EMARKETER



Creators have won attention. Budgets need to catch up.

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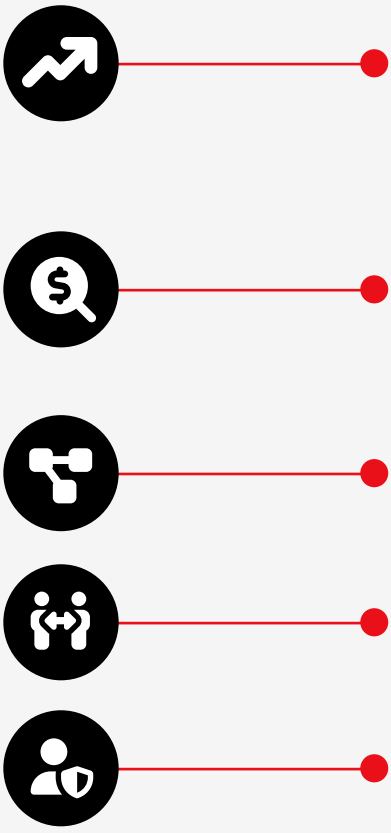
Marketers have made up their minds about creators. Some 80.5% say creators and influencers have become more influential in shaping what consumers prefer and buy over the past two years, according to a new survey by EMARKETER and Creator Ads. What most haven't built yet is the capability to act on that conviction at the scale they'd like.

Three challenges stand in the way of increasing investments in creator marketing. Marketers don't feel confident in measuring the returns they see from creator media. Without reliable measurement, they struggle to decide which creator content deserves paid support. And even when they know what to back, the manual workflows most teams still use cap how many creators they can vet and manage at once.

The result is a channel whose influence marketers see rising as fast as social platforms and AI tools, but that they still fund like an experiment. Nearly two-thirds (65.7%) put 20% or less of their digital media budget toward creators.

This report draws on a September 2026 survey of 329 marketers in the US, Brazil, and Mexico who run creator marketing fielded by EMARKETER and Creator Ads, along with aggregated campaign data from Creator Ads.



KEY FINDINGS

1 Influence has outrun investment. Most marketers say creators have grown more influential with consumers, yet nearly two-thirds put 20% or less of digital budgets toward them. Creators show the highest net gain in influence of the eight drivers tested, essentially level with social platforms.

2 Marketers believe in the returns but struggle to prove them. Most are at least somewhat confident in creator media's ROI, yet it is the channel they feel least equipped to measure, and the marketers who invest the most are the most confident in what it delivers.

3 Organic performance helps marketers decide what to scale. Most use organic results to pick what to amplify, but only about half do it systematically.

4 Manual operations constrain the growth of creator programs. Four in 10 teams manage 20 or fewer creators per campaign and 7 in 10 teams manage 50 or fewer.

5 Importance of brand safety scales with the programs. While most teams still vet creators at least in part by hand, brand safety concern rises with creator commitment.

1 Conviction about creators has outrun investment

For years, brands ran creator marketing as a string of one-off partnerships, judged it mostly on reach, and funded it from whatever was left after the core channels were set. The channel has matured.

Some 80.5% of marketers say creators and influencers have become somewhat or much more influential in shaping brand preference, purchases, and loyalty over the past two years, according to the survey. That puts creators' influence growth on par with social platforms (78.1%) and AI tools and assistants (78.2%), and well ahead of search engines (62.9%) and traditional TV ads (42.3%). Marketers are five times as likely to say traditional TV lost influence as to say creators did (31.0% vs. 6.1%).

Marketers' spending plans reflect that conviction. Some 76.9% expect to increase their creator investment either somewhat or significantly in the next 12 months, and that share would rise to 86.3% if their main barriers were resolved. The share planning a significant increase would jump from 33.4% to 44.4%. Marketers want to put more money behind creators than their current capabilities allow.

That tension shows up most clearly in the US. Some 57.9% of US marketers allocate 10% or less of their digital budgets to creators, compared with 38.3% in Mexico and 33.3% in Brazil, according to the survey. Brazil is the most committed market, with 20.6% of its marketers putting more than 30% of digital budgets into creators.

