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## The Mid-Tier Advantage.

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# The Mid-Tier Advantage.

Why creator campaigns in the 15K-250K follower range outperform mega-influencer campaigns on conversion by 3-5×, and what brand marketers should do about it.

## ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes a growing body of public industry research showing that creator marketing campaigns executed with creators in the 15,000 to 250,000 follower range consistently outperform campaigns with mega-influencers above one million followers on downstream conversion metrics — by a factor of three to five, depending on category and objective. The finding is not new; it has been documented across multiple independent industry sources using different methodologies. What is new is the convergence of those sources and the operational implications for brand marketing teams under increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable return on creator spend. The paper presents the evidence, examines the mechanism behind it, offers a worked example showing how a mid-tier campaign actually prices out, and is explicit about what the finding is and is not.

## KEYWORDS

Creator marketing; influencer marketing; mid-tier creators; conversion; engagement; creator economy; brand marketing; parasocial trust.

## HOW TO CITE

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Creator marketing campaigns executed with creators in the 15,000 to 250,000 follower range outperform campaigns with mega-influencers above one million followers on downstream conversion metrics by a factor of three to five. The finding is documented across multiple independent industry sources, supported by academic research on parasocial trust, and consistent with what unregarded has observed across its own book of business.

Brand marketers who organize campaigns around reach — total follower count, potential impressions — systematically underperform brand marketers who organize campaigns around audience fit. The default assumption that 'bigger creator means bigger campaign' is wrong for conversion-oriented objectives, which represent the majority of creator marketing spend.

#### THE HEADLINE FINDING

Mid-tier creator campaigns convert 3–5× better than mega-influencer campaigns, across multiple independent industry benchmarks.

#### Four findings in one sentence each

- 01** The performance gap is real, replicable, and documented in every major industry benchmark that measures engagement or conversion at the creator-tier level.
- 02** The mechanism is audience composition, not content quality — mid-tier creators have audiences that chose them deliberately, while mega-influencers accumulate audiences that include many passive viewers.
- 03** The mid-tier advantage shows up most clearly in categories requiring audience trust — finance, health, caregiving, technical expertise — and least clearly in categories driven by pure aesthetic appeal.
- 04** Brand marketers can capture the mid-tier advantage without eliminating mega-influencer campaigns entirely by reallocating 20–30% of creator budget to mid-tier creators matched on audience fit.

## The question this paper answers.

Why do some creator marketing campaigns dramatically outperform others, even when the budgets, products, and creative directions are similar? The question has a plain answer the industry has been circling for years: it's the follower tier the campaign was built around. The specific answer is more useful: creators in the 15,000 to 250,000 range convert meaningfully better than creators above one million, and the gap is large enough to change how brand marketers should allocate budget.

This paper makes the case for why that gap exists, documents the evidence that supports it, and lays out what brand marketers can do with the finding. It is written for brand marketing teams making allocation decisions about creator spend, for CMOs defending those decisions to CFOs, and for trade press covering the shift in how the creator economy is evolving.

### **What this paper is**

A synthesis. The mid-tier advantage has been documented across multiple independent industry benchmark reports and academic studies. What has been missing is a single document that pulls the evidence together, examines the mechanism behind the pattern, and draws operational conclusions — the kind of research output brand marketing teams can forward internally and trade journalists can cite as primary analysis.

### **What this paper is not**

A proprietary study. unregarded has not conducted a formal research study of its own book of business. The agency's own observations appear in this paper, but only as confirmation that the pattern visible in its work matches the pattern documented in published industry sources. All quantitative claims in this paper trace back to public, citable sources.

**The mid-tier advantage is real. It has been documented for years. The question is no longer whether it exists — it is what brand marketers should do about it.**

## Why this matters now.

The creator economy has undergone three structural shifts in the last five years that make the mid-tier advantage newly relevant for brand marketing teams. Understanding these shifts is important for understanding why a finding that has been technically true for years is only now changing how brands allocate creator budget.

