KALO IQ RESEARCH / 2026

The Verified Creator Report 2026

US creator spend is growing four times faster than the rest of the ad market. The rigor brands apply to verifying those creators is not keeping pace. This report pulls together public data from the IAB, eMarketer, the FTC and others to size that gap, then explains what it costs and how to close it. Every number here is public and cited. No private data, no guesswork.

$37B
US CREATOR ECONOMY AD SPEND, 2025
+26% YoY

~$44B
PROJECTED US CREATOR SPEND 2026

49.9%
US CREATOR SPEND GOING TO NANO AND MICRO

58%
US ADULTS WHO HAVE BOUGHT ON A CREATOR'S SAY-SO

4x
CREATOR SPEND GROWTH VS TOTAL MEDIA

Headline figures: IAB 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report; eMarketer (Feb 2026 forecast); National Advertising Division, BBB National Programs. Full sources listed below.

The thesis: spend is outrunning trust

Here is the tension the data keeps pointing at. Money flowing to creators is climbing fast and shifting toward smaller accounts where audiences are harder to verify, while the channel runs almost entirely on trust that most brands do not actually check. The result is a structural gap. Spend goes up and to the right. Verification mostly does not move. And the wider that gap gets, the more budget leaks to audiences that are not real or not reachable.

This is not a doom report. Creator marketing works, the trust is real, the growth is earned. The point is narrower and more useful: the fastest-growing parts of the channel are also the hardest to verify.

That is exactly where brands are pouring new money. Closing the gap is the cheapest performance gain available in 2026.

Ten findings from the public record.

1. **US creator spend hit $37 billion in 2025, growing four times faster than the rest of media.**

   The IAB's 2025 Creator Economy report put US creator ad spend at roughly $37 billion, up 26% year over year and growing about four times faster than the broader ad market. That is up from $13.9 billion as recently as 2021. (Source: IAB 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report.)

2. **It is on track for about $44 billion in 2026.**

   IAB analysts project US creator ad spend, including paid amplification of creator content, climbing to roughly $43.9 billion in 2026, an 18% jump. The line item that used to sit next to experimental social budgets is now bigger than several traditional media categories. (Source: IAB, 2026 projection.)

3. **Half of US creator spend now goes to nano and micro creators.**

   eMarketer data presented at its Creator Trends 2026 Summit shows nano and micro creators now capture 49.9% of US creator spend, up from less than a fifth a few years ago. Smaller accounts win on trust and cost, yet they are also the hardest tier to verify by hand. (Source: eMarketer, Feb 2026.)

4. **The trust the channel runs on is real and large.**

   58% of US adults have bought a product because of an influencer endorsement, per the National Advertising Division of BBB National Programs. That is the engine of the whole channel. It is exactly what fake or misrepresented audiences quietly siphon off. (Source: NAD, BBB National Programs.)

5 **Creators earn most of their money from sponsored content, so the incentive to look bigger is built in.**

eMarketer forecasts that in 2026 creators earn 59% of their revenue from sponsored content, followed by platform payouts (24.4%) and affiliate (8.2%). When sponsorship dollars track follower counts and engagement, there is a standing financial incentive to inflate both. (Source: eMarketer.)

6 **Engagement rates vary roughly sevenfold by platform, which makes a single benchmark useless.**

TikTok's average engagement rate ran near 3.7% in 2025 against Instagram's roughly 0.48%, about a 7x gap. A brand judging a TikTok creator and an Instagram creator against the same number will misread both. Engagement-rate anomalies are one of the clearest fake-follower signals. (Source: industry engagement benchmarks, 2025.)

7 **Fake and bot accounts have long been estimated at 15 to 20% of followers.**

Independent estimates have for years put roughly 15 to 20% of social followers as fake or bot accounts. Even at the low end, on a $44 billion channel that is billions in spend pointed at audiences that do not exist. (Source: long-running industry estimates, incl. Influencer Marketing Hub.)

8 **Regulators now treat undisclosed and fake endorsements as enforceable violations.**

The FTC's maximum civil penalty for endorsement violations is inflation-adjusted to roughly $51,744 per violation, with each post counting as a separate violation. In 2024 the FTC returned $337.3 million to consumers across its actions. (Source: Federal Trade Commission.)

