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Creators and Platform Dependency: The Strategic Role of *creator-Owned brands* in the Creator Economy

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Abstract

The increasing dependence of creators on digital platforms and intermediary agencies has raised concerns about their autonomy and ability to maintain control over their personal brand. This study explores how the creation and management of creator-owned brands can reduce this dependency, providing creators with greater control and economic sustainability. Through a qualitative analysis based on interviews with creators active in various sectors, the research highlights the tensions between authenticity and commercialization, as well as the income diversification strategies adopted by creators. The implications for marketing and management are discussed, suggesting a resilient entrepreneurial model based on value co-creation. The results show that although digital platforms offer extraordinary opportunities for content distribution and audience building, they also impose significant limitations that can negatively impact creators' activities. To counteract this dependency, creators are increasingly developing their own brands, a strategy that not only offers greater autonomy but also allows for income diversification, reducing reliance on platforms and brand collaborations. However, managing a creator-owned brand requires advanced entrepreneurial skills, representing a significant challenge for many creators. This study concludes that an approach that values authenticity, entrepreneurship, and value co-creation is essential for success in the creator economy.

Keywords creator economy, platform dependency, creator-owned brands, content monetization, digital agency

1. Introduction

The growing relevance of the creator economy has transformed the way digital content is produced, distributed, and consumed. Creators, ranging from micro-influencers to the most famous digital personalities, have acquired a central role in contemporary marketing and communication dynamics.

Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are no longer simply distribution channels but true intermediaries that hold the power to shape the behaviors, strategies, and economic choices of creators. In recent years, creators' dependence on digital platforms and intermediary agencies has raised significant concerns regarding their autonomy. In this context, the emergence of creator-owned brands represents a key strategy for creators seeking to balance the need for monetization with maintaining their authenticity and control over their personal brand.

Despite the increasing attention to the creator economy, the existing literature has not yet exhaustively addressed the issue of their dependency on platforms and agencies.

In particular, there is a significant gap regarding how creators can reduce this dependency through the creation and management of their own brands.

This paper aims to explore the dynamics between creators, platforms, and agencies, focusing on the strategic and managerial implications of creator-owned brands and addressing the following research questions:

***Q1.** How do creators manage the tension between dependency on digital platforms and the need to maintain control over their brand?*

***Q2.** How can the creation of a creator-owned brand help reduce creators' dependence on platforms and agencies?*

***Q3.** What are the marketing and management implications for creators who choose to develop and promote their own brands?*

The purpose of this study is therefore twofold: on the one hand, it contributes to the academic literature on the creator economy and digital branding, offering new perspectives on how creators can navigate the ecosystem of platforms and agencies.

On the other hand, it provides practical insights for creators, marketers, and managers operating in this context, suggesting strategies to reduce platform dependency and maximize the autonomy and success of creator-owned brands.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Creator-Owned Brands and Platform Dependency in the Creator Economy Ecosystem

The creator economy is an emerging phenomenon that has transformed the entire cultural and media industry, shifting power from traditional media to individual creators. Creators, defined as individuals who produce digital content for a specific audience, have become central figures in marketing and advertising due to their ability to generate engagement and build online communities (Burgess & Green, 2009; Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

However, the success of these creators is closely tied to the digital platforms that host their content, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

Digital platforms exert significant control over creators, determining the rules for monetization, content distribution, and visibility.

Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2022) describe this relationship as a form of structural dependency, where creators must conform to the rules imposed by the platforms to maintain their relevance and economic sustenance. This dependency creates an environment in which creators are constantly pressured to produce content that satisfies platform algorithms, often at the expense of their creative autonomy and authenticity (Duffy, 2017).

To counteract dependency on platforms and agencies, many creators have started developing creator-owned brands. Although there is no single definition of creator-owned brands, they can be understood as brands that offer creators the opportunity to monetize their audience directly, bypassing the limitations imposed by platforms. Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) emphasize the importance of managing personal brands as autonomous entities that can operate independently of traditional distribution channels.

Creator-owned brands allow creators to maintain control over their image and marketing strategies, reducing the need to rely on intermediaries such as advertising agencies (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

This approach not only offers greater autonomy but can also increase the audience's perception of authenticity, as creators can present products and services that directly reflect their values and personal aesthetics (Hund, 2023).

One of the most complex aspects of managing a creator-owned brand is finding a balance between authenticity and commercialization.