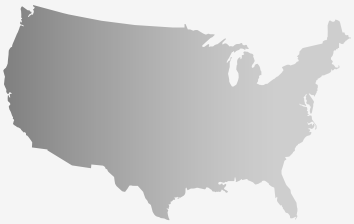
The US, by far the largest digital ad market in the survey, according to EMARKETER's August 2026 forecast, is also the one where marketers allocate the smallest share of their digital budgets to creators. And that pattern repeats throughout the data: The US consistently sits furthest from acting on its conviction in the importance of creator media, while Brazil and Mexico are further along.



Brazil is the most committed market, with 20.6% of its marketers putting more than 30% of digital budgets into creators.

Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

Approximately what share of your digital media budget goes to creator/influencer media?



US

0.9%
20.6%
36.4%
17.8%
12.1%
6.5%
5.6%



Brazil

3.9%
4.9%
24.5%
23.5%
22.5%
18.6%
2.0%



Mexico

1.7%
13.3%
23.3%
25.8%
20.0%
10.0%
5.8%

0%
1% to 4%
5% to 10%
11% to 20%
21% to 30%
31% to 50%
More than 50%

Total

2.1%
13.1%
28.0%
22.5%
18.2%
11.6%
4.6%

n= 329 total, 107 US, 102 Brazil, 120 Mexico. Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

2 Creator media's returns are harder to prove

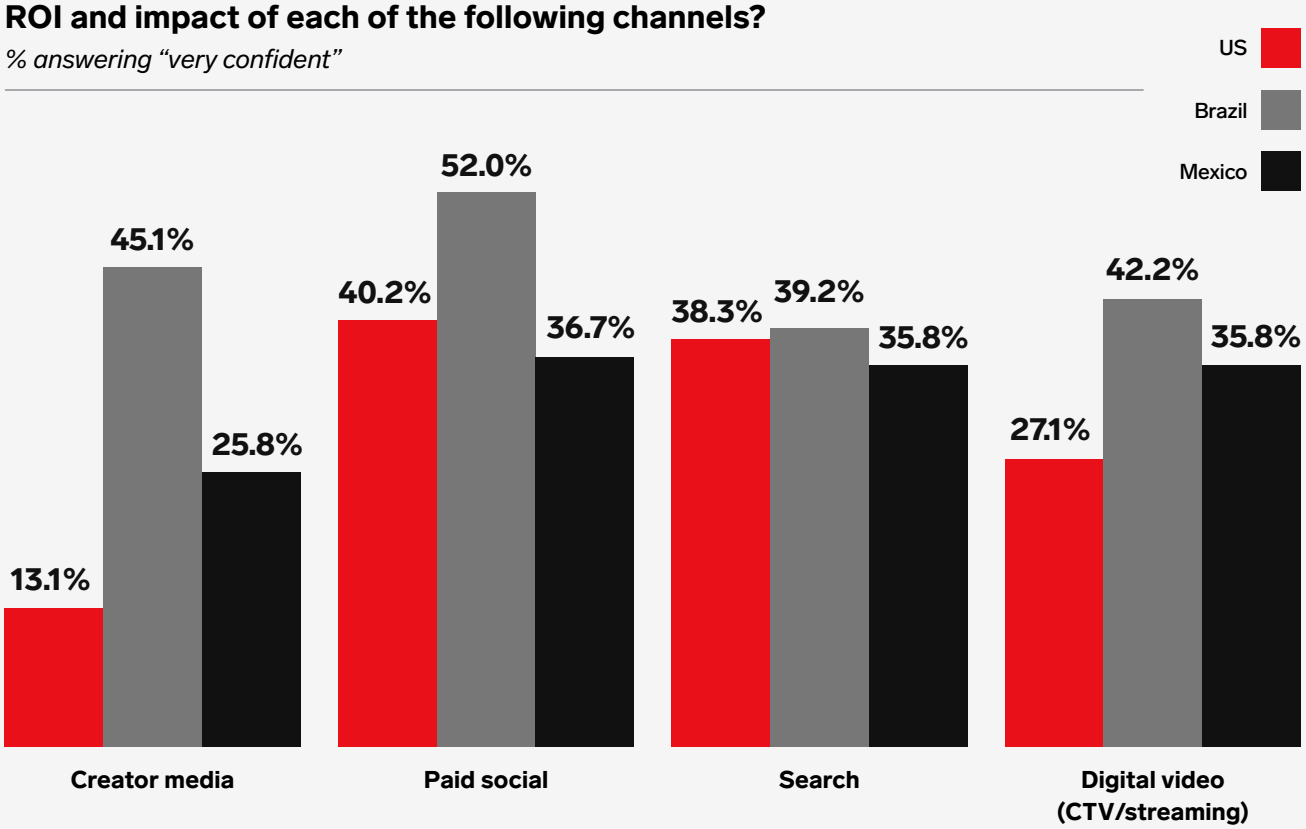
Paid social, search, and streaming each come with platform reporting and attribution tools that marketers have refined for years. Creator media is harder to pin down.

