

NEARLY HALF OF  
MARKETERS FAIL TO

# BUILD LASTING CREATOR PARTNERSHIPS

A study conducted by

**SOCIALLY POWERFUL**



Building  
Brand  
Advocacy



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

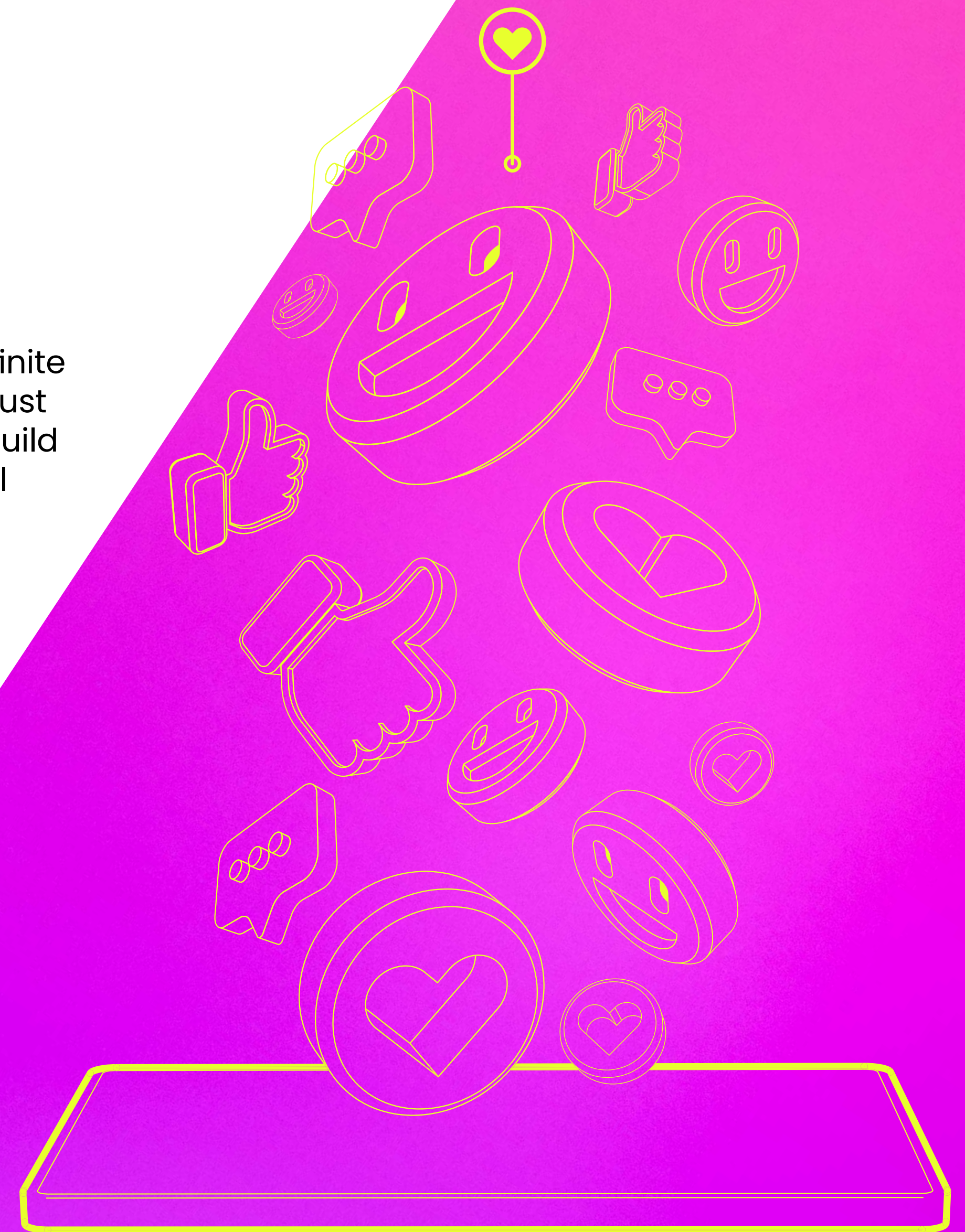
In today's challenging economic climate, where marketing budgets are under intense scrutiny, brand advocacy has emerged as a critical investment area. Our survey of **150+** senior marketers reveals that **four in five** say they plan to increase investment in brand advocacy over the next year, underlining growing recognition of its potential to break through a crowded digital landscape.