As noted by Duffy (2017), creators operate in a context where authenticity is a fundamental value, but they must also monetize their work to sustain themselves; this creates a duality highlighted by Banet-Weiser (2012), who describes the tension between the need to maintain an authentic image and the economic imperative to generate revenue through sponsorships and collaborations.

The creation of a creator-owned brand could represent a response to this tension, allowing creators to capitalize on their authenticity without compromising their relationship with the audience.

However, managing a brand requires entrepreneurial and strategic skills that not all creators possess, which can lead to difficulties in building and maintaining the brand (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

The emergence of creator-owned brands has significant implications for marketing and management. On the one hand, marketers need to adapt their strategies to collaborate with creators in ways that respect their autonomy and authenticity.

On the other hand, creators must develop business management skills to effectively manage their brands and maximize monetization opportunities without compromising their public image. Recent studies (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020) highlight how diversifying income sources, including the creation of creator-owned brands, can offer greater economic stability to creators, reducing their dependence on advertising and platforms (Poell, 2020; Kozinets, 2023). This diversification represents not only a survival strategy but also an opportunity for creators to expand their influence and build autonomous media empires.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design adopted for this study is qualitative, a choice particularly suited to exploring in-depth the experiences, perceptions, and strategies of creators within the creator economy. The qualitative methodology is often preferred when the goal is to understand complex and dynamic phenomena that are difficult to capture through quantitative tools (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, adopting a qualitative approach allowed for the investigation of how creators are developing autonomous business models, with a specific focus on the adoption of creator-owned brands as a strategy to mitigate dependency on digital platforms and agencies.

The study design was structured around semi-structured interviews, which allow for an in-depth exploration of complex themes while maintaining a certain flexibility in conducting the interviews (Kvale, 2007).

This approach is particularly useful when investigating emerging phenomena such as those in the creator economy, as it captures new nuances and insights that may spontaneously emerge during interactions with participants (Patton, 2015).

The sampling strategy used was theoretical sampling, a technique based on identifying participants who can offer a variety of perspectives and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under examination (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling is particularly suitable in exploratory qualitative research, where the goal is to develop a theory rather than test pre-existing hypotheses (Charmaz, 2014).

In this study, the selected participants were creators operating in various sectors, including fashion, fitness, food, travel, education, and green lifestyle. This diversity allowed for an examination of how branding and monetization strategies can vary depending on the sectoral context. Additionally, particular attention was given to micro and nano-influencers, who represent a significant but often less studied part of the creator economy (Abidin, 2019).

Creators were selected based on the diversity of their sectors and the size of their following, with a number of followers ranging from 1,000 to 100,000, ensuring a focus on those who have achieved a balance between relevance and autonomous brand management; this choice allowed for the inclusion of influencers who, despite not having a massive following, possess a strong engagement capability and autonomous management of their activities (Marwick, 2013). Priority was then given to creators who have shown significant commitment to the creation and management of their own brands, beyond simple sponsored collaborations, to fully understand their revenue diversification and economic autonomy strategies (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Figure 1.

Creator ID	Sector	Number of Followers	Main Platforms	Type of Content	Autonomous Branding
Creator 1	Fashion	85,000	Instagram, TikTok	Outfits, Fashion Tips	<i>Development of a clothing line</i>
Creator 2	Fitness	65,000	Instagram, YouTube	Workouts, Nutrition	<i>Online coaching platform</i>
Creator 3	Food	55,000	Instagram, Blog	Recipes, Restaurant Reviews	<i>Sale of food products</i>
Creator 4	Travel	42,000	Instagram, YouTube	Travel vlogs, Photography	<i>Organization of experiential tours</i>
Creator 5	Education	38,000	YouTube, Instagram	Tutorials, Study Tips	<i>Online courses</i>
Creator 6	Lifestyle (Green)	75,000	Instagram, Blog	Eco-friendly tips, DIY	<i>E-commerce of sustainable products</i>
Creator 7	Gaming	95,000	Twitch, YouTube	Live streaming, Game reviews	<i>Personalized merchandise</i>
Creator 8	Fashion	60,000	Instagram, Pinterest	Style tips, Fashion accessories	<i>Line of accessories</i>