### **Shift one — CFO scrutiny of creator marketing spend**

Creator marketing was treated as an experimental line item for most of the 2010s. Budgets were small, measurement was loose, and the question of whether campaigns converted was largely secondary to the question of whether they reached the right cultural moment. That era has ended. Creator marketing is now a multi-billion-dollar line item in most large-brand marketing budgets, which means it is subject to the same return-on-investment scrutiny as every other line item. Brand marketers who cannot demonstrate conversion from creator spend are losing budget.

### **Shift two — saturation at the top of the follower distribution**

The mega-influencer tier has become crowded. The cost-per-impression of campaigns with creators above one million followers has risen faster than the effectiveness of those campaigns, driven by the accumulating sponsored content fatigue their audiences experience. Every brand marketer has seen a top-tier creator's sponsored post underperform a comparable organic post from the same creator. The phenomenon is industry-wide.

### **Shift three — algorithmic surfacing of niche expertise**

Platform algorithms have become measurably better at surfacing niche creators to audiences genuinely interested in their topics. A decade ago, a mid-tier creator in a niche like tax preparation or professional nursing practice would have struggled to reach their audience at scale. Today, the algorithm does that work — which means niche mid-tier creators now have audiences large enough to matter for brand campaigns, without the passive-follower dilution that comes with mass appeal.

Together, these three shifts mean that the mid-tier advantage — a pattern that has been visible in engagement data for years — is now operationally relevant in a way it wasn't before. Brand marketers have both the pressure to act on it and the infrastructure to execute on it.

## Four claims, supported by the evidence.

Each of the following claims is drawn from publicly available industry research. The sources are cited at the paper level in § 09 — Appendix. Each claim is presented alongside the evidence that supports it and a short note on where the evidence is strongest and weakest.

### **Finding 01 — Engagement rate declines sharply with follower count**

The most robust finding in creator economy research is that engagement rates — likes, comments, saves, and shares as a percentage of followers reached — decline substantially as follower count increases. The decline is non-linear: the drop-off is steepest between 500K and 1M followers, and continues above that threshold.

Influencer Marketing Hub's annual benchmark reports have documented this pattern consistently across six years of publication. HypeAuditor's State of Influencer Marketing reports, which sample a different set of creators using a different methodology, reach the same conclusion. The convergence across independent measurement approaches is what makes this finding reliable.

- Mid-tier creators (15K–250K) typically show engagement rates 2× to 6× higher than mega-influencers (above 1M), depending on platform and category.

### **Finding 02 — The engagement gap translates to conversion**

Engagement rate is a proxy, not a conversion metric directly. The open question for brand marketers has always been whether higher engagement actually produces higher conversion to purchase. Academic research on parasocial trust — the psychological relationship audiences form with creators they follow — suggests it does. Studies in marketing journals have found that viewers are measurably more likely to act on a recommendation from a creator they actively trust than from a creator whose content they passively consume.

Later's annual creator economy reporting has tracked save-rate as a conversion proxy across follower tiers and found the same pattern: saves (signals of intent to return to content or act on it later) are disproportionately high for mid-tier creators relative to their follower counts.

- Mid-tier conversion advantage is largest in categories where audience trust matters most — finance, health, caregiving, technical expertise. It is smallest in categories driven by pure aesthetic appeal (fashion, beauty adjacent to celebrity culture).

### **Finding 03 — Brand marketers are already shifting spend**

Trade publication coverage from Digiday, AdWeek, and Marketing Brew documents a clear trend: major brand marketing teams have been reallocating creator budget toward mid-tier creators since 2022, with several publicly reporting conversion improvements of two to five times when they made

the shift. These are not claims unregarded is making — they are documented in industry trade press.

The shift is ahead of the infrastructure. Large creator agencies, whose commission structures are optimized for mega-influencer deals, have been slow to build mid-tier capability. Brand marketers increasingly work around them — either by approaching mid-tier creators directly or by seeking out boutique agencies built specifically for the tier.

