wondery in partnership with SmithGeiger

# Brand Building in the Creator Age

## From Reach to Resonance

A STUDY OF THE CREATOR-HOSTED ECONOMY

**The creator is the channel**

**3,000**
**U.S. fans surveyed**

**Trust. Not just reach.**

Introduction

# Narrowing the Lens

**"In a world where attention is fragmented, these creators built something rare, an audience that keeps coming back."**

**The creator economy is vast, and one segment deserves a closer look.**

What is a creator? Is it the self-taught makeup artist posting tutorials? The retired scientist broadcasting live experiments? An award-winning journalist sourcing audience Q&A? The answer is all the above. Today, anyone with a perspective and a platform can create, and millions do. The creator economy spans every format, every niche, and every level of ambition.

Within this expanding landscape, a specific category of creator has emerged. Those that are not just posting, but hosting. These creators produce episodic programming around their voice and point of view, and over time they have built audiences that consistently show up across formats and channels. In a world where attention is increasingly fragmented, these creators have built something rare, an audience that keeps coming back.

Despite the loyalty these creators command, the industry lacks a reliable way to prove it. Advertisers have used a variety of inconsistent metrics to guide their creator advertising decisions. While follower counts and views may be valid signals of potential reach, they don't quantify a creator's resonance. Resonance, a trusted voice's ability to convert attention into action, is quickly becoming one of the most meaningful predictors of full-funnel success.

To close that gap, Amazon's Wondery commissioned SmithGeiger to survey 3,000 U.S. adults who regularly tune into a creator-hosted podcast or digital series. The findings map what drives resonance among these fans: how they engage with their favorite show, what earns their trust, and what happens when brands show up with consistency or fall short of it. These audiences didn't form overnight. They are the result of what happens when creators invest in community, and they reward brands that do the same.

**3,000**
U.S. adults surveyed

**4-5**
shows followed regularly

**8/10**
knew the host before tuning in

1

PAGE 03

The Rise of Creator-Hosted Premium Video

2

PAGE 06

Connection Over Persuasion

3

PAGE 09

From Ad Placement to Community Presence

4

PAGE 11

Conclusion: Earning Resonance

+

PAGE 12

Methodology

Part One

# The Rise of Creator-Hosted Premium Video

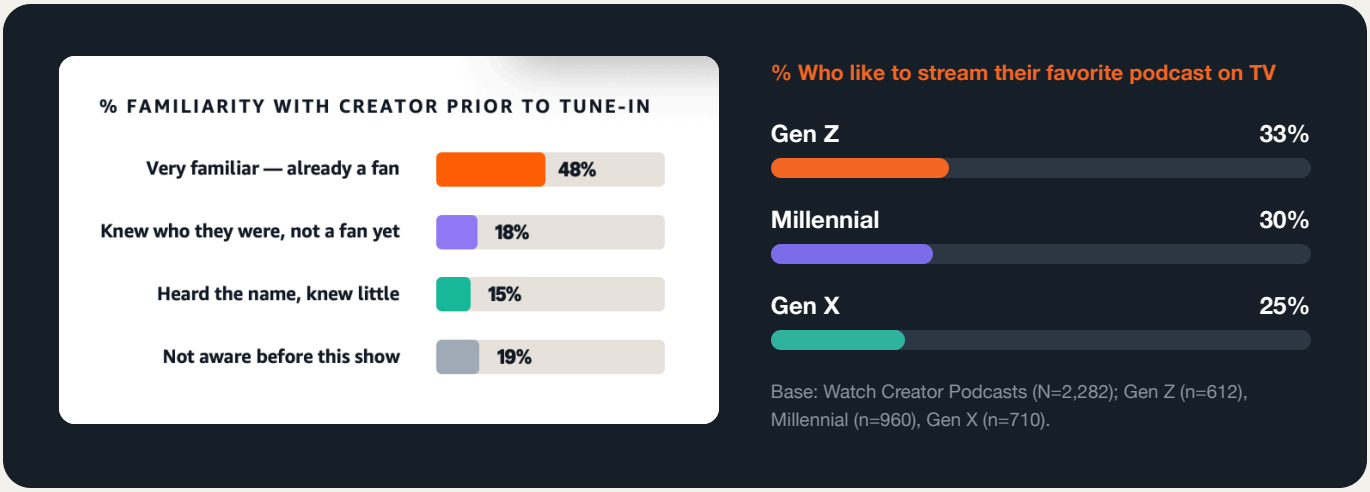
**Familiarity drives routine engagement, and the connection begins before fans ever hit play.**

> ***"I enjoyed watching little snippets and clips of their conversations, now they are a big part of my weekly routine and something I look forward to."***
>
> — Female, 26 · speaking about Giggly Squad

Creator-hosted podcasts and digital series have crossed the threshold from niche to mainstream, with fans tuning into an average of 4-5 shows on a regular basis. This space is notably ripe with well-known personalities, from reality TV stars and business leaders to a former First Lady serving as hosts. 8 out of 10 surveyed fans were already familiar with the host of their favorite show before tuning in, and most were already fans.