Creator 9	Education	45,000	TikTok, Instagram	Quick educational content	<i>E-book publication</i>
Creator 10	Fitness	50,000	Instagram, YouTube	Fitness, Mental health	<i>Personalized workout programs</i>
Creator 11	Food	40,000	YouTube, Instagram	Food reviews, Traditional cooking	<i>Collaborations with local restaurants</i>
Creator 12	Travel	30,000	Instagram, YouTube	Travel photography, Blogging	<i>Partnerships with travel agencies</i>
Creator 13	Education	52,000	LinkedIn, Blog	Career advice, Online training	<i>Consultations and seminars</i>
Creator 14	Lifestyle (Green)	28,000	Instagram, YouTube	Sustainable living, Minimalism	<i>Sale of e-books and guides</i>
Creator 15	Gaming	90,000	Twitch, YouTube	Gameplay, Reviews	<i>Hardware sponsorships</i>

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, a method that allows for the gathering of rich and detailed data, deeply exploring the personal experiences of the creators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Each interview lasted an average of 45-60 minutes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of complex topics such as the tension between authenticity and commercialization, platform management, and monetization strategies. The interview questions explored various aspects, including the creators' personal and professional journeys, their branding strategies, their interaction with platforms, and their perceptions of autonomy and dependency. Particular attention was given to how creators use autonomous branding to mitigate dependency on digital platforms, a central theme in the analysis of their "self-production" (Pooley, 2010).

All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the collected data (Silverman, 2013). Data analysis was conducted using a grounded theory approach, a methodology particularly useful for exploring emerging and understudied phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory allows for the construction of a theory directly from the data, rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses, and is crucial for capturing the complexity of creators' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The analysis process was divided into an open coding phase, where interview transcripts were carefully read to identify key concepts and recurring themes. This phase led to the emergence of a series of codes representing the main aspects of creators' experiences, such as "personal brand" management and the challenges related to monetization (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subsequently, axial coding allowed for the grouping of codes into broader categories, linking concepts based on relationships that emerged from the data. This phase led to the identification of main themes such as the tension between authenticity and commercialization, and the role of platforms in brand management (Glaser, 2002). Finally, the selective coding phase led to the selection of a central category that connects all the other identified categories, forming the theoretical basis of the study (Figure 1). In this case, the central theme that emerged is "autonomy through branding," which highlights how creators use their personal brands to gain greater independence from platforms and agencies (Charmaz, 2006). To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, various strategies were adopted. Data triangulation, involving the use of different sources to confirm the results, was employed to enhance the credibility of the research (Patton, 1999). Additionally, interview transcripts were sent to participants for review, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of the collected information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The cross-analysis of themes that emerged in the interviews and existing literature on the creator economy and branding further strengthened the validity of the results, situating the study within a broader theoretical framework (Yin, 2014). This study presents some limitations, as is the case with any qualitative research. For example, the relatively small sample size and the focus on micro and nano-influencers could limit the generalizability of the results to larger-scale creators. Moreover, the use of interviews involves the risk of self-selection bias, as participants may be more inclined to share particularly positive or negative experiences (Maxwell, 2012). Despite these limitations, the combination of grounded theory with content analysis provides a solid foundation for further research and insights in this field (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

4. Findings

4.1 Tension Between Authenticity and Commercialization

Authenticity was identified as a crucial competitive advantage for creators. However, maintaining an authentic image can be challenging, especially when creators are involved in brand collaborations.

The interviews revealed that followers are increasingly aware of and critical towards sponsored content, and creators must carefully balance product promotion with their personal identity. One of the interviewees highlighted this challenge: "Collaborating with brands is essential for earning, but at the same time, I have to be very selective. If I promote products that don't reflect my values, I risk losing my audience's trust" (Creator 6). From this perspective, the importance of creators choosing collaborations that align with their values and their audience's expectations is evident. One of the main themes that emerged from my analysis is the intrinsic tension between authenticity and commercialization. As indicated by Duffy (2017), authenticity has become a crucial resource for creators, who must continuously balance the need to monetize their content with the necessity of maintaining a genuine and credible image in the eyes of their followers. It is on this delicate tightrope that what I believe is one of the main turning points of a creator's professionalization is played out (with the possible involvement of intermediaries), or the slow decline of the fanbase after initial success or virality. On one hand, creators who manage to maintain their authenticity are able to build stronger and more lasting relationships with their audience, strengthening their personal brand (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). On the other hand, however, the constant pressure to generate income can lead to compromises that risk undermining their credibility, as observed by Abidin (2015). One of the creators interviewed shared their experience, which I believe is crucial to understanding how fundamental this element is, with a collaboration that did not succeed due to the audience's perception: "I accepted a collaboration with a fashion brand, but my followers saw it as a sellout. I lost many followers and realized how important it is to maintain consistency with those who have always followed me" (Creator 1). The challenge for creators, therefore, is to develop branding strategies that not only allow them to effectively monetize but also preserve the integrity of their message; hence, it becomes clear how fundamental it is to carefully select brand collaborations and continuously monitor public perceptions, elements that have proven essential to avoid the phenomenon of so-called "brand fatigue" (Cocker & Cronin, 2017).