#### **Finding 04 — The finding is robust across category**

One reasonable skepticism about the mid-tier advantage is whether it varies enough by category to undermine the general claim. The industry evidence suggests it does not. The advantage holds across food, finance, home, wellness, lifestyle, and technology categories. It is larger in some categories than others — reliably larger in trust-dependent categories than in image-dependent categories — but it holds directionally across all of them.

- Brand marketers can act on the finding without waiting for category-specific research. The general pattern is robust enough to justify budget reallocation.

## Why mid-tier converts better.

The empirical finding is clear. The mechanism behind it is more useful, because understanding why the pattern exists allows brand marketers to anticipate when it will and won't hold. The mechanism has three components, each of which compounds with the others.

### Component 01 — Audience selection effect

A mid-tier creator's audience is, on average, composed of people who followed them deliberately — who searched for their niche, found their content, and chose to continue consuming it. A mega-influencer's audience is composed of a mix of deliberate followers and passive followers who discovered them through cultural virality and follow out of habit rather than active interest. The deliberate-to-passive ratio is what drives the engagement difference between tiers.

The difference isn't audience size. It's audience composition. A 50,000-person audience that chose to be there converts better than a 5,000,000-person audience that accumulated by accident.

### Component 02 — Parasocial trust

The academic concept that explains why deliberate audiences convert better is parasocial trust — the sense of personal relationship audiences develop with creators they follow closely. Parasocial trust scales inversely with audience size: the larger a creator's audience grows, the harder it becomes to maintain the illusion of direct relationship with individual viewers, and the weaker the parasocial trust becomes for most of the audience.

This isn't a quirk of the format — it's a basic feature of how attention works. A creator who responds to comments, answers DMs, and shows up consistently for a 30,000-person audience can sustain the illusion of direct relationship with a substantial fraction of them. The same creator at 3 million followers cannot, and the trust erodes accordingly.

### Component 03 — Sponsored content fatigue

The third component is specific to sponsored content rather than organic content. Mega-influencers run substantially more sponsored campaigns per year than mid-tier creators, which means their audiences have seen more sponsored content from them and developed more pronounced ad fatigue. The same audience is less receptive to the tenth sponsored post from a creator this year than to the first. Mid-tier creators, who run fewer campaigns, have audiences that are less acclimated to sponsored content and therefore more responsive to it.

### Why the three components compound

None of these three mechanisms alone would be sufficient to explain the 3–5× conversion advantage. All three operating simultaneously is. A mid-tier creator has an audience that chose them deliberately, maintains parasocial trust with a substantial fraction of that audience, and runs sponsored campaigns rarely enough that each one lands with force. The combination is what brand marketers are actually buying when they book a mid-tier campaign.

## What a real mid-tier deal costs.

Abstract discussions of creator marketing economics obscure more than they reveal. To make the mid-tier value proposition concrete, this section walks through a representative deal from start to finish — every fee, every line item, every dollar.

### The campaign

A 35,000-follower creator in the finance category. One sponsored Reel. Thirty-day paid usage rights (the brand can run the content as paid ads for 30 days). Rate card built on current market data for the creator's size, platform, and category. The brand is a financial services company; the audience fit is tight because the creator's followers actively seek her financial explainer content.

### The economics, itemized

Creator Reel rate (base fee)	\$8,000
+ 30-day paid usage rights (20% premium)	+\$1,600
<b>Creator total fee</b>	<b>\$9,600</b>
Management fee (20% of \$9,600, paid by brand)	+\$1,920
<b>Total brand payment</b>	<b>\$11,520</b>
Agency commission (20% of \$9,600)	-\$1,920
<b>Creator net payout</b>	<b>\$7,680</b>

### What this breakdown reveals

Three things are visible in this example that usually are not. First, the actual cost to the brand is higher than the creator's listed rate — the management fee is paid on top, not deducted from, the creator's fee. Second, usage rights are priced separately, not bundled into the base fee; bundling obscures the true cost per impression. Third, the creator's net payout is substantially less than either the brand's total payment or the listed rate, which is why fair commission structures matter for creator retention.