Only 27.7% of marketers are very confident measuring the ROI of creator media, compared with 42.6% for paid social, 37.7% for search, and 35.0% for connected TV (CTV) and streaming, per the survey. Some 30.4% are not very or not at all confident measuring creator media, the highest share of any channel in the survey.

That uncertainty shapes how much marketers are willing to spend. Among marketers who put 10% or less of digital budgets into creators, 53.5% feel very or somewhat confident measuring creator ROI. Among those who allocate more than 30% of budget, 83.0% have that level of confidence. Low spenders are also more than twice as likely to name ROI measurement as a limit on investment (33.6% of those who spend 10% or less of budget on creator media vs. 15.1% of those who spend 30% or more on creator media).

How confident are you in your ability to measure the ROI and impact of each of the following channels?

% answering "very confident"



n= 329 total, 107 US, 102 Brazil, 120 Mexico. Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

Confidence and spending rise together, and a marketer who can't defend creator results in a budget meeting has little chance of winning a bigger share. Among the most committed creator investors, confidence in measuring creator media (83.0%) nearly matches paid social (88.7%) Confidence rises alongside investment. The challenge is proving the case before the budget is committed.

US marketers feel the measurement problem most acutely. Half (50.5%) lack confidence in measuring creator ROI. They're the most likely to cite ROI measurement (39.6%) and proving incremental value (37.7%) as limits on investment, and the least likely to plan a significant spending increase in the next 12 months (17.8%, vs. 44.1% in Brazil and 38.3% in Mexico).

But marketers know what would change that math. Some 74.8% say better measurement and attribution would increase their creator investment a great deal or a lot, the top-rated factor in the survey.

"The reality is that many marketers remain behind the curve on creator marketing," said Minda Smiley, EMARKETER's senior analyst on social media. "Marketers often don't know what to measure, especially as creator marketing becomes full funnel. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to measuring creator marketing; brands need to figure out a framework that works for them and stick to it."



Some 74.8% say better measurement and attribution would increase their creator investment a great deal or a lot.

Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026



3 Organic performance helps marketers decide what to scale

Weak measurement creates a second problem. If marketers can't reliably judge results, it affects their decision on where to spend in the first place. That's why many let the content prove itself organically first.

The approach, often called organic-to-paid, works like a filter. Creators publish content to their own audiences, marketers watch which posts gain traction, and the strongest performers get paid amplification.

"Amplification has quickly become a crucial part of creator marketing strategies. Many brands find it to be incredibly effective. But it can become challenging from a budgetary perspective," said Smiley. "Amplification also requires a strategy in and of itself; brands shouldn't assume that boosting automatically leads to better results. It's more nuanced than that, and the savviest marketers will examine what's working and what isn't."

Some 85.1% of marketers use creators' organic performance to guide paid amplification at least some of the time, according to the survey. Far fewer treat it as a process. Only 49.2% systematically identify top-performing organic content and put paid budget behind the best of it, while 35.9% do so on an ad hoc basis. Creator Ads applies the approach as a fixed rule, amplifying only the top 15-30% of content by organic engagement and reach.

Brazil and Mexico are well ahead of the US here. Systematic amplification is about twice as common in Brazil (60.8%) and Mexico (58.3%) as in the US (28.0%). Mexican marketers put more weight on virality (41.8%), US marketers lean hardest on engagement (63.2%), and marketers in Brazil (32.3%) and Mexico (29.1%) weigh a creator's track record far more than US marketers do (13.2%).

"Amplification has quickly become a crucial part of creator marketing strategies. Many brands find it to be incredibly effective. But it can become challenging from a budgetary perspective."