4.2 Platform dependency and revenue diversification: a necessary step towards the sustainability of creator-owned business models

The interviews revealed that dependency on digital platforms is one of the most recurring and concerning themes for creators. Many of them highlighted how platforms, although offering extraordinary opportunities for content distribution and audience building, also impose significant limitations that can negatively affect their activity. As previously discussed, many creators are closely tied to the digital platforms that host their content, which exert significant control over them by setting the rules for monetization, distribution, and content visibility. Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2022)

describe this relationship as a form of structural dependency, in which creators must conform to the rules imposed by the platforms to maintain their relevance and economic sustenance.

This dependency creates an environment where creators are constantly under pressure to produce content that satisfies platform algorithms, often at the expense of their creative autonomy and authenticity (Duffy, 2017).

An interesting finding that emerged is how changes in algorithms directly impact content visibility and, consequently, creators' revenues (Bucher, 2018).

One interviewee emphasized: "Every time Instagram changes its algorithm, I see an immediate drop in engagement and views. It's frustrating because there's no transparency, and we never know how to adapt to these changes" (Creator 9).

This feeling of uncertainty is shared by many creators, who find themselves constantly having to change their strategies to maintain visibility and audience engagement.

Another relevant aspect that emerged is the perception of a "golden cage," where creators, while benefiting from platforms to build their audience and monetize, feel trapped by the rules imposed by those very platforms.

One interviewee observed: "The platforms give us the opportunity to grow, but at the same time, they hold us in their grip. If they decide to change the rules, all our work can go up in smoke" (Creator 10).

From this perspective, the interviews highlighted how crucial it is for creators to diversify their income streams; in addition to earnings from platforms and brand collaborations, many creators are exploring new monetization opportunities, such as subscriptions to exclusive content, merchandise sales, and online course creation. Revenue diversification thus proves essential to ensuring the long-term economic sustainability of creators.

Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) have emphasized how exclusive dependency on brand collaborations can expose creators to significant risks, related to market fluctuations and changes in platform policies.

The ability to monetize through multiple channels, such as subscriptions, merchandise sales, and exclusive content creation, therefore represents a crucial strategy to reduce economic vulnerability and ensure greater stability (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

However, this business model requires an understanding of the dynamics of the various market sectors in which the creator intends to specialize and an investment in terms of time and resources that are not always available to creators, especially emerging ones. Creators must therefore develop a true entrepreneurial strategy that allows them to identify and exploit new monetization opportunities without compromising the quality and authenticity of their content (Burgess & Green, 2009).

In this sense, one creator shared their experience, stating, "I started offering exclusive content through a subscription service. This allowed me to create a more stable income source and connect more deeply with my most loyal followers" (Creator 5), demonstrating how this monetization approach reflects a growing maturity among creators, who are developing more sophisticated strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability of their business.

However, despite the interview results showing a situation in slow evolution where creators are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial and strategic in their decisions,

dependency on platforms remains a critical issue. On one hand, it surrounds the creator economy with an aura of "insecurity" and precariousness regarding what is considered and normalized as a profession. On the other hand, it pushes creators to rely on an ecosystem of intermediary agencies or to undertake a path of individual monetization, such as creating their own brand.

4.3 The evolution towards creator-owned brands

To counteract dependency on platforms and agencies, many creators have begun developing creator-owned brands.

One of the most significant developments that emerged from the interviews is the growing trend among creators to develop their own brands (creator-owned brands).

What emerges from this work is that this strategy is often seen as a way to gain greater autonomy and diversify income streams, thereby reducing dependency on platforms and brand collaborations.

Several interviewees recounted how creating their own brand allowed them to have greater control over their business and build a more stable and predictable income.

One creator explained: "I decided to launch my own product line because I wanted something of my own, that didn't depend on the decisions of platforms or brands. Now I feel like I have better control over my future" (Creator 8).