Yet, **only 10% report advocacy to be a core part of their overall strategy**. This disconnect highlights a costly mistake. Brands are willing to increase investment but are doing so without a clear blueprint. The result is a hollowed-out, ad-hoc approach that manufactures fleeting buzz, sacrificing the lasting influence that has the power to build a self-sustaining earned ecosystem that breaks through the crowded market.

**While advocacy is multi-faceted, social media is a primary growth engine.** It's where brands can own the conversation, capture consumer attention,

and drive product discovery. In an era of infinite choice, and fleeting brand loyalty, people trust people. True advocacy enables brands to build sustainable marketing ecosystems that fuel peer-to-peer discovery and stay relevant.

Our study reveals that the number one challenge preventing this is the struggle to **compete for attention in a crowded market**, closely followed by the **inability to identify and maintain relationships with authentic creator partners**, the key to unlocking earned media, the social proof that builds trust and drives action.





# KEY INSIGHTS

**81%**

of surveyed marketers are set to moderately increase their investment in brand advocacy over the next year, yet only

**10%**

are doing it right.



**51%**

of surveyed marketers revealed their biggest challenge in unlocking brand advocacy is competing for attention in a crowded market.

Nearly half of marketers

**(48%)**

state their top challenge is finding and maintaining long-term relationships with authentic creators.



Marketers are overlooking a key opportunity in their adoption of AI. While

**80%**

are experimenting with it,

**57%**

primarily use it to aid creative ideation, failing to address one of their biggest self-reported challenges: identifying the right creator partners.





# THE NEW FRONTIER OF BRAND BUILDING

## Defining Brand Advocacy Today

Brand advocacy is the proactive and voluntary willingness to champion and defend a brand, signifying a deep level of emotional investment and loyalty. These advocates, ranging from loyal customers and employees to influential figures naturally amplify a brand's message through various channels.

While the channels have evolved, the concept of brand advocacy has been a powerful force for generations, built on the foundation of trusted, personal recommendations. Back in 2012, Nielsen reported that 92% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family above all other forms of advertising.

Today, peer-to-peer still remains the norm, with social media having fundamentally changed the scale, speed, and impact of word-of-mouth. It connects people from every corner of the globe in an instant, transforming private recommendations into public discourse. Crucially, the circle of trust has expanded; in a generation that lives online, a recommendation from a creator can carry as much weight as one from a close friend.



# SETTING THE SCENE:

1.2

## Why Brand Advocacy is the Answer to Today's Market

We are operating in the most dynamic and competitive market in history, especially the beauty market. No longer dominated by a few heritage giants, it has become a sprawling democracy of choice, flooded by agile challenger brands. This has cultivated a spoiled for choice consumer who is not just selective, but less brand-loyal by default. Our study reflects this, with 51% of senior marketers revealing their **biggest challenge is competing for attention in this crowded market.**

Layered on top of this is a sharp economic reality. With the rising cost of living, every purchase is scrutinised. For the modern consumer, it is both easy and financially prudent to switch to the next exciting, well-priced alternative, making it harder than ever for brands to build sustainable, long-term relationships. Recently, a study by an AI-powered digital ad firm Becausal revealed a new consumer segment: the skincare switcher attributed to the finding that US households routinely switch among competitive skincare brands.