9 **The FTC's 2024 rule put fake reviews and testimonials directly in scope, including AI-generated ones.**

In August 2024 the FTC finalized a rule banning fake consumer reviews and testimonials, explicitly allowing civil penalties and explicitly covering AI-generated fakes. Disclosure obligations now extend to AI-generated content, while platform "paid partnership" tags alone are not treated as sufficient. (Source: FTC Final Rule on fake reviews, 2024.)

10 **The whole channel is moving from one-off campaigns to always-on programs, which raises the cost of a bad roster.**

The IAB describes creator content as a "core media channel" and notes brands shifting from one-off partnerships to always-on programs built on micro, affiliate and performance creators. An always-on program built on unverified creators does not just waste one campaign, it compounds the waste every cycle. (Source: IAB, via Marketing Dive.)

What the gap actually costs

Put the public numbers together and the shape is clear. A roughly $44 billion US channel in 2026, with about half the spend flowing to the hardest-to-verify tier, running on real consumer trust that fake audiences quietly drain, under a regulator that now fines undisclosed and fabricated endorsements per post. The brands treating verification as optional are the ones funding the leak.

The fix is not exotic. Verify the audience before you pay: confirm the followers are real, the engagement is genuine and, for a US brand, the audience is actually in the US. That single discipline turns the fastest-growing, hardest-to-verify part of the channel from a risk into an edge. In a market this big growing this fast, verification is the cheapest performance lever left.

Methodology and what this report is

WHAT THIS IS

An analysis that synthesizes publicly available, third-party data on the US creator economy into a single argument about the spend-versus-verification gap. The interpretation is ours. The numbers are not.

SOURCE STANDARD

We cite primary and neutral sources only: the IAB, eMarketer, the FTC, the National Advertising Division and Goldman Sachs. We deliberately excluded vendor "fraud studies" from competing tools, which are not independently verifiable.

WHAT WE DID NOT DO

We did not use any private KALO IQ customer data in this report, nor did we generate or estimate any figure ourselves. Every statistic traces to a named public source you can check.

LIMITATIONS

Forecasts are forecasts. Measurement scopes differ between sources (for example, IAB includes paid amplification while eMarketer counts creator revenue), so figures are not always directly comparable. We note the scope where it matters.

Sources

1. IAB, 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report (US creator spend $37B in 2025, +26% YoY, ~4x media growth, ~$43.9B projected 2026, "core media channel").
2. eMarketer, Creator Trends 2026 Summit and February 2026 forecast (US social creator revenue $21.10B in 2026; nano and micro 49.9% of US creator spend; revenue mix 59% sponsored, 24.4% platform, 8.2% affiliate).
3. National Advertising Division, BBB National Programs (58% of US adults have purchased due to an influencer endorsement).
4. Federal Trade Commission (endorsement-violation civil penalty, inflation-adjusted; $337.3M returned to consumers in 2024; August 2024 Final Rule banning fake reviews and testimonials, including AI-generated; disclosure applies to AI content; platform tags alone insufficient).
5. Goldman Sachs (creator economy total addressable market estimated near $250B in 2024, projected toward ~$480B by 2027).
6. Industry engagement benchmarks, 2025 (TikTok average engagement ~3.7% vs Instagram ~0.48%).
7. Long-running industry estimates including Influencer Marketing Hub (roughly 15 to 20% of social followers estimated fake or bot).

Figures are reported as published by the sources above as of June 2026. Where sources use different measurement scopes, we have noted it. This page links to no competitor and reproduces no third-party report; it summarizes published figures with attribution for industry reference.

Use this report

You are welcome to cite any figure here. Each one is attributed to its original public source above, so cite the original source directly (the IAB, eMarketer, the FTC and so on). Where you reference our synthesis or the spend-versus-verification framing, attribute it as *KALO IQ Research, The Verified Creator Report 2026*.

Why KALO IQ publishes this

We build verification into influencer marketing, so the spend-versus-trust gap is the problem we work on every day. Publishing the public data on it is how we make the case plainly: in a $44 billion channel growing four times faster than the rest of media, verifying creators before you pay is the cheapest edge a brand has left.

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.

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