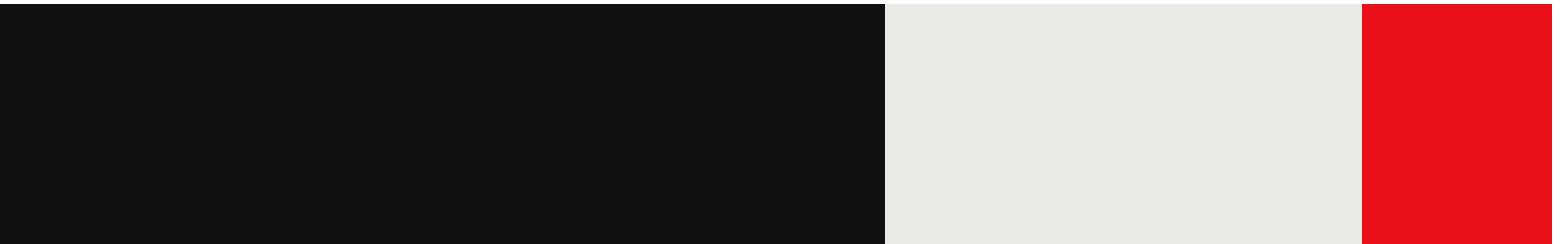


Behind the Numbers Special Edition: Finding Influencers and Measuring Impact in the AI Era

Audio



On today's special edition podcast, we talk about how brands are rising to the challenge of finding the right influencers and creators for campaigns. Listen to the discussion with Senior Analyst, Minda Smiley, as she hosts N'Yaisha Aziz, Global Social Media Lead at Uber, and Rodney Mason, the Head of Marketing and Brand Partnerships at LTK. Listen everywhere and watch on YouTube and Spotify.

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Episode Transcript:

Marcus Johnson (00:00):

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(00:25):

Welcome to a special edition episode of the eMarketer Podcast, Behind the Numbers, made possible by Zeta Global. I'm Marcus. And today's special episode is from the eMarketer Summit Creator Economy Trends 2025, held on February 7th. This episode is a panel discussion about finding influences and measuring impact in the AI era. Senior analyst, Minda Smiley hosts N'Yaisha Aziz, the global social media lead at Uber and Rodney Mason, the head of marketing and brand partnerships at LTK. I'll see you on the other side.

Minda Smiley (01:02):

Hi everyone. Thank you for joining us for finding influencers and measuring impact in the AI era. I'm Minda Smiley and I'm a senior analyst at eMarketer. For the next 30 minutes, we're going to be digging into how brands are rising to the challenge of finding the right influencers and creators for campaigns. Joining me are N'Yaisha Aziz, global social media lead at Uber in New York City and Rodney Mason, head of marketing and brand partnerships at LTK in Dallas. Before we begin, let us know in the chat where you're tuning it from. Also, if you have questions, please feel free to drop them in throughout the session. We may get to a few of them at the end of our conversation, but our emcees, Jeremy and Sarah will return later on and take your questions. So let's get started.

(01:41):

Great to see you N'Yai and Rod, let's go ahead and dive in. There have been some major changes happening within the social landscape this year already. There's a lot of uncertainty around TikTok right now and Meta made waves last month when it ended its fact-checking program. So from your perspectives, if and how are these shifts impacting how brands go about finding and working with creators? Let's start with you, Rod.

Rodney Mason (02:06):

Yeah, so we have a thing at LTK called the LTK Law, and that states that at least every three years there's going to be a dynamic shift in all things creator, mainly in the social sphere. So TikTok disrupted and then are they going to turn it on or off? There's a lot of shifting there like you talked about, but creators are really resilient. They understand that because they've been through so many dynamics and especially at LTK, but I believe across creators... Creators are on at least three platforms and they're using social as just one of their recruitment tools. They live in blogospheres, they've got chat groups. At LTK, they have their own personal stores, so they're always driving their customers to that central place that's typically outside of the social sphere, and that's more of just attracting followers. So I would say whatever happens, creators continue to grow and they're very resilient.

Minda Smiley (02:59):

What about you, N'Yai?