— **MINDA SMILEY**
SENIOR ANALYST
AT EMARKETER

There's a clear payoff for discipline. Among marketers who systematically amplify top organic content, 46.3% expect to increase creator investment significantly in the next 12 months. That compares with 23.7% of ad hoc amplifiers and 14.3% of marketers who rarely or never use organic performance to guide paid. Systematic amplifiers also feel better about measurement: 35.2% are very confident measuring creator ROI, compared with 19.5% of ad hoc amplifiers.

Campaign data suggests that confidence is warranted. In Creator Ads campaigns where clients supplied a paid-media cost-per-action (CPA) benchmark, creator-led execution beat it every time, by 15% to 66% and about 38% on average. Meta's own tests of creator-led Partnership Ads found 19% lower CPA and 71% higher brand recall than standard Meta ads.

"In the campaigns we've worked on, organic performance has helped guide content selection for paid media, improving efficiency. I see room for this integration to grow as brands establish more consistent criteria for selecting content, assessing results, and guiding investment decisions," said Rapha Avellar, CEO of Creator Ads.



Among marketers who systematically amplify top organic content,

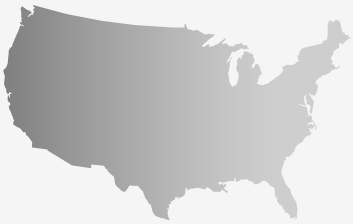
46.3%

expect to increase creator investment significantly in the next 12 months.

Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026



When a creator's organic content performs well, how does your organization act on it?



US
28.0%
43.9%
14.0%
6.5%
7.5%



Brazil
60.8%
30.4%
4.9%
2.0%
2.0%



Mexico
58.3%
33.3%
6.7%
1.7%
0.0%

We systematically identify top-performing organic content and put paid budget behind the best

We do this sometimes, on an ad hoc basis

We rarely do this

We do not use organic performance to guide paid amplification

We do not run paid amplification of creator content

Total
49.2%
35.9%
8.5%
3.3%
3.0%

n= 329 total, 107 US, 102 Brazil, 120 Mexico. Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

4

Manual operations cap how far creator programs can grow

Organic-to-paid depends on speed and volume. A team has to spot the winning posts across every creator in a campaign, secure the rights to run them as ads, and move budget behind them while they're still gaining traction.

The result is a process few can run consistently. Only 7.4% of marketers say nothing limits them. The rest name at least one obstacle: budget or media-planning constraints (31.0%), processes too slow or manual to act while content is still performing (27.9%), difficulty predicting what will scale in paid (26.7%), and limited content usage rights from creators (24.2%).

Marketers who amplify posts systematically also run into the same blockers as ad hoc amplifiers. Even the marketers with the clearest method are limited by the infrastructure around it. By market, budget pressure weighs heaviest in the US (43.4%), while Mexican marketers are the most likely to cite a lack of tools (24.2%, vs. 8.5% in the US).

Team capacity is also a blocker. Four in 10 teams (40.1%) can manage 20 or fewer creators per campaign, and only 4.5% can manage more than 250, according to the survey. Vetting is just as hands-on: 29.2% review creators primarily through manual checks, while just 15.5% rely mainly on automated tools. US teams are the most constrained, with 62.6% managing 20 or fewer creators per campaign and 41.1% vetting manually.