# SETTING THE SCENE:

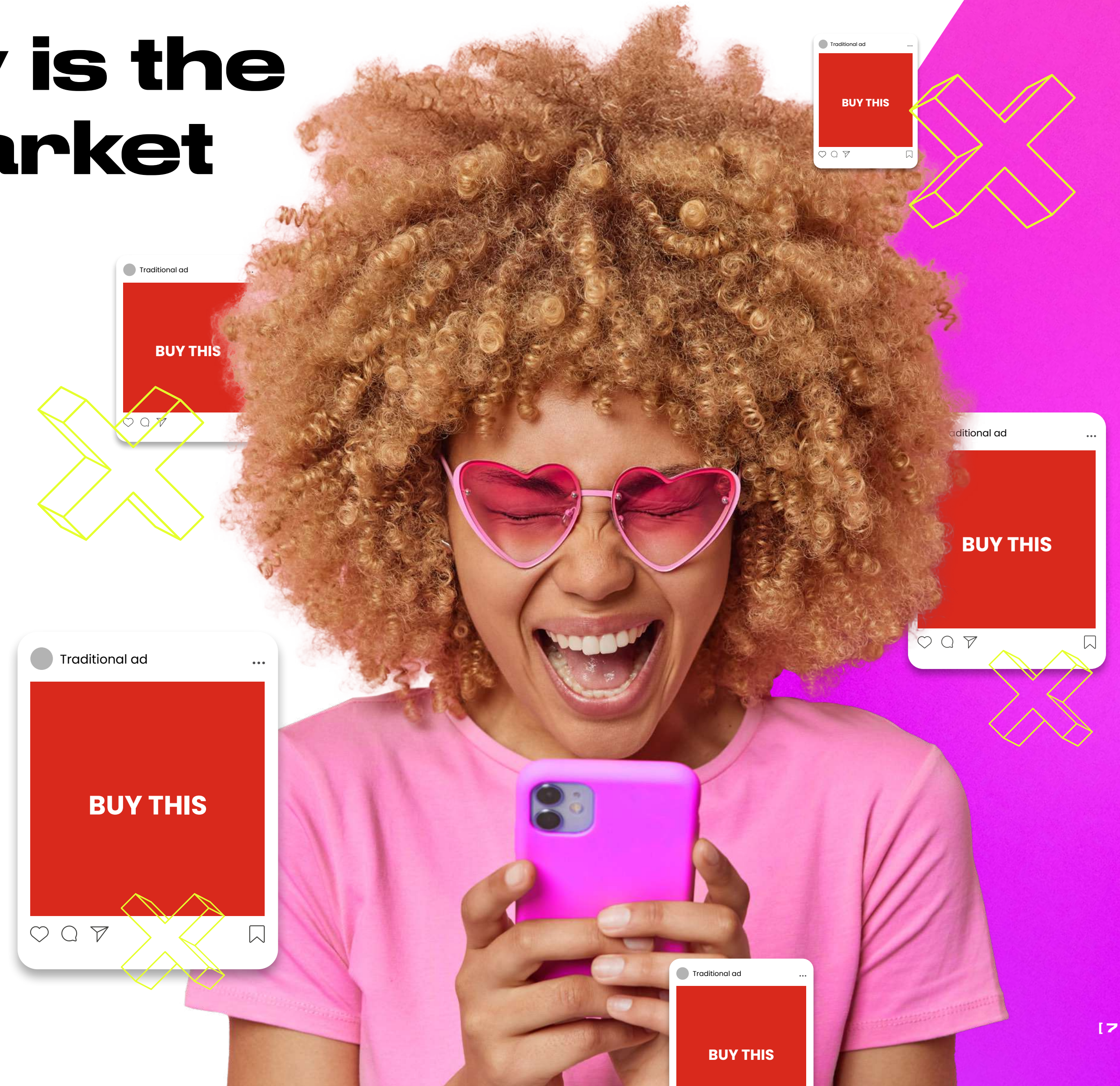
1.2

## Why Brand Advocacy is the Answer to Today's Market

This explosion of options has also forged a powerful defence mechanism: sophisticated skepticism. **Today's consumer is adept at tuning out overly promotional content, having developed a deep-seated resistance to being 'sold to'. The sheer volume of advertising they face explains why.**

An ad campaign might buy temporary visibility, but once the ad spend stops, the conversation often flatlines.

This mirrors the findings of the groundbreaking 2012 paper The Long and the Short of It by Les Binet & Peter Field. Published by the IPA, their study proved that long-term brand-building investment delivers double the profit of a short-term rented attention approach. Crucially, they found that emotional campaigns, those that build lasting brand affinity and memory structures are twice as efficient at driving this long-term profit as rational, promotional messaging.





# SETTING THE SCENE:

1.2

## Why Brand Advocacy is the Answer to Today's Market

While the channels have evolved, the strategic principle is more relevant than ever. Even brands with culturally resonant advertising recognise this limitation. Following the success of its ad campaign “Better in Denim”, Gap turned to a creator advocacy platform, understanding that social proof is essential to sustain relevance long after the initial ad spend has ended. This proves that even breakout creatives require an advocacy engine to achieve long-term impact.

In a recent article by System1's SVP, Andrew Tindal for The Drum, alluded to how much power creativity holds to build memory, capture attention and shift behaviour. And Effie dataset shows that advertising has become far less emotional and less likely to get noticed and build useful memories.