That familiarity translates into routine. Most fans surveyed treat new episodes as appointment viewing, and nearly 3 in 4 say these shows are more matched to their personal interests than serialized programming because hosts offer real and candid conversations.

These conversations are increasingly happening on the living room screen as creator-hosted shows find homes on streaming services. Gen Z and Millennial fans surveyed are significantly more likely than Gen X fans to stream creator-hosted podcasts on TV. Video is how most fans first arrive, but the connection begins before they hit play.



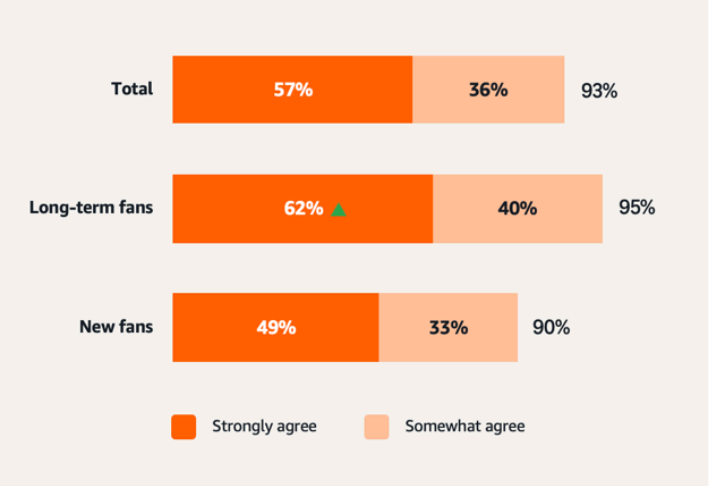
# Long-term fans are the most leaned-in

> ***"I started as a casual listener, now I feel personally connected and emotionally invested deeply."***
>
> — Male, 35 · speaking about Armchair Expert

Because most fans today report discovering shows in their social feeds, 3 in 5 first tuned in to a full-length episode by watching it. And they stay leaned in on video because of the human connection. 45% choose to watch creator-hosted podcasts so they can see the host's reactions.

Tenure drives anticipation and on-screen attention. Two-thirds of surveyed fans report they have tuned in regularly to their favorite show for at least a year. Those long-term fans are significantly more likely than newer ones to anticipate each new episode drop as much as their favorite TV shows.

LOOK FORWARD TO NEW EPISODES AS MUCH AS THEIR FAVORITE TV SHOW




Base: Total (N=3,000); Tuned in >1 yr (n=1,837), <1 yr (n=1,163).

**Fans who watch creator shows**

**60%** sit down and watch on any screen

Long-term fans 62% · New fans 56%

**The other side**

**40%** put it on in the background

Long-term fans 38% · New fans 44%

## Podcast fans follow creators, not formats

For fans of creator podcasts, video hasn't replaced audio. 70% move fluidly between watching and listening to full episodes of their favorite show, choosing audio when the situation demands it: commutes, chores, and screen-free moments. Older fans tend to pick a lane while younger fans toggle between both.

How surveyed fans typically watch a full episode of their favorite creator podcast

| Mode | Gen Z | Millennial | Gen X |
|---|---|---|---|
| Only the audio version | 7% | 11% | 17% |
| Mostly audio, sometimes video | 17% | 18% | 19% |
| Both audio and video equally | 38% | 34% | 24% |
| Mostly video, sometimes audio | 21% | 23% | 17% |
| Only the video version | 17% | 14% | 23% |

Base: Gen Z (n=857), Millennial (n=1,081), Gen X (n=757).

# Clips are the creator's flywheel

> ***"From the clips, I found myself wanting to know more about whatever they were talking about, and then I found myself enjoying the full episodes on YouTube."***
>
> **— Female, 46 · speaking about Good Hang**

Clips are the #1 source for show discovery, but they do more than recruit new audiences, they keep the conversation going for existing ones. Nearly all fans surveyed said they encounter clips from their favorite creator shows, which they talk about and share directly with friends. 1 in 3 use them to keep up when they don't have time for the full episode.

They also function as standalone viewing experiences with their own memory encoding, as nearly 1 in 4 fans recall seeing a brand or logo in a clip on social. For brands, clips extend reach to new audiences while reinforcing presence among loyal ones. The question is how to translate that visibility into genuine resonance.

**41%**
Talk about clips

**37%**
Share clips directly

**24%**
Recall a brand logo in a clip

Base: Watched clips of favorite show (n=2,571).

