

Influencers, creators, or AI?

The new rules of brand building:

Why this matters now...

Marketing has undergone a fundamental shift, with more investment moving into influencer-led strategies. This is forcing us to rethink how brands grow.

Creators, influencers, AI - some combination of all three? Or something else, something more fundamental?

What you'll get from this

01 A clearer definition of creators vs influencers (and why it's not that simple)

02 A reality check on how different this is from traditional advertising

03 Where AI fits—and how influencers/creators and AI

04 A challenging perspective on what actually drives brand growth: momentum

The $5 billion decision

Last year, Unilever announced it was shifting 50% of its marketing budget to influencers—in practice, this means both influencers and creators. It's a seismic decision from one of the world's oldest and biggest advertisers.

Unilever's toothpaste brand, Signal, was the very first ad on UK commercial television in 1955. Along with P&G, Unilever helped define what we now regard as "traditional" marketing and advertising.

But this time, they may be playing catch-up. Brands like Gymshark have already demonstrated how influencer-led marketing can build global brands.

50%

Unilever puts 50% of its marketing budget to influencers

This raises some basic questions:

- What is the difference between an influencer and a creator?
- Do they overlap?
- How is this different from good old ads?
- Is AI better than either?
- Where is all this heading?

What's the difference between an influencer and a creator?

Some simple definitions (That don't quite hold)

Influencer

"People follow me.

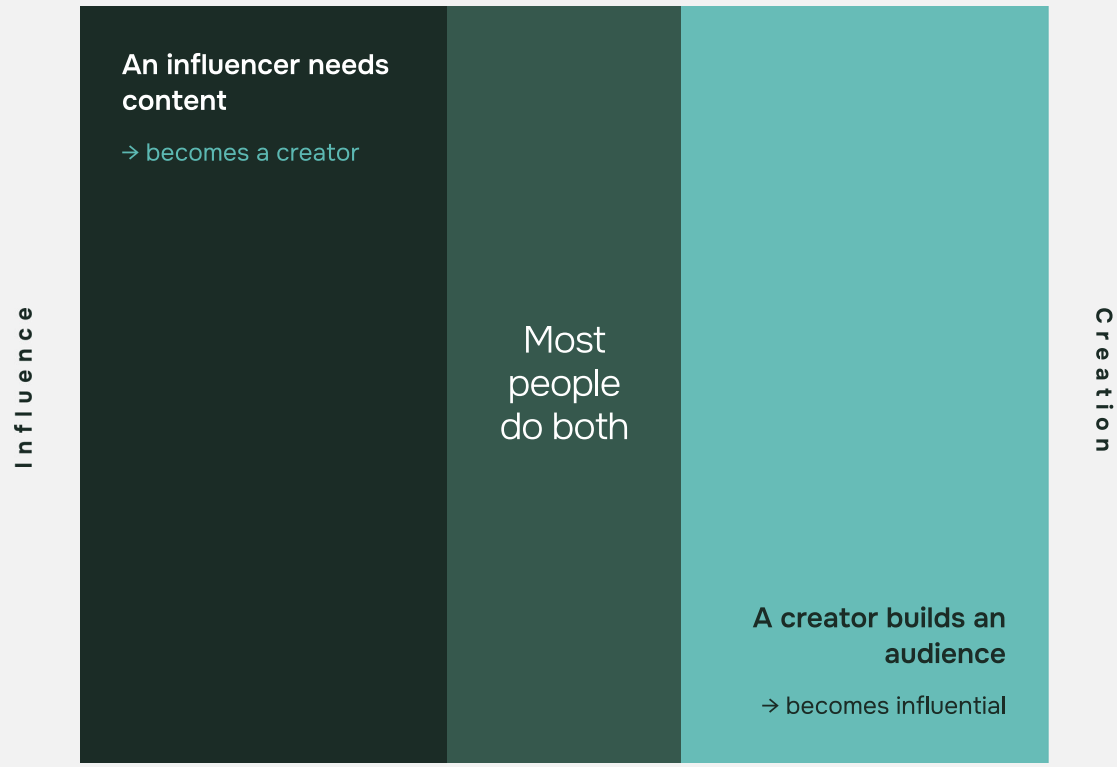
I influence what they do."