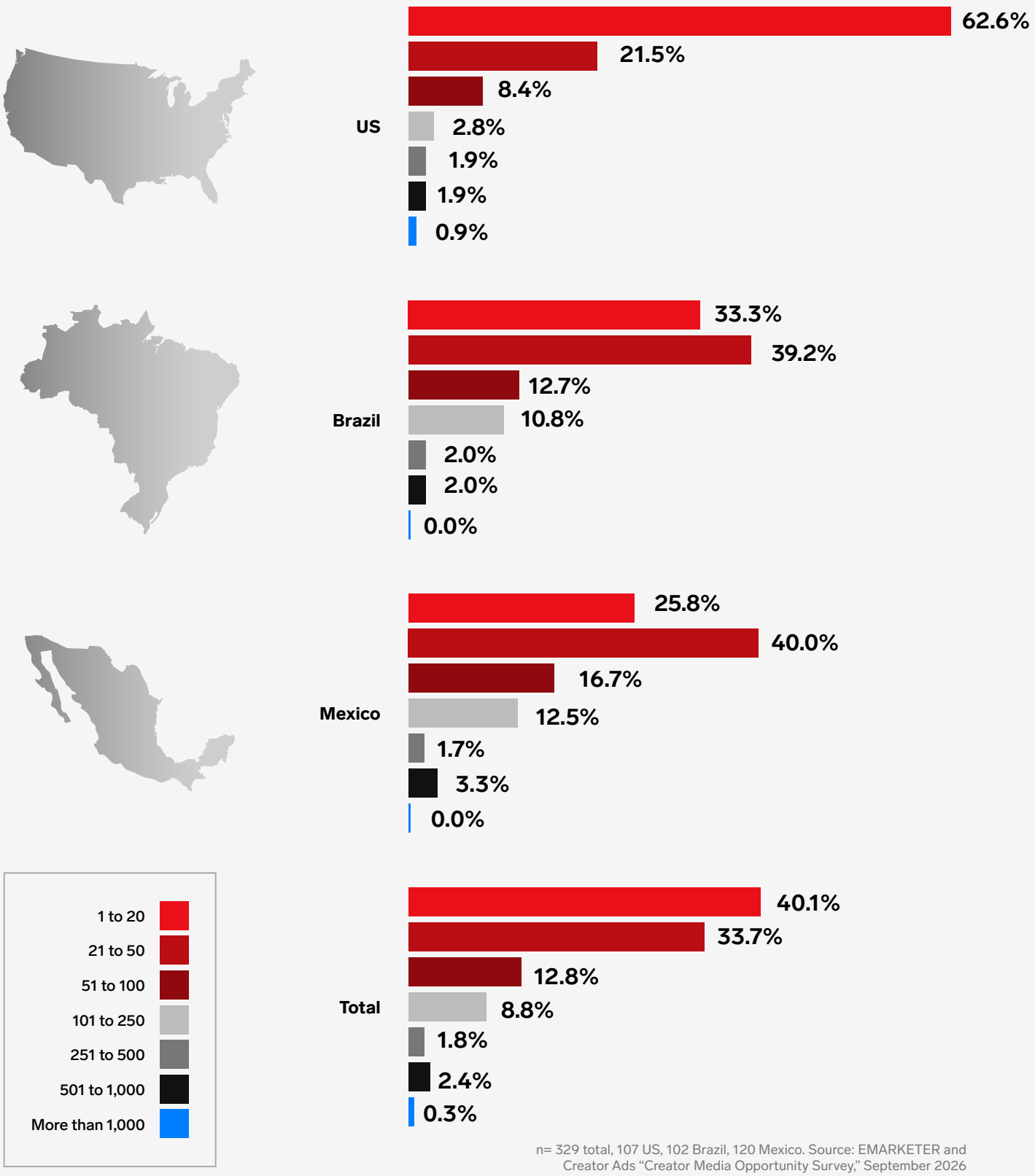
Some 71.8% of marketers say technology to source, vet, and manage creators at scale would increase their creator investment a great deal or a lot. Automated campaigns show what that scale can look like: Creator Ads has run single campaigns activating 1,000 to more than 2,000 creators, including one in Brazil that delivered 151 million views at a blended R$0.01 cost-per-view (CPV) with about 30 minutes of brand-side effort per week.



Some 71.8% of marketers say technology to source, vet, and manage creators at scale would increase their creator investment a great deal or a lot.

Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

In a typical campaign, approximately how many individual creators can your team source, vet, and manage today?



n= 329 total, 107 US, 102 Brazil, 120 Mexico. Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

5

Brand safety becomes infrastructure as creator programs scale

With greater scale comes greater brand safety risk to mitigate. When a brand worked with a handful of celebrities or macro-influencers, vetting meant checking a short list by hand. That doesn't work for a program built on hundreds or thousands of smaller creators.

Marketers rate mid-tier creators (20,000 to 99,999 followers) as delivering the most impact (39.8%), nearly four times the share who say the same of mega creators (10.9%). Creator Ads' campaigns activate 1,000 to more than 2,000 creators at a time and put 87.9% of creator investment toward creators with fewer than 100,000 followers. A team that can't verify creators and content at that scale can't safely grow its program, however strong its conviction or sharp its selection process.

But brand safety becomes harder to enforce as commitment grows. Among marketers who put 10% or less of digital budgets into creators, 21.4% cite brand safety or reputational risk as a limit on investment, according to the survey. Among those allocating more than 30%, some 37.7% cite that same level of risk. The marketers most invested in creators are the ones most attuned to what can go wrong.