Most creator agencies do not publish breakdowns of this kind. The opacity has been a feature of the industry since its beginnings — agencies benefit from brands not knowing exactly what they're paying for. unregarded publishes its fee structure publicly because transparency is a market positioning: brand marketers who can see where every dollar goes are more likely to book with confidence.

- The numbers in this example are representative of a well-structured mid-tier finance campaign. Comparable campaigns vary by  $\pm 25\%$  depending on creator, category, and exclusivity terms.

## What brand marketers should do.

The operational implications of this paper's findings are direct enough to act on without further research. Brand marketing teams managing creator spend should consider the following shifts — not as dogma, but as testable hypotheses any marketing team can validate in a single campaign cycle.

### **Implication 01 — Write briefs around audience fit, not follower count**

The default brief template in most brand marketing teams asks for creators above a threshold follower count, often 500K or 1M. This default selects for mega-influencers and systematically excludes mid-tier creators who would convert better. The alternative is to write briefs around audience composition: who the brand wants to reach, what they buy, what content they already engage with. Creator selection becomes a question of fit rather than size.

### **Implication 02 — Price usage rights separately**

Usage rights should appear as a separate line item in creator contracts, priced based on the duration and scope of the rights. Bundling usage rights into the base fee — common in mega-influencer deals — obscures the true cost per impression and often means the brand is paying for rights it doesn't need. A 30-day paid-media usage right costs about 20% of the base fee; perpetual rights run 100% or more. These are decisions brand marketers should make with full visibility, not inherited defaults.

### **Implication 03 — Require kill fees in every contract**

Kill fees — partial payment to the creator if the brand cancels after production begins — should be standard in every creator contract. Their absence in mid-tier deals is a warning sign: it usually indicates the agency representing the creator isn't negotiating on the creator's behalf, which ultimately costs the brand through weaker content and creator reluctance to sign future deals. Every contract a professional agency reviews will have a kill fee; absence of one is diagnostic.

### **Implication 04 — Test the reallocation before committing**

Brand teams don't need to move all creator budget to mid-tier overnight. A defensible test structure: allocate 20–30% of the next campaign's creator budget to mid-tier creators matched on audience fit, and compare conversion metrics against the mega-influencer portion of the same campaign. Run the test for one campaign cycle. The data will inform the allocation decision for the next cycle, and so on. This is how large brand marketing teams have been making the shift quietly for the last three years.

## What this paper doesn't claim.

Every research paper is strengthened by being explicit about its limits. The following are the most important caveats to the claims made in this paper — written here so brand marketers and journalists who cite the paper can do so with accurate calibration.

### **Limitation 01 — The 3–5× figure is directional**

The 3–5× conversion multiple is a range drawn from multiple independent sources, not a precise point estimate from a single study. Specific results vary substantially by category, campaign objective, and creator-brand fit. A badly-briefed mid-tier campaign will underperform a well-briefed mega-influencer campaign. The claim in this paper is that mid-tier campaigns outperform mega-influencer campaigns on average, not that they always do.

### **Limitation 02 — The finding does not apply to every campaign objective**

Mega-influencer campaigns remain the correct choice for specific objectives — pure awareness campaigns at scale, announcement moments, product launches where reach is the primary goal. What the paper argues is that the default assumption 'bigger creator means bigger campaign outcome' is wrong for conversion-oriented campaigns, which represent the majority of creator marketing budget. Different campaigns have different optimal creator tiers.

### **Limitation 03 — unregarded's book of business is not a research study**

The agency's own observations are consistent with the published industry findings, but they are not a formal research study. Sample sizes, comparison methodology, and attribution quality vary across campaigns in unregarded's work. The agency's observations appear in this paper as confirming evidence — the pattern we see in our work matches the pattern documented in the independent sources — not as independent empirical support.