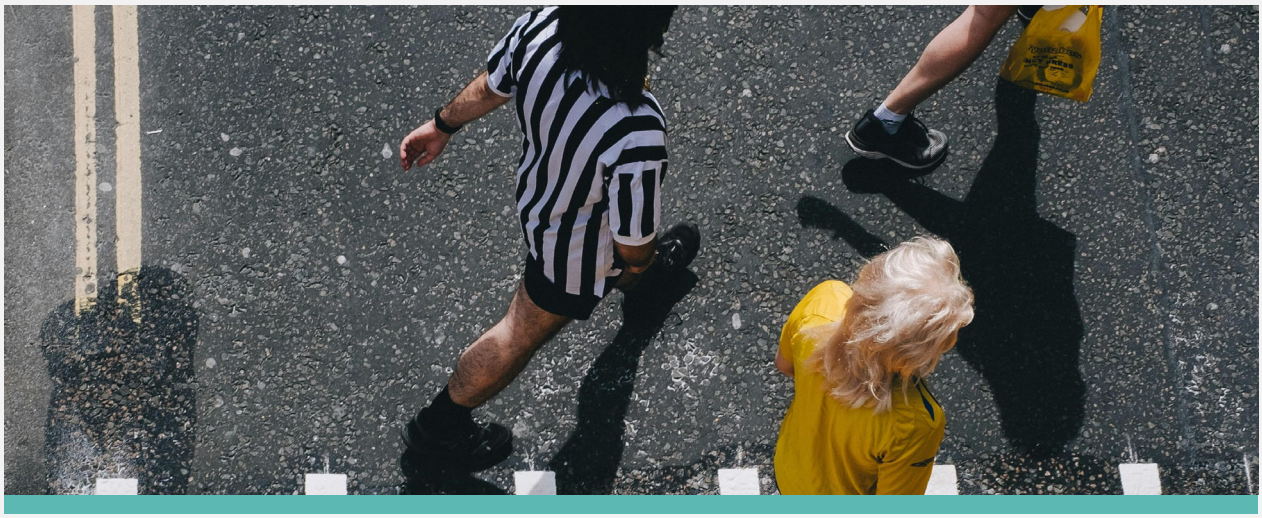
Creator

"I make valuable content.

People follow me."

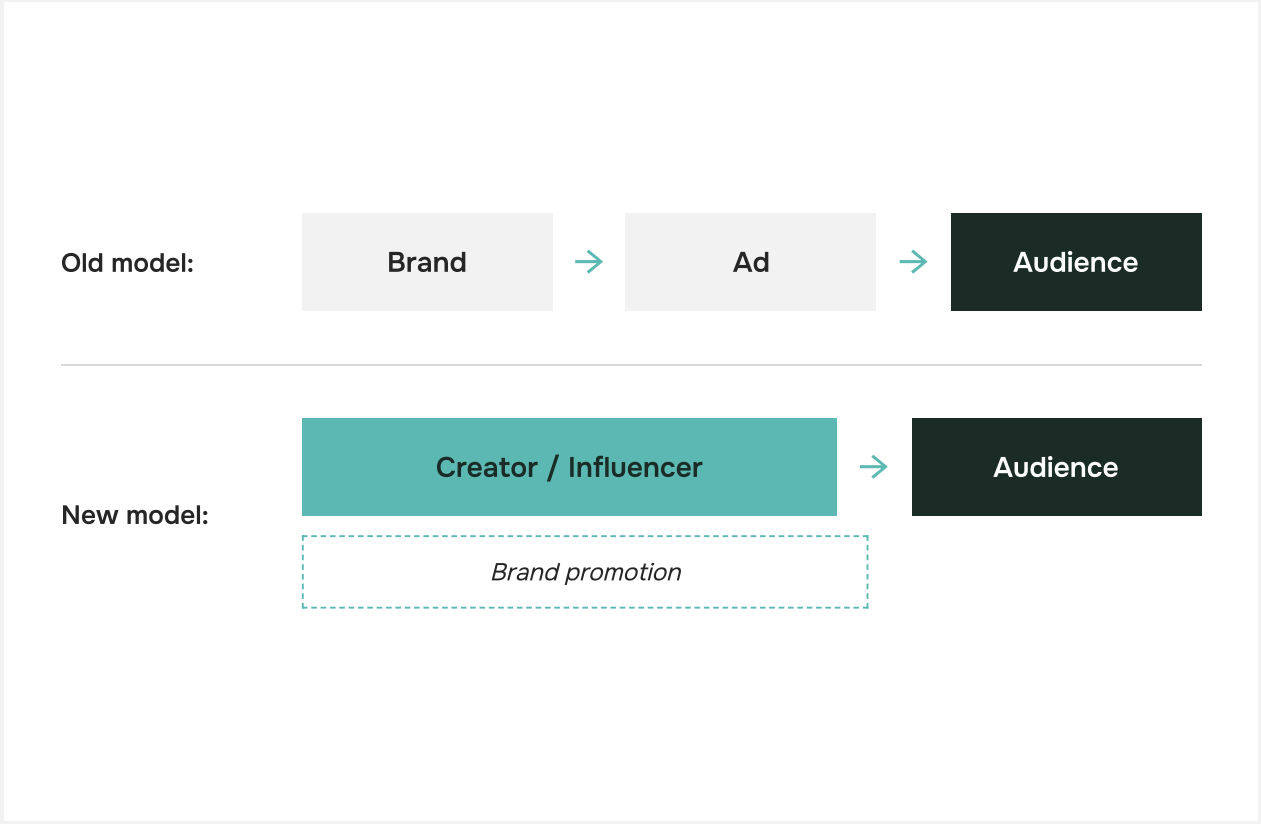
There is a big overlap — most people do both





