

Influence Beyond the Feed

How creators have evolved from content producers into drivers of culture, commerce, and consumer relationships

TRUTH
TRENDS

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What's Happening and Why We Care

This edition of Truth Trends explores how influencers have evolved from a social media trend into a **major force shaping consumer relationships, brand engagement, and purchasing decisions**. Through storytelling, recommendations, and creator-led experiences, creators are becoming increasingly influential across the consumer journey, helping brands build awareness, spark consideration, and drive action. As audiences continue to seek trusted voices, authentic content, and community-driven experiences, **creators are playing a growing role in how consumers discover information, evaluate brands, and make decisions in the digital world.**

The Creator Economy Is No Longer Niche

The creator economy has grown into a major force within the advertising landscape. Industry estimates value the space at approximately **\$24 billion, with 83% of U.S. marketers using paid creators in 2024**. As audience attention continues shifting toward social platforms, brands are increasingly investing in creator partnerships to **build relevance, strengthen consumer relationships, and reach consumers in more authentic ways.**

Creators Are Shaping Modern Culture

Mintel's 2026 influencer report found that in a survey of 1,963 social media users, **75% of consumers agree that influencers shape trends more than celebrities today**. This perspective is prominent among younger audiences (18–34) who turn to creators for entertainment, inspiration, and recommendations rather than traditional media sources.

The top self-reported areas impacted by creators include:

- Entertainment (29%)
- Fitness & exercise (26%)
- Personal style or appearance (26%)
- Travel & vacation (25%)
- Technology (24%)

TikTok Dominates Social Commerce

TikTok Shop Becomes a Retail Powerhouse

TikTok Shop has rapidly emerged as a major force within the social commerce landscape. In 2025, the platform accounted for **18.2% of total U.S. social commerce sales**, and **eMarketer projects that figure will reach 24.1% by 2027**. The platform generated **\$15.82 billion in U.S. sales during 2025**, placing it among the largest and fastest-growing players in the category. Growth has accelerated globally as well, with Pattern reporting **94% year-over-year growth** in TikTok Shop's gross merchandise value (GMV). This expansion is occurring alongside broader changes in online shopping behavior, as Statista projects social commerce will grow from **approximately 18% of global online retail sales in 2025 to nearly 23% by 2030**, reflecting a continued shift toward creator-led and platform-native purchasing experiences. As brands continue shifting budgets toward creator partnerships, **performance is increasingly measured through engagement, conversion, and revenue generation**, reinforcing TikTok Shop's position as both a content platform and a retail channel.

Shopping No Longer Starts With Search

TikTok has evolved from just being a source of entertainment into a powerful shopping channel. **Twenty-seven percent of consumers have purchased products through influencer posts while 32% are open to buying on the platform (Mintel, 2026)**. Creator-led content surfaced through TikTok's personalized algorithms, including shoppable posts, livestreams, and affiliate-enabled videos, has significantly shortened the path from discovery to consideration. This integration of e-commerce features has positioned TikTok as a **holistic shopping experience without having to leave the app**.