Part Two

# Connection Over Persuasion

**Fans view creators as peers, not personalities, and that trust is what transfers to brands.**

> ***"I have listened to their show for so long they feel like friends more than just hosts of a show."***
>
> — Male, 23 · speaking about The Colin and Samir Show

Audiences keep coming back because of the creator. 9 in 10 report the host is the leading reason they tune in, and not just for their unique voice or point of view. By tuning in regularly, fans say they've come to know the host more as a real person than as a performer, developing a sense of closeness that rivals actual friendship. Most fans say they trust the host of their favorite creator show as much or more than their own friends.

Given this depth of trust, fans welcome branded messaging in their favorite shows. Over 3 in 4 don't mind hearing ads in their favorite creator show if it helps support the host. Fans recognize that brand partnerships are investments in the creators they care about and are willing to give their attention in return.

**85%**

Say the host of their favorite creator show feels like a friend



50% strongly agree · 35% agree somewhat

**81%**

Trust the host as much or more than their friends



44% trust more · 37% trust as much

# Authenticity is non-negotiable

> ***"They are always so unfiltered and honest on the podcast, I trust that they wouldn't endorse a product they don't actually use or like."***
>
> **— Female, 36 · speaking about Calm Down with Erin and Charissa**

For brands, partnering with a creator means borrowing trust from a voice the audience believes in. Nearly two thirds say they trust the host of their favorite show over any brand message on its own, so when the host endorses a product, it gives fans the confidence to buy.

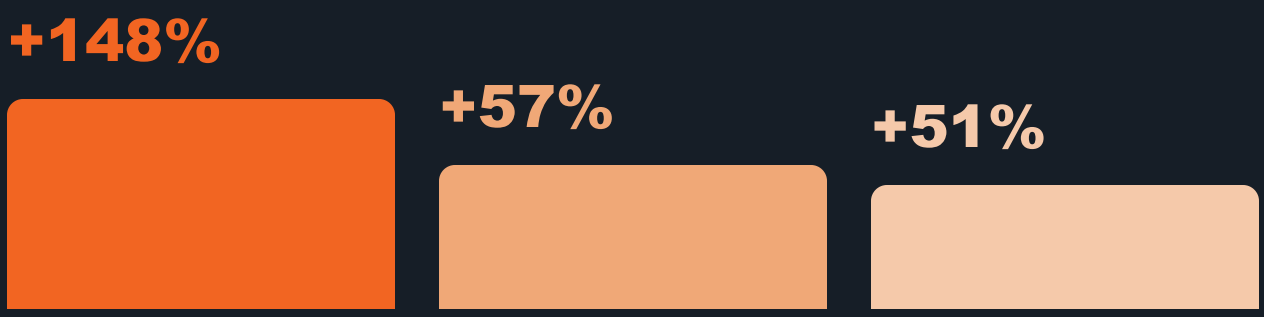
How do these creators maintain audience trust? Through a relentless commitment to authenticity. Nearly all fans say trust derives from honest, unscripted conversations they don't get from other media. An endorsement feels most authentic when the creator explains how they use the product and why they chose it over alternatives.

**78%**

feel more confident buying a product the creator has endorsed

## Authenticity drives lift across the brand funnel

**Lift among campaigns rated high vs. low on ad authenticity**




Source: Nielsen Brand Lift Meta Analysis. Campaigns indexed against the Nielsen Q2 2026 Total Database norm for ad authenticity (0.33) and grouped into overperformers (index >115) and underperformers (index <85). Campaign dates 2021-2026.

When an ad feels genuine within the context of the show and the creator's world, it consistently outperforms those that don't. But one credible endorsement does not move the needle on its own.

# Consistency signals credibility

> ***"Over time, I've gotten better at filtering out the obvious cash grabs and paying attention to the people who actually care about what they're recommending."***
>
> **— Male, 28 · speaking about the All-In Podcast**

Without consistent presence across episodes and channels, audience trust erodes. In open-ended responses, fans draw a clear line between genuine partnerships and one-off ad reads. Their signal is whether a brand appears consistently across episodes and across the creator's broader media presence. A single mention does more than fail to build trust; for half the audience, it signals the creator may not actually like the product. That skepticism is even sharper among younger fans, rising to 59% of Gen Z and 54% of Millennials surveyed.

In contrast, a sustained presence builds brand equity. 2 in 3 fans say that when they encounter a brand partner in daily life, they associate it with the creator or series that mentioned it, a powerful halo effect for brands willing to invest over time. And while over half can name a brand mentioned on their favorite show, no single ad format dominates that recall, reinforcing that cross-channel consistency, not any one placement, drives memorability.