What is the difference with conventional advertising?

The common objective is the audience. The difference lies in context, content relevance, influence, and persuasion. But does it? Ad creative is meant to be persuasive, and brands can target content to create relevant context.



The reality: lines are blurred

By the way the question was posed to ChatGPT, it assumed "influencer" meant people like Kim Kardashian (335 million followers) and "creator" meant people like MrBeast (450 million followers).

But there are other - arguably more important - examples:

- George Clooney helped make Nespresso the number one self-serve coffee in 81 countries. He also co-created Casamigos tequila, which Diageo bought for over $1 billion.
- King Charles III reaches billions globally and indirectly influences hundreds of brands like Barbour through royal warrants. His Duchy of Cornwall Organic Food brand has raised millions in profit to support his charities.

Are they influencers?
Celebrities?
Brand builders?

The distinction becomes academic.

Now consider creators.

Is a TikTok creator fundamentally different from:

- Game of Thrones and Yellowstone (50 million audience per show)
- Stranger Things (1.2 billion total views)

Some of the most successful modern creators include George R. R. Martin, Taylor Sheridan, J.K. Rowling, and Ian Fleming. Over 200 million people have paid at the box office to watch James Bond drink Heineken and drive Aston Martins in recent films.

> All are creators.
> All build audiences.
> All shape culture.

In a more detailed definition of a creator, AI referenced their value as education, entertainment, and inspiration. Sound familiar?

Sir John Reith, the first Director-General of the BBC, defined its mission as "to inform, educate and entertain."

Today, 453 million people worldwide watch or listen to the BBC every week—yet it only monetises this content outside the UK (and not especially well).

The truth is that "creator" and "influencer" are not new categories. They are new labels for long-standing roles, now using new channels to find audiences.

453m 453 million people worldwide watch or listen to the BBC

Bigger isn't always better

It's easy to see influencers or creators—old and new—as a simple numbers game.

Bigger is better. Not so fast.

Studies suggest that 10 influencers with 100k followers each can outperform one influencer with a million—being both more influential and better value.

AI also confirms (based on aggregating multiple studies) that many influencer journeys start with micro, highly specialised, and deeply committed audiences.

10 × 100k

can outperform

1 × 1m

Where does AI fit in?

AI modestly believes it is less trusted than humans and sees itself as the engine behind content creation.

Its view of the future is tidy:

AI	biggest reach
Influencers	strongest persuasion
Creators	deepest loyalty

And that these roles will merge, with AI as the content engine.