Now, within this environment of overwhelming volume and deep-seated skepticism lies the single greatest opportunity for modern brands: to cultivate authentic advocacy that cuts right through the noise and builds genuine connection. When done right, **advocacy becomes a self-sustaining marketing engine where earned success compounds**. It further strengthens brand equity and creates measurable business value, justifying investment at the highest levels. Among all channels, social delivers the most scalable and direct **pathway for brands to turn advocacy into growth**.



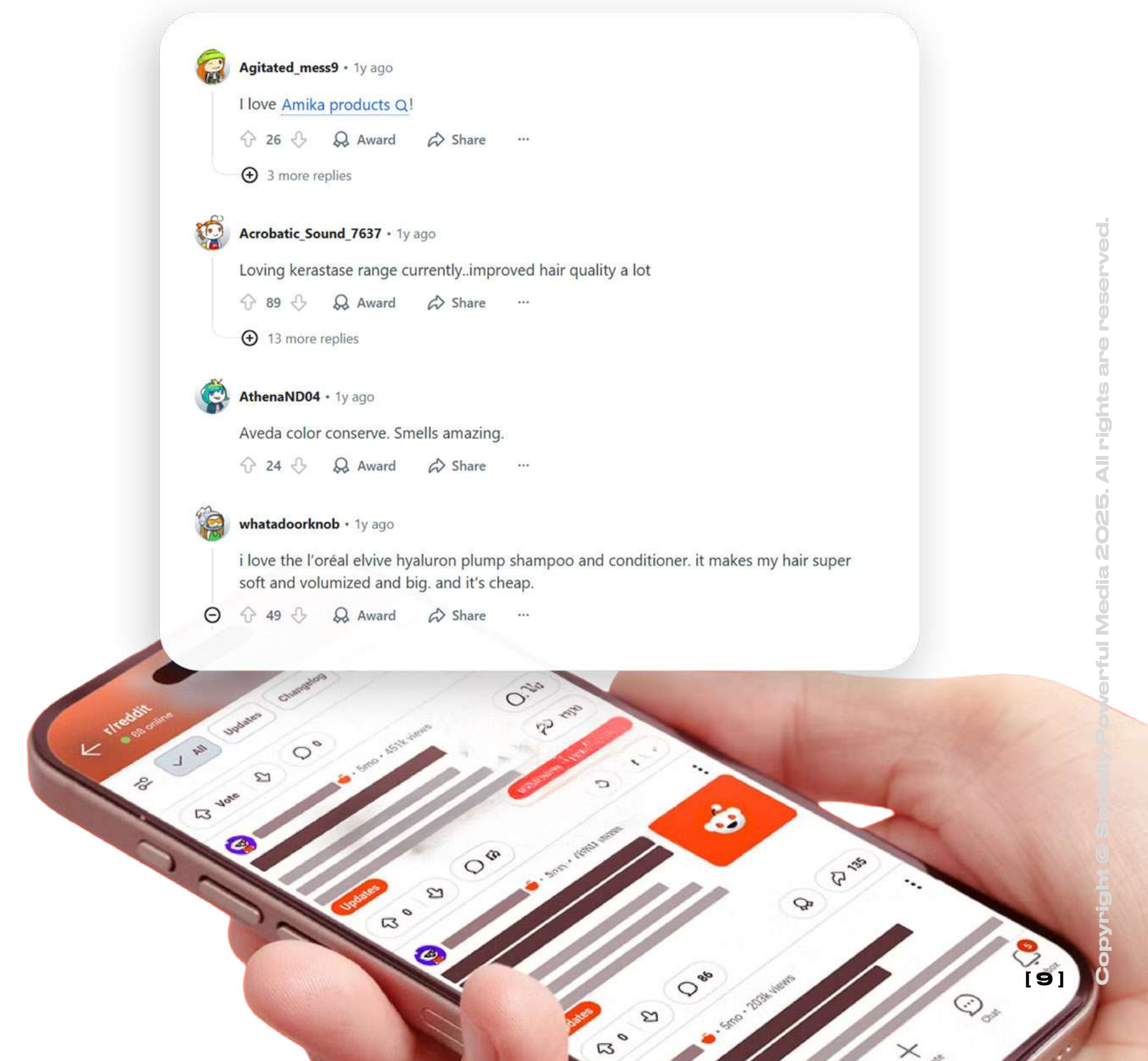
# THE HUMAN IMPERATIVE OF MODERN MARKETING

1.3

This opportunity is rooted in a profound human need. In an increasingly digital world, feelings of loneliness and a desire for genuine connection are growing, particularly among younger generations (Forbes, 2023). People are actively seeking spaces where they can belong and engage with others who share their interests and values. This creates an imperative for brands to *earn* their place, not by shouting, but by evoking the genuine emotion that builds lasting advocacy.