### **Limitation 04 — The industry evidence has its own gaps**

The industry benchmark reports this paper draws from have their own methodological limitations. Different reports sample different creators, use different engagement measurement approaches, and define tiers differently. The convergence across independent methodologies is what makes the finding reliable; any single source, read alone, would be easy to question. The appendix in § 09 lists each source's approach explicitly so brand marketers can weigh the evidence themselves.

## Sources, definitions, and citation guidance.

### Primary industry sources

The following publicly available industry benchmark reports and publications are the primary sources behind this paper's claims. Each has a different methodological approach; the convergence across approaches is what makes the finding reliable.

- Influencer Marketing Hub — Annual Benchmark Reports. Published yearly, surveying marketing professionals and sampling creator engagement rates across platforms and categories. Primary source for tier-level engagement rate benchmarks.
- HypeAuditor — State of Influencer Marketing. Published regularly, using programmatic analysis of a large sample of creator accounts to track engagement, audience authenticity, and tier-level performance. Primary source for follower-authenticity-adjusted engagement data.
- Later — Annual Creator Economy Reports. Published yearly, combining platform data from Later's user base with surveys of brand marketers. Primary source for save-rate and comment-quality metrics across tiers.
- Digiday, AdWeek, and Marketing Brew — Trade publication reporting on creator economy trends. Primary source for documented brand spend shifts and case-study-level reporting on mid-tier campaign performance.
- Academic research on parasocial trust and sponsored content — Published work in marketing journals examining the psychological relationship between audiences and creators. Primary source for the mechanism underlying the mid-tier advantage.

### Definitions used in this paper

Mid-tier creator.

A creator with 15,000 to 250,000 engaged followers on at least one primary platform. 'Engaged' refers to followers who interact with the creator's content at rates consistent with authentic audience relationship, rather than followers acquired through engagement farms, giveaways, or bought followers.

Mega-influencer.

A creator with more than 1,000,000 followers. Some industry sources use 500K as the mega-influencer threshold; this paper uses 1M for clearer separation from mid-tier.

Conversion.

Downstream user action tied to a creator campaign. Depending on campaign structure, this may include click-through rate, save rate, purchase attribution, sign-up rate, or content share. The paper's claims refer to conversion in this general sense, not to any single specific metric.

Engagement rate.

The ratio of audience interactions (likes, comments, saves, shares) to follower count, usually measured per post and averaged across recent content. The specific interaction types weighted in the measurement vary by platform and source.

### **How to cite this paper**

Formal citation: unregarded. Research. (Spring 2026). The Mid-Tier Advantage. Paper 01. Retrieved from [unregarded.co/research](https://unregarded.co/research).

When citing the 3–5× conversion advantage figure specifically: the figure is a synthesis drawn from multiple published sources, not a proprietary finding. Attribution should be phrased as 'according to industry benchmark reports synthesized in unregarded. Research Paper 01' rather than 'according to unregarded's own research.'

For journalists citing this paper, the agency is available for follow-up interviews and can provide specific report excerpts or source details on request to [research@unregarded.co](mailto:research@unregarded.co).

The Mid-Tier Advantage is the inaugural paper of unregarded. Research — a publication imprint of the boutique creator agency unregarded. The series publishes approximately four papers per year, each examining a specific question about the creator economy with citable evidence and explicit limitations.

The research series exists because the creator economy has been under-served by rigorous public analysis. Most available research either sells something (agency-branded white papers) or says nothing (platform-issued trend reports). unregarded. Research is designed as the third option: papers that take specific positions, support them with public evidence, and are available free of lead-capture forms or gated downloads.

This paper was written by the unregarded editorial team. All opinions expressed are the agency's own. The agency does not accept sponsorship for its research publications, nor does any brand partner have editorial input on what the papers cover. The research imprint is funded entirely by unregarded's core agency operations — the brand deals it closes for its mid-tier creators.

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