But AI might be wrong—because it does not fully understand context.

And context is everything.

Don’t underestimate AI

Unlike influencers or creators, AI is:

01	02	03	04
Always available	Instantly responsive	Increasingly trusted	Personalised to the user

You can’t call Kim Kardashian or MrBeast and ask a question. You can’t tailor their answers to your exact needs with follow-up questions.

But you can do both with AI—any time, anywhere.

Influence is no longer just about who you follow. Increasingly, it’s about the answers you receive.

A new challenge for brands:

How do you influence AI?

Conventional advertising, celebrity endorsement, and product placement are straightforward—you can buy what you want. There are agencies that specialise in connecting brands to influencers and creators.

Ads	you buy placement
Influencers	you partner
Product placement	you negotiate

But how do you ensure AI gives an accurate, fair—let alone favourable—representation of your brand?

(Ask AI which is better, Ariel from P&G or Persil from Unilever: it hedges at first. Push it, and it will tell you—Ariel.)

More than influence: What really drives brand growth?

This is a BIG topic.

AI will confirm that people are drawn to brands they perceive as becoming more popular—brands with momentum. This applies across many walks of life: artists, political parties, religions.

Safety in numbers, combined with the fear of missing out, creates powerful attraction.

AI will also confirm what experienced marketers already know :-

Momentum is built through multiple encounters over time

01	02	03	04	05
The ad you saw	The content you watched online	The conversation you overheard	The review you read	The person you saw using something new

Influencers, creators, and AI all matter—but they are only part of the story. The real challenge is orchestrating the right encounters, in the right combination, for your brand and category to create momentum.

Think of it like take-off. A pilot doesn't slam everything to maximum at once. Power, flaps, angle—each is applied in a precise, coordinated sequence. At the right moment, momentum builds, lift takes hold, more power is applied—and the aircraft soars into the sky.

Marketing works the same way.

We can't yet define the exact formula - the perfect sequence of channels, creative, and experiences - with scientific precision. But we can understand far more than we currently do.



Momentum

Momentum is visible, measurable, and testable.

People instinctively know which brands are taking off and which are losing altitude, which ones are becoming more popular and which ones feel tired.

When Unilever bought the first ad on British commercial television, they were simply following the audience. Today, many brands are doing the same with influencers.

But following the audience isn't enough.

> “ The real advantage lies in understanding context—and in building momentum.

About the authors

Mark Sherrington

Chief Strategist at We Live Context

Mark Sherrington learned his marketing working for Unilever competing against P&G. He progressed through brand management to marketing director level before becoming a global product category lead. In 1988, with a fellow Unilever colleague, he founded The Added Value Group. When WPP acquired the business he went back to the client side as CMO SABMiller.

While at Added Value, working with his highly talented team and blue chip clients, Mark developed tools for brand strategy and market segmentation many of which are still used by major brand businesses. Mark is a fellow of the UK Marketing Society and was on the editorial board of Market Leader. He has written many articles on marketing and a best-selling book, "Added Value: the alchemy of brand-led growth".

As an early stage investor Mark has been involved in several marketing technology businesses and was on the advisory committee for Unilever Ventures.

He is the Chief Strategist at We Live Context, a team of marketing and 'research' experts who focus on giving clients the maximum return on Intelligence.

Olly Robinson

Senior Director at We Live Context

Olly Robinson is an insight, innovation and strategy practitioner who has built a career helping organisations make better decisions about people, markets, brands and products. He's led award-winning work for clients like Google, Meta, Visa and Just Eat, spanning brand, experience, customer and innovation strategy.

Across his career Olly has developed and applied cutting-edge research approaches, from passive measurement and neural networks to AI methods that make research faster, richer and more useful. He's a regular writer and speaker on the future of research and the value of insight-led strategy, and has won multiple awards for research innovation and business impact

At We Live Context, Olly is driving our innovation proposition: building new tools to improve the way research intelligence is gathered, interpreted and activated; developing new methods and ways of working; and helping clients tackle their own innovation challenges with sharper, more contextual understanding of their opportunities.

We Live Context are a team of marketing and research experts who help clients maximise their return on intelligence.

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