thrust online creativity into crisis.



Creators like [@jmulligan.tv](#) are discussing junk content under hashtags like [#deadinternettheory](#)

➤ Many of today's creators are caught in this sea of over-optimised sameness.

To cut through, they're leaning into the unusual and extreme, whether that's espousing the mental health benefits of ketamine, faking one's own death to call attention to a cause, or courting danger for clout by firing fireworks at a helicopter from a Lamborghini.



WHAT'S DRIVING IT?

> The enshittification of the internet

In the sea of sameness as the internet seems to be **dying a slow death**, creators are going to far out spaces to gain attention.

> Generation online

As the generation who grew up totally online become creators, they understand what it takes to stand out by breaking the internet's unspoken rules.



Surreal and alarming content –
like @leonardoscotti's imagery
– no longer feels extreme in
today's
platform culture

WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

> Human feats

Creators are chasing thrills and showcasing extreme feats of endurance for attention: **Max Webb**'s lo-fi, high-octane adventure content democratizes the world of extreme sport, while **DeoRuns** aims to be the first person to run from Cape Town to London as a way of highlighting the history of human migration.

@maxwebbi



@deoruns



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

»» Sharp formats

Comedy creators, like [@accorciabro](#) are subverting influencer tropes by employing extreme brevity – stitching and summarising other creator content with a dry monotone in a matter of seconds. Summarising an influencer’s lengthy cliffhanger video, he deadpans: “She thought that the spring onion was mould, so she stopped eating”.



WHAT ARE CREATORS DOING?

Ultra-weirdness

Creators are challenging category norms with bizarreness to cut through. **John Pork**, an **AI enhanced Travel Influencer** who happens to be a pig, has gained a cult following and spawns the “John Pork Calling” meme that helped the creator reach 900 million views on TikTok.





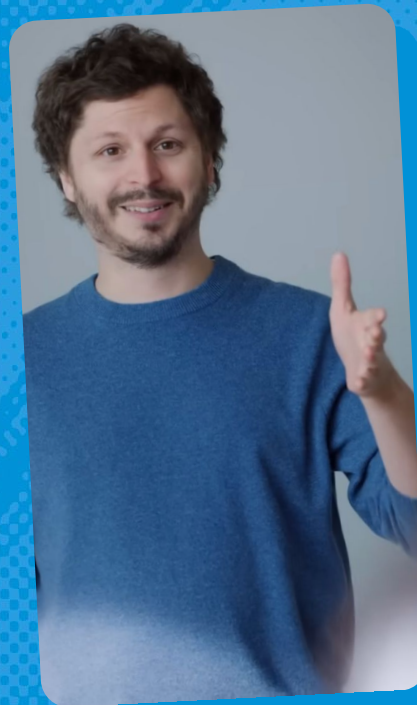
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

- As online culture becomes more extreme, social has become a place where brands are expected to be more playful and experimental.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

➤ Embrace the chaos.

Social is today's entertainment, meaning brands will be forced to be bolder to stand out. Skincare brand CeraVe took a page from this book with its **MichaelCeraVe** campaign. Inspired by the extreme corners of social where conspiracy theories form, the campaign **enlisted 450 influencers** to seed a conspiracy theory that goofy Canadian actor Michael Cera – not dermatologists – was the secret founder behind the brand.

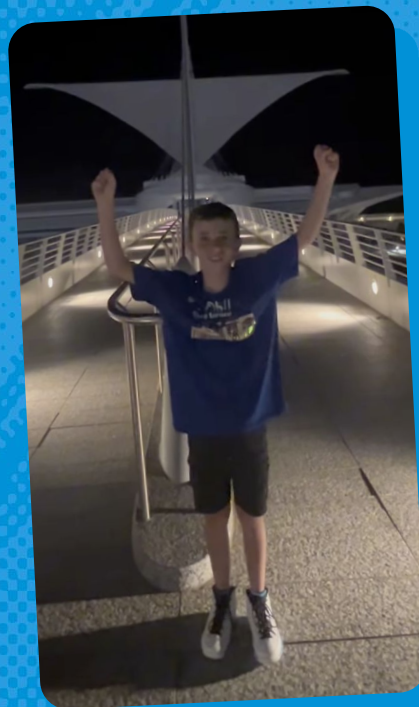


@michaelcera

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

»» Lean into extreme niches

Passions, niche hobbies and feats of endurance are becoming shorthand for authenticity and likability. Working with the most passionate creators in these areas, even if they're smaller scale, can offer more credibility than opting for scale. Marc Jacobs took this approach when it invited **Jack the Great**, a cult creator known for capturing the moment that public lights are shut off, into their shop to **watch the lights go out after hours**.



METHODOLOGY

Predicting emergent internet trends isn't easy, and the influencer marketing category is no exception. The creator economy is vibrant, but it's also complex – prone to constant innovation but also rapid change.

To ensure that the trends uncovered in the 2024 edition of this report are ones that will persist over time, we've conducted a mixed-methodological approach to analysing influence, using quantitative, qualitative, and cultural analysis.

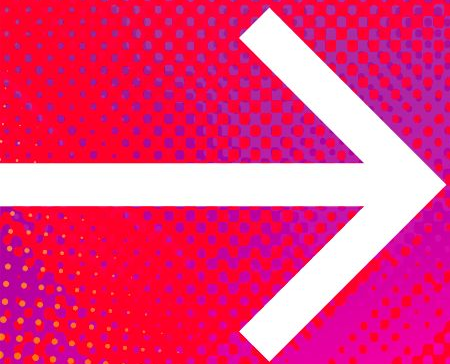
This included **contextual desk research** to understand foundational shifts in the influencer marketing and creator economy space.

This was followed by a series of **expert interviews** with influencer marketing specialists across the globe to understand the current landscape.

We then worked with Tagger, an influencer identification, management and reporting tool, pulling the **fastest growing 100 creators** with over 50K followers in the last six months, looking across key markets and across the beauty, fashion, lifestyle, gaming, sports, food and drink, and travel categories. Many of these creators are featured throughout the report.



With this research input, our Cultural Insights department used thematic analysis to identify emergent trends that are shaping the influencer marketing category.



ABOUT

**we
are
social**

We are a global socially-led creative agency with unrivalled social media and influencer marketing expertise.

With 1300 people in 19 offices, we deliver a global perspective to our clients in a time when social media is shaping culture.



Find out how we can help your brand build authentic and impactful influencer partnerships

GET IN TOUCH:

ENQUIRIES@WEARESOCIAL.NET

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