**71%**

Multi-episode presence feels like a real partnership between brand and creator

Gen Z 74% · Millennials 73%

**78%**

When a brand appears in multiple episodes, it changes how fans think about the brand

**70%**
more likely to trust

**68%**
consider more premium

**67%**
more likely to try

Part Three

# From Ad Placement to Community Presence

**The conversation doesn't end when the episode does. It travels into daily life.**

> ***"They were talking about the Super Bowl and all I could think of was, I can't wait to get to work and talk about this with my coworkers."***
>
> — Female, 38 · speaking about the Pat McAfee Show

The conversation doesn't end when the episode does. Fans follow their favorite creator-host across an average of five touchpoints beyond the show itself. 45% of fans surveyed say that moments and interviews from creator shows fuel their conversation at work and online, outpacing traditional watercooler topics.

What makes a moment worth talking about? Fans consistently point to content that feels real and unscripted, thought-provoking analysis or debate, inside jokes that make sense to the show's community, and public figures saying something unexpected. These are the moments that travel beyond the episode, carrying the show's cultural footprint into daily life.

**Top ways surveyed fans connect with the host outside the series**

**57%**
Follow the show's social handles

**57%**
Follow the host's other media appearances

**55%**
Watch the host on a live stream

# Live events and merch are unmet demand

> ***"The host genuinely makes all of us viewers feel like a family. They mention the community, call us by our community name, and give us platforms to talk to others."***
>
> — Female, 29 · speaking about Good Mythical Morning

For these audiences, the show itself is not enough. They want to show up for their favorite creator in more ways. Nearly 3 in 5 say they have attended or want to attend live creator events, and over half have traveled for one. There's a similar story around commerce. 55% have bought or want to buy host or show-related merchandise, but 1 in 3 haven't yet had the opportunity.

What powers this organic amplification is community. 87% of fans say their favorite show makes them feel part of a community of people who share their interests. These aren't passive audiences consuming in isolation, but a collective with a shared language tied to the creator's world. For brands, it's not just about appearing in an episode, but earning a place within the community that surrounds it.

**87%**
feel part of a community that shares their interests

**3 in 5**
have attended or want to attend a live creator event

**55%**
have bought or want to buy show merchandise

**The opportunity isn't a placement.**
**It's a partnership.**

1 in 3 fans say they simply haven't had the opportunity to buy merchandise yet, signaling clear unmet demand that brands and creators can meet together.

Conclusion

# Earning Resonance

What makes this sector of the creator economy unique is that fans arrive with familiarity. Tune-in leads to trust, fandom leads to friendship, and community leads to conversation. So when a host brings a brand into their orbit, its relevance is immediate. But a relevant ad doesn't necessarily resonate. The data shows three conditions unlock resonance:

**01**

## Trust is the entry point

9 in 10 fans keep watching for the creator and trust the creator's voice over traditional media. Audiences are receptive to brand messaging (76% don't mind it) specifically because it supports the show and its host.

**02**

## Authenticity moves the needle

When a creator explains how they use a product and why they chose it, 78% feel more confident buying. Authentic ads can more than double brand familiarity, moving audiences from recognition to consideration.

**03**

## Consistency signals credibility

7 in 10 say multi-episode presence makes the partnership genuine. Brands that show up across episodes and channels over time earn trial intent (67% more likely to try) and conversion.

> **The question for brands is not whether these communities have value. It's whether they are willing to earn their place in them, showing up with creators across their channels, over time, and wherever their worlds extend.**

Methodology

# How we conducted this research

Wondery, in partnership with SmithGeiger Group, conducted a quantitative online survey of 3,000 U.S. adults ages 18-64 who regularly watch or listen to hosted podcasts or hosted online series. Fieldwork took place in June 2026.

The sample was balanced to 50% men and 50% women, with near-equal distribution across generations, 30% Gen Z (ages 18-29), 40% Millennials (ages 30-45), and 30% Gen X (ages 46-64), and representative targets by U.S. region and ethnicity. Respondents were required to regularly watch or listen to a hosted show, defined as one where a host or hosts discuss different topics each episode, either with each other or with a guest, spanning genres including entertainment, society and culture, political or social commentary, self-improvement, health, or wellness, sports, technology, business, entrepreneurship, or finance, faith, religion, or spirituality, and food, travel, or cooking.

Respondents answered questions about a single show and host assigned based on their stated favorite, covering their viewing and listening habits, their relationship with the host, their exposure to and recall of brand sponsorships, and their broader media and community behaviors. Figures throughout this paper reflect the total respondent base unless otherwise noted. Respondents completed several open-ended prompts about their favorite show and creator, with deeper probing moderated by AI, which grounded the results in a real, ongoing relationship between creator and consumer.

**3,000**
U.S. adults, ages 18-64

**50 / 50**
men / women

**June 2026**
fieldwork period