These strategies tap into a broader consumer shift towards more niche communities and trusted peer-to-peer conversations. This trend is evident on platforms like Twitch and Reddit, but also within broadcast channels, community pages, where the conversations feel genuine and intimate. As a recent Ipsos report found, emotionally attached consumers recommend a brand nearly twice as often as those who are merely functionally satisfied.

This is the new frontier of brand building. It's a proactive, human-centric approach that transforms customers from passive buyers into a brand's most powerful storytellers. The potential is immense, however, seizing this opportunity requires a foundational shift that holds so many businesses back.





# THE RELATIONAL CHALLENGE OF MODERN ADVOCACY

2



While  
**4 in 5**  
**marketers**  
want to increase their investment  
in brand advocacy over the next 12  
months, nearly half of surveyed marketers  
**(48%) admit**  
that their top challenge is **finding and**  
**maintaining long-term relationships with**  
**authentic advocates who align with their brand.**



# THE REVOLVING DOOR OF ADVOCATES

2.1

In this environment, brands that fail to identify and cultivate authentic, aligned advocates are simply adding to the noise, their messages lost in a sea of sponsored posts and fleeting trends. This revolving door of advocates is a symptom of treating creators as disposable assets rather than long-term partners. Our data reveals that

# 67%

of surveyed marketers lean heavily into pay-to-play tactics

well, using creators whose persona and beliefs genuinely align with the brand – this approach can feel authentic and effective. But when done in isolation, this approach feels too transactional. Ultimately, the goal is selecting the right creators who genuinely advocate for your brand and product, amplifying reach without forcing it. An example of long-term trust building is the collaboration between Collection Cosmetics and YouTuber Zoella Sugg. A loyal fan of the brand for over a decade, Zoe had consistently championed their Lasting Perfection concealer long before any formal partnership. Her endorsement of their new product launch felt like a natural extension of an existing relationship, not a rented moment of influence.





# USING AI TO FIND NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK

2.2

Our survey shows that brands are eager to innovate, with over **80% already using or testing AI tools in their workflows**. However, our data also reveals that while AI is predominantly used for **creative ideation (57%)**, its application in **creator identification** lags significantly. This calls for an opportunity for brands that noted their biggest challenge in unlocking brand advocacy is finding and maintaining creator relationships.

This hesitation stems from valid concerns: nearly **40% of marketers fear brand safety risks and a lack of human nuance** when using AI. Brands need intuitive technology that helps identify partners based on niche attributes, audience psychographics, and, crucially, pre-existing affinity. For example, identifying creators who have previously mentioned the brand organically, or those whose personal stories naturally align with a product's purpose – like a creator openly discussing her acne journey partnering with a

skincare brand that offers acne-targeted solutions, can make all the difference. Without authentic alignment and strong, lasting relationships, brands are not just failing to build advocacy, *they are actively contributing to the consumer skepticism they seek to overcome.*





# WHAT'S NEXT?

The industry is chasing a 21st-century goal with a 20th-century mindset. Marketers are attempting to rent attention in a market that thrives on what must be earned. Ultimately, brands are trapped in a costly loop. They are funding a hollowed-out version of advocacy, confusing paid media with earned trust and fleeting visibility with lasting influence. The ambition for a self-sustaining marketing ecosystem is present, and it's the future of modern marketing. Until this fundamental conflict is resolved, the true power of brand advocacy will remain a missed opportunity.



**Missed Part 1 of our series on influencer seeding (gifting). Read it here for measurable insights along with a maturity framework.**

## Coming Soon:

Our master advocacy report. We analysed 80+ investor communications reports from leading global beauty brands to reveal the organisational challenge in unlocking brand advocacy along with industry evidence and *our recommendations*.



# ABOUT SOCIALLY POWERFUL

Socially Powerful is a global social and influencer marketing agency founded in 2017, with a presence across the UK, United States, Europe, and the Middle East. Founded by social media pioneers who grew alongside platforms like Facebook and YouTube, the agency specialises in delivering bold marketing campaigns that leverage technology, creative storytelling, and deep social media insights. The agency excels in influencer marketing, social strategy, video content, and distribution, consistently achieving marketing performance that outperforms traditional channels.