Axis Intelligence, 2026



42%

of U.S. TikTok Shop GMV is driven by affiliate creator content

Consumer Behaviors

Mintel, 2026

Consumers Are Questioning Traditional Influence

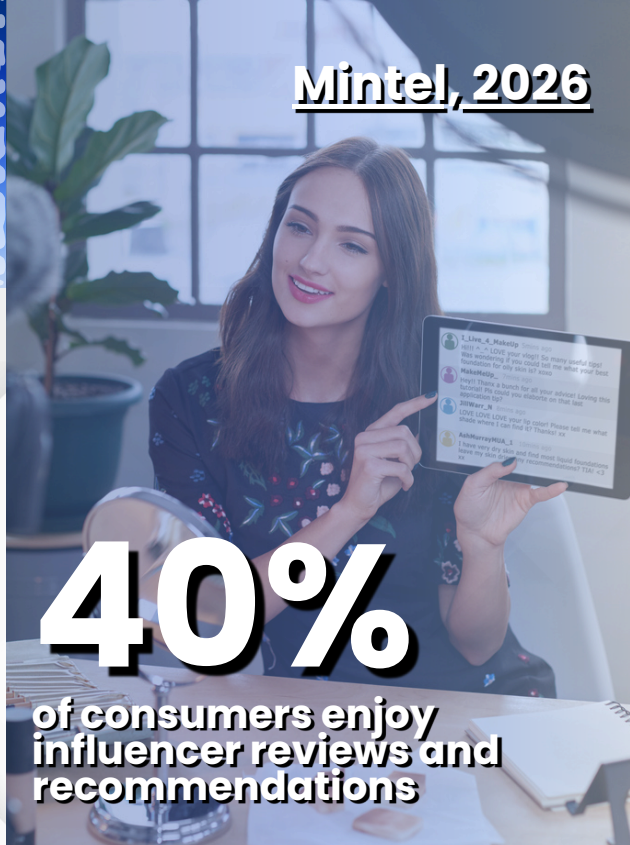
As creator marketing has matured, consumers have become increasingly selective about who they trust online. Mintel found that **71% of consumers unfollow creators when they are no longer relatable, while 73% believe influencers promote unrealistic lifestyles**. Additionally, **77% assume influencer partnerships are driven by financial incentives rather than genuine recommendations**. These findings suggest that consumers are becoming more skeptical of highly curated content and commercialized partnerships, making authenticity and relevance more important than ever.

Influence Sparks Curiosity, Not Immediate Purchases

Creator content often begins the consumer journey rather than ending it. According to Mintel, **46% of consumers search online** after seeing a creator promote an unfamiliar product, while **34% visit a brand's website or social media page** to learn more. Consumers also seek additional validation, with **29% checking social media conversations and another 29% using AI tools to gather information before making decisions**. While creator content can increase awareness and curiosity, reviews, user-generated content, and broader social proof often play a critical role in building confidence and driving conversion.

Employees Are the New Micro-Influencers

As consumers place greater value on firsthand knowledge and lived experience, brands are looking beyond traditional influencers and toward **employees, experts, and community members**. Mintel highlights examples such as the viral "**Staples Baddie**," whose behind-the-scenes content generated engagement by sharing useful information rather than promotional messaging. Similarly, Starbucks has experimented with creator programs that encourage employees to share content rooted in their everyday experiences and product knowledge. Instead of outsourcing influence, brands are increasingly cultivating advocates from within, demonstrating that **credibility is becoming less about audience size and more about expertise, proximity, and trust**.



40%

of consumers enjoy influencer reviews and recommendations



44%

of consumers enjoy personal stories from influencers

Key Takeaways

Creator Content Is Becoming a Cross-Channel Asset

Creator content is no longer confined to social platforms. As brands look to maximize the value of creator partnerships, content is increasingly being repurposed across websites, retail media placements, connected TV, email campaigns, and in-store experiences. What begins as a social media post can now influence consumers across multiple touchpoints throughout the decision-making process.

What This Means for Brands: Treat creator content like a long-term marketing asset, not a one-time campaign deliverable.

Authentic Voices Already Exist Within the Brand

The definition of influence is expanding beyond traditional creators as brands increasingly recognize the value of **employee-generated content**. Examples such as the viral "Staples Baddie" demonstrate how employees can build credibility by sharing product expertise and behind-the-scenes perspectives that feel authentic rather than promotional. As trust becomes more valuable than visibility alone, brands are finding that some of their **most credible voices already exist within their own organizations**.

What This Means for Brands: Identify, support, and amplify employees who can authentically represent the brand and build trust with consumers.

Relevance Is Replacing Reach

As consumers become more selective about who they trust, **audience size is becoming a less reliable measure of influence**. Brands are increasingly prioritizing creators who have strong relationships within specific communities and can generate meaningful engagement rather than broad exposure. The most effective partnerships are often built around **shared interests, expertise, and cultural relevance**.

What This Means for Brands: Prioritize creators who deliver credibility and engagement within specific communities rather than maximizing audience size alone.