Stronger safeguards would release more spending, too. Some 63.9% of marketers say stronger brand safety controls would increase their creator investment a great deal or a lot, including 28.0% who say a great deal.

"As creator marketing scales, brand safety has become top of mind but also more difficult," said Smiley. "There are a variety of platforms and tools that use automation or other tactics to help brands vet creators. But creator marketing is still a very human business, and at the end of the day, a creator who is considered 'brand safe' today may not be tomorrow."

The percentage who said brand safety or reputational risk limited their investment in creator media

10% or less*:

21.4%

11%-30%:

26.1%

More than 30%:

37.7%

For marketers who invest 30% or more of their digital media budget to creator, brand safety is the No. 1 concern limiting their investment in the channel.

*digital media budget that goes to creator
Note: Respondents could select up to three.
n= 327. Source: EMARKETER and Creator Ads "Creator Media Opportunity Survey," September 2026

How to turn creator conviction into results

Marketers already believe in creator marketing. Turning that belief into investment means building the three capabilities they lack (measurement, selection, and operations) and putting safeguards in place so a creator program can grow safely. Here are six ways marketers can start building toward greater creator investment.

"The study suggests that the next stage of creator marketing depends on enabling brands to invest with greater confidence. The intention to increase investment is already there, but in some cases, measurement challenges and operational constraints stand in the way. I see this market's growth as tied to the ability to turn one-off initiatives into ongoing strategies, with results that can be assessed and used to inform future decisions," said Avellar.

- **Build the measurement case before asking for more budget.** Confidence in creator ROI rises steeply with budget share, and low spenders are the most likely to cite measurement as a limit. Set a baseline now, such as cost per acquisition against existing paid benchmarks, so the next budget request rests on results.
- **Turn organic-to-paid from a habit into a process.** Systematic amplifiers are nearly twice as likely as ad hoc amplifiers to plan significant increases in creator investment. Define in advance which signals qualify content for paid support and who makes the call.
- **Shorten the path from organic signal to paid decision.** Organic performance fades quickly, and slow or manual processes rank among the top blockers for marketers. Tools that flag winners and secure usage rights early let teams act while content is still performing.
- **Grow the roster on the back of organic signal.** Teams that rarely or never put paid behind organic winners are nearly twice as likely to be capped at 20 creators per campaign (67.3%) as teams that do it systematically (35.8%). Expand the creator pool first and let organic results decide where budget goes, rather than committing spend to a short list chosen up front.
- **Treat brand safety as infrastructure.** Brand safety concern rises with creator commitment, and most teams still vet at least in part manually. Building automated vetting into the program before expanding the roster keeps safety from becoming the ceiling on scale.
- **Borrow from Brazil and Mexico.** Marketers in Brazil and Mexico are about twice as likely as US marketers to amplify systematically and far more likely to plan significant increases in creator media investment. Their approach offers US teams a ready model for moving past the measurement stalemate.

"As a Brazilian working with brands and creators across different markets, I see these findings as an opportunity to expand knowledge sharing across countries. Among the professionals surveyed, those in Brazil and Mexico stand out for their systematic approach to content amplification. Their experience can offer useful insights for other markets, while accounting for differences in audiences, budgets, and operations," said Avellar.

About the survey

This survey was developed and fielded by EMARKETER and Creator Ads in September 2026. We surveyed 329 marketers in the US (107), Brazil (102), and Mexico (120) who run influencer or creator marketing, including 182 at agencies, consultancies, and publishers and 147 at brands, to gather their attitudes toward creator media investment, measurement, organic-to-paid amplification, and operations.

About this report

Research for this report was compiled by members of the EMARKETER Studio team using the above-mentioned survey, aggregated campaign data provided by Creator Ads, and reports, forecasts, and analysis by EMARKETER.

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CreatorAds

Creator Ads is the world's first AI-native ad platform for creator media. It automates the entire influencer campaign operation: AI-powered creator matchmaking, content approval at scale, paid media amplification, and brand safety. From a single briefing, brands can reach thousands of relevant creators, review content before it goes live, and turn top-performing organic posts into paid media with greater efficiency and measurability. Creator Ads works with several Fortune Global 500 companies and partners with some of the world's largest technology companies. Headquartered in São Paulo, Creator Ads expanded its operations internationally in 2026 and now has a presence in New York City and Mexico City, serving brands across Latin America and North America.