This shift towards creator-owned brands could therefore represent a direct response to the perceived precariousness that comes from relying on third parties for monetization. Moreover, for many creators, their own brand also represents a natural extension of their personal brand, allowing them to offer products that fully reflect their identity and values.

In this sense, the growth of creator-owned brands represents a true game changer that is redefining the boundaries of the creator economy; as discussed by Khamis, Ang & Welling (2017), the ability for creators to develop and manage their own personal brands offers them an unprecedented level of control over their business. This model not only reduces dependency on platforms and external collaborations, but also enables creators to build a more resilient and sustainable economic ecosystem (Gandini, 2016).

However, creating and managing a creator-owned brand is not without its challenges. Creators must develop advanced entrepreneurial skills, ranging from financial management to logistics, marketing strategy to intellectual property protection (Arvidsson, 2006).

Marketing and management agencies must therefore rethink their role, offering strategic support and specialized consulting that go beyond traditional promotional services (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

4.4 The Complex Relationship with Agencies

The interviews highlighted a complex relationship between creators and talent management and marketing agencies. On one hand, agencies provide valuable support in managing brand collaborations, negotiating contracts, and handling administrative aspects. On the other hand, however, many creators feel that agencies can become an

obstacle to their independence and a significant additional cost. One interviewee explained: "The agencies helped me a lot in the beginning, but now that I have more experience, I'm thinking of going solo. The percentages they take are high, and in the end, I'm the one doing the creative work" (Creator 2). This sentiment of dissatisfaction was also found among other creators, especially those developing their own brands and who wish to have total control over their operations. Moreover, the increasing professionalization of creators has led some of them to consider the possibility of managing their collaborations internally, reducing their dependency on agencies; from this perspective, agencies seem forced to adapt to a market where creators are increasingly aware of their value and their management capabilities.

This is why marketing agencies and digital platforms face unprecedented challenges in supporting creators in their entrepreneurial evolution: on one hand, agencies must adapt their services to meet the needs of increasingly autonomous and independent creators, offering advanced expertise in areas such as personal branding, intellectual property management, and revenue diversification strategies (Abidin, 2015). On the other hand, platforms must develop tools and features that facilitate multi-channel monetization and efficient business management while ensuring the transparency and security necessary to build a trusting relationship with creators (Duffy, 2017).

Agencies and platforms that succeed in positioning themselves as strategic partners for creators, offering not only technical but also strategic support, will have a significant competitive advantage in an increasingly fragmented and competitive market (Miller & Rose, 1990).

One could conclude that the creator economy is leading to a redefinition of the relationships between brands and creators; it is no longer just about traditional sponsorships, but about true strategic partnerships that allow for co-creation of value (Beverland, 2009).

Brands must therefore adopt a more collaborative and transparent approach, involving creators from the early stages of product development, actively listening to their feedback, and increasingly valuing content quality over simple *influencing*.

5. Marketing and Management Implications

5.1 The Centrality of Authenticity in Marketing Processes

The findings and discussion presented earlier highlight how creators are at the center of an ecosystem where authenticity, entrepreneurship, and revenue diversification have become crucial factors for success. The centrality of authenticity in the creator economy cannot be underestimated; as discussed, creators who manage to maintain an authentic image enjoy a significant competitive advantage, enabling them to sustain or scale their fanbase.

In contrast to traditional marketing tools, numerous studies show that consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising and instead seek more genuine relationships with brands.

For marketing professionals, it is therefore crucial to reorient strategies towards creating content that not only promotes products or services but is also aligned with the values and personality of the involved creators.

Brands must collaborate with creators in ways that respect and enhance their authenticity, avoiding messages that may appear insincere or overly commercial.

A practical example could be the approach adopted by fashion brands collaborating with influencers known for their commitment to sustainability; in these cases, the brand must ensure that the collaboration does not compromise the creator's credibility, for instance, by using eco-friendly materials and transparent production processes.

This consistency between the creator's image and the brand's values is essential to maintain public trust and ensure the campaign's success.

From a managerial perspective, agencies representing creators must deeply understand the importance of authenticity for their clients; this means facilitating collaborations that are not only financially advantageous but also reinforce the creator's image and reputation. This requires a more personalized and strategic approach in selecting commercial partners, focusing on long-term value creation rather than short-term monetization.

