KALO IQ RESEARCH / 2026

The creator verification gap

There is a structural mismatch in influencer marketing right now. The money is moving fastest into exactly the creators that are hardest to verify, while the channel runs on trust that most brands never actually check. This is a short analysis of that gap, built on public data, with the original sources cited so you can check every number.

The gap in plain terms

Spend is climbing fast. US creator ad spend hit roughly $37 billion in 2025 and is projected near $44 billion in 2026, growing about four times faster than the broader ad market, per the IAB. At the same time, eMarketer data shows nearly half of US creator spend, 49.9%, now goes to nano and micro creators. Those small accounts are the hardest tier to verify by hand, since there are vastly more of them and far less third-party data on each.

So the two lines are diverging. Spend, especially in the small-creator tier, goes up and to the right. The verification effort brands apply mostly stays flat. That divergence is the gap, widening precisely because the fastest-growing part of the channel is the part that is hardest to check.

Why the gap keeps widening

1. **The money moved to the tier that is hardest to verify.**

   Nano and micro creators now take 49.9% of US creator spend, up from under a fifth a few years ago, per eMarketer. A handful of large creators can be vetted by hand. A long tail of thousands of small ones cannot, so the shift to small creators quietly raised the verification burden on every brand.

2 **The channel runs on trust, which is exactly what fakes drain.**

58% of US adults have bought a product because of a creator endorsement, per the National Advertising Division. That trust is the entire mechanism. When an audience is padded with bots or based overseas, the brand pays for trust that cannot convert, while most never measure the leak.

3 **Creators are paid to look bigger than they are.**

eMarketer forecasts that 59% of creator revenue in 2026 comes from sponsored content. When sponsorship dollars track follower counts and engagement, there is a standing financial incentive to inflate both, which is the root cause the verification gap has to address.

4 **A single benchmark hides the fakes.**

TikTok engagement averaged about 3.7% in 2025 against Instagram's roughly 0.48%, a 7x gap. A brand judging every creator against one number will misread most of them, then miss the engagement anomalies that flag a bought audience. Verification has to be tier and platform aware, which is more work, so it often gets skipped.

5 **Always-on programs multiply the cost of a bad roster.**

The IAB notes brands shifting from one-off campaigns to always-on creator programs. An unverified creator in a one-off campaign wastes one budget. The same creator in an always-on roster wastes budget every cycle, so the move to always-on raises the stakes on getting verification right once.

6 **Regulators now price the downside.**

The FTC's per-violation civil penalty is inflation-adjusted to roughly $51,744, each post can count separately, plus the 2024 fake-reviews rule covers AI-generated fakes. Verification is no longer only about wasted spend, it is about regulatory exposure when an endorsement or audience turns out to be fabricated.

How to close it

The fix is a discipline, not a tool feature. Verify the audience before money moves: confirm the followers are real, confirm the engagement is genuine for that creator's platform and tier, then for a

US brand confirm the audience is actually in the US. Do it once, up front, rather than discovering the problem in the campaign report.

The reason this is worth doing now is simple math. In a channel near $44 billion and growing four times faster than the rest of media, with half the spend in the hardest-to-verify tier, the brands that verify before they pay are not being cautious. They are taking the cheapest performance gain on the table. The verification gap is a cost everyone is paying. Closing it is optional.

Sources

1. IAB, 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report (US creator spend ~$37B in 2025, ~$44B projected 2026, ~4x media growth, shift to always-on programs).
2. eMarketer, February 2026 forecast (nano and micro 49.9% of US creator spend; 59% of creator revenue from sponsored content).
3. National Advertising Division, BBB National Programs (58% of US adults have purchased due to an influencer endorsement).
4. Federal Trade Commission (per-violation civil penalty, inflation-adjusted; August 2024 Final Rule banning fake reviews and testimonials, including AI-generated).
5. Industry engagement benchmarks, 2025 (TikTok ~3.7% vs Instagram ~0.48% average engagement).

Figures are reported as published by the sources above as of June 2026. Measurement scopes differ between sources and are noted where relevant. This page links to no competitor and reproduces no third-party report; it summarizes published figures with attribution for industry reference.

Go deeper

This analysis is part of **The Verified Creator Report 2026**. For the full data reference, see **Creator Economy Statistics 2026**.

About this content

Editorial, verification and review standards for this page.

PUBLISHER

Published by **KALO IQ**, the US influencer marketing platform headquartered in Beverly Hills, California. Founded December 2015.

VERIFICATION STANDARDS

Every creator on the **KALO IQ database** is hand-verified by our 15-person verification team before being listed. We exclude bots, fake-follower accounts and creators outside the US.

LAST REVIEWED

May 2026 · **See our latest research** · **Contact editorial**