5.2 Development of Creator-Owned Brands: a resilient business model

The emerging trend towards creator-owned brands represents one of the most significant implications for management in the creator economy.

As previously discussed, creators who develop their own brands gain greater control over their business, reducing dependence on platforms and external collaborations.

This entrepreneurial model not only improves the economic sustainability of creators but also opens new paths of innovation for the creator economy.

For managers, this means that agencies and platforms must adapt their services to support creators in developing and managing their brands.

Agencies, in turn, can offer specialized consulting in branding, digital marketing, and sales management, helping creators build strong and recognizable brands.

At the same time, digital platforms could develop tools that facilitate the sale of products and services directly through creators' channels, reducing the need for intermediaries.

An example of this type of support could be the creation of an integrated platform that allows creators to manage their e-commerce, marketing, and customer relations in one place (Creator 6; Creator 13).

This approach not only simplifies brand management but also allows creators to focus on content creation, knowing that the commercial aspects of their business are efficiently managed.

From a strategic perspective, brands that collaborate with creator-owned brands must recognize the importance of these partnerships not only as marketing opportunities but also as co-creation collaborations.

Creators bring a unique perspective to the table, combining their audience knowledge with their creativity, which can lead to innovative products and campaigns that resonate deeply with consumers.

Revenue diversification has emerged as a crucial strategy for creators seeking to build a sustainable business.

This involves expanding monetization opportunities beyond traditional collaborations, exploring new avenues such as subscriptions to exclusive content, merchandise sales, online course creation, and more.

For marketing professionals, this means that advertising strategies must evolve to support this diversification.

Campaigns should no longer focus solely on product promotion but should include elements that encourage continuous audience engagement, such as subscriptions or paid content. For example, a brand might collaborate with a creator to develop an exclusive online course that not only promotes the brand's products but also offers added value to the audience, creating a recurring revenue source for the creator.

5.3 New challenges and opportunities for agencies and brands

As creators become more autonomous and entrepreneurial, agencies must rethink their role and adapt the services they offer to meet their clients' new needs (Abidin, 2015). Agencies can differentiate themselves by providing advanced strategic support, such as facilitating personal branding and helping creators navigate complex legal and tax regulations (Duffy, 2017).

Additionally, agencies could position themselves as co-creation partners, working with creators not only in promoting external brands but also in developing new products and services that add value to both the creator and the brand involved (Miller & Rose, 1990).

For brands, there are also implications of this new reconfiguration of the creator economy ecosystem.

Primarily, it is no longer just about sponsoring content but about building strategic and collaborative relationships that lead to co-creation of value (Beverland, 2009).

Companies will need to involve creators from the early stages of product development, listening to their feedback and integrating their ideas into the process (Gandini, 2016). Furthermore, a collaborative and transparent approach will not only strengthen the bond between the brand and consumers but will also create products and services that align more closely with market expectations or, in this case, the expectations of a fanbase (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017).

Figure 2.

Implication	Description	Marketing Implications	Management Implications	Practical Examples	Academic Sources
Authenticity in Marketing Processes	The importance of maintaining authenticity to gain a competitive advantage.	Create content aligned with the values of creators and brands. Avoid insincere messages.	Agencies should facilitate collaborations that strengthen creators' images, focusing on long-term strategies.	Collaborations between fashion brands and influencers committed to sustainability.	Duffy, 2018; Helmond, 2020; Abidin, 2018
Development of Creator-Owned Brands	Entrepreneurial model that reduces dependence on platforms, offering control and economic sustainability.	Strategic collaborations with creators for product development.	Support creators with specialized consulting in branding and digital marketing. Facilitate sales and customer management.	Integrated platforms combining e-commerce and marketing for creators.	Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020; Hund, 2023
Revenue Diversification	Expanding monetization opportunities beyond traditional collaborations.	Develop campaigns that encourage continuous engagement, such as subscriptions and paid content.	Offer services that support the management of new revenue sources. Facilitate co-creation collaborations.	Collaborations for the development of exclusive online courses.	Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017; Mardon, Molesworth & Grigore, 2018
New Challenges and Opportunities for Agencies	The need to reinvent the role of agencies in the creator economy.	Rethink traditional skills, offering advanced support in branding, marketing, and business management.	Agencies should position themselves as co-creation partners, collaborating in the development of new	Development of new legal and tax consulting services for creators.	Carah & Shaul, 2016; Gandini, 2019

			products and services.		
Implications for Brands	The need to move from simple sponsorship to co-creation of value with creators.	Involve creators in the early stages of product development, listen to their feedback, and incorporate their ideas.	Invest in training and development of creators' skills. Offer long-term collaborations.	Involvement of creators in the design and promotion of products.	Jenkins, 2006; Duffy, 2017; Poell & van Dijck, 2015

6. Conclusions

The phenomenon of the creator economy has emerged as one of the most impactful transformations in digital marketing and communication, bringing creators to the forefront as key players in new dynamics of content production, distribution, and consumption.

However, the growing dependence of creators on digital platforms and intermediary agencies invites reflection on their autonomy and ability to maintain control over their personal brand. This study sought to explore how the creation and management of creator-owned brands can serve as a key strategy to mitigate this dependence, providing creators with greater control and economic sustainability.

One of the most significant findings from the qualitative analysis conducted is that creator-owned brands offer an effective means of reducing dependence on the control mechanisms of digital platforms.

This entrepreneurial model allows creators to monetize their audience directly, bypassing the limitations imposed by platforms and intermediary agencies. Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) highlight how the autonomous management of personal brands enables creators to maintain control over their image and develop marketing strategies that authentically reflect their values and personal aesthetics.

This approach not only enhances the perception of authenticity in the eyes of the public but also allows creators to differentiate themselves in a market increasingly described as saturated and inflated.

The interviews further revealed that many creators see the creation of their own brand not only as an alternative source of income but also as a form of empowerment, allowing them to master a world otherwise dominated by external forces. The creators interviewed emphasized that managing an independent brand enables them to build a more resilient business capable of withstanding sudden changes in platform algorithms (Helmond, 2018). However, it also emerged that managing a creator-owned brand

requires advanced entrepreneurial skills, which not all creators possess, making training and strategic support necessary.

A central theme that emerged from the study is the tension between authenticity and commercialization, representing a constant challenge for creators.

As indicated by Duffy (2017), creators operate in a context where authenticity is a fundamental value, but they must also monetize their work to sustain themselves.

This tension was particularly evident in the interviews, where many creators expressed concern about compromising their authenticity by accepting collaborations that do not fully align with their values.

Balancing the need to generate income with maintaining a genuine and credible image in the eyes of the public is therefore crucial for the long-term success of creators.

Autonomous branding strategies emerge as a response to this tension. Creating a personal brand allows creators to maintain control over their narrative and present products and services that authentically reflect their identity.

However, this choice does not exclude collaborations with other brands; rather, it involves finding collaborations that are consistent with the creator's image, avoiding the risk of appearing insincere or overly commercial. Careful selection of collaborations and constant monitoring of public perceptions are thus fundamental elements to avoid the phenomenon of "brand fatigue" (Cocker & Cronin, 2017).

Dependence on digital platforms is another significant concern for creators, clearly emerging from the interviews.

Many creators expressed frustration with the lack of transparency and predictability in platform policies, particularly regarding the algorithms that determine content visibility.

As noted by Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2022), this dependency creates an environment where creators are constantly pressured to produce content that meets the demands of algorithms, often at the expense of their creative autonomy and authenticity.

Revenue diversification emerges as a crucial strategy to mitigate this dependency.

The interviews also revealed that many creators are exploring new monetization opportunities, such as subscriptions to exclusive content, merchandise sales, and online course creation. Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) emphasize how the ability to monetize through multiple channels is a crucial strategy to ensure the long-term economic sustainability of creators, reducing their vulnerability to platform changes.

Another theme that emerged from the study is the complex relationship between creators and talent management and marketing agencies. While agencies provide valuable support in managing brand collaborations, many creators perceive agencies as an obstacle to their independence.

The increasing professionalization of creators has led some of them to consider managing their collaborations internally, reducing their dependence on agencies.

In conclusion, the creation and management of creator-owned brands can be seen as a strategy to ensure the autonomy and economic sustainability of creators, reducing their dependence on digital platforms and intermediary agencies.

However, it is clear that only creators who (with or without the help of intermediaries) can balance authenticity and commercialization will be able to build solid and resilient businesses.

At the same time, agencies and brands that can adapt to these new realities by offering strategic support and actively collaborating with creators will be better positioned.

This evolution requires an approach where authenticity, entrepreneurship, and value co-creation become determinants for creators, agencies, brands, and the entire creator economy ecosystem.

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