N'Yaisha Aziz (03:00):

Yeah, I mean, on my end I would say I'm pretty old school, not to date myself, but I'm very manual when it comes to my search in terms of the different creators we partner with for both Uber and Uber Eats. So for me, what that looks like essentially is I'm deep diving into the niche communities. I'm poking around the forums, the comment sections, if there's a tag, I'm following that tag to the next tag, just really zeroing in on organic engagement. And then the result for me has always been finding these creators who have truly built these loyal platform agnostic communities. At the end of the day, I want creators on my roster with communities that will follow them wherever they go. So not just someone who's popping maybe on TikTok and less so on Reels, but I want to work with creators who can hold court regardless of these different shifts. And I say in order to do that, brands and marketers kind of have to get their hands dirty and get in the weeds.

Minda Smiley (04:01):

And what you're both talking about I think really speaks to this idea of their professionalization of the creator economy that my colleague Jasmine referenced earlier. And one element of that involves creators breaking out of the confines of social media and not being tied to one specific platform and really trying to diversify their revenue streams. We're seeing them move into CTV, create their own merchandise and newsletters and more. So I'm curious, how is this broader shift in diversification affecting how brands partner with influencers? N'Yai, I would love to know how Uber is navigating this.

N'Yaisha Aziz (04:35):

No, of course. I mean, I actually welcome it. At the end of the day, creators are more than just these online personalities. They're real people and they have passions and businesses, projects, ventures, et cetera. So if you're a creator with different streams of revenue coming in, I see it more so as an opportunity to meet communities where they are. I'm chronically online and I think marketers, we want to have communities that are equally chronically online, but that's just not the reality. So if there are more streams then I see that as more chances for impact.

(05:11):

And I think a good case study of that is our sustainability work with Lauren Bash. She's a climate activist as well as a content creator. And when I found Lauren, I really wanted to work with her more holistically and just avoid the usual one-off social posts. So actually went into a year long partnership with her. So she created Reel, she created TikTok videos, but I also incorporated her in our Go-Get Zero planning. So Go-Get Zero is our sustainability product event. So I worked with Lauren to create this sustainability guide to LA and it lived on Instagram Reels, but we also created another iteration specifically for her blog.

(05:51):

So the people who are deeply invested in Lauren and her environmental work, enough to read the blog and subscribe to the blog could also tap into Uber's more sustainable efforts. And then I also pushed for her to be on the ground for Go-Get Zero last year, which was in London, and I wanted her to be an event correspondent for social. Now the calendars didn't necessarily align, but it just gives a broader scope of the different types of ways I try to

partner with content creators and really tap into their different revenue streams outside of just the one-off posts across social.

Minda Smiley (06:27):

Yeah, exactly. I think that's a really great example of what this trend actually looks like in real life and how it does maybe take marketers out of this laser focused on just these social platforms and sometimes even one platform in particular. And Rod, I know you're coming at it from a little bit more of the social commerce perspective, but I'd love to hear what you're hearing from marketers in terms of this broader trend towards diversification.

Rodney Mason (06:50):

Yeah, we hear from our clients, but we also just conducted a study with Northwestern University. We actually did it in the end of 2024 and we spoke to 185 CMOs and really got deep into what their goals are in life and in business. And the number one goal they had was growing their audience above anything else, above sales or whatever. And yes, they want to drive sales, but they need to grow their audience because what's going on in social, it's hard to keep an audience because it's becoming linear, almost like linear TV. So that in mind, we asked them who's now working with creators? In the old days, creator was kind of with the social team and with PR and affiliate. Now the number one group in all departments working with creator is media, number two is branding.

(07:35):

And they're looking at creator across all forms of communication. And we're seeing that with our clients, whether it's in retail media networks, it's UGC, user-generated content living on the site because that's more believable than reviews. It's in CTV and regular television. You're going to see it during the Super Bowl and all things digital. And the reason is a lot of times everything that we've seen when you test creator creative, typically it's going to beat regular branded creative because it's just more believable. And we do a lot of consumer studies, everybody else has seen this, but consumers trust creators more than ads. So as a marketer, you're going to want the most believable way to serve that up. And now you're really starting to see this explosion. In fact, in creator, when we ask them what's the number one area of investment growth in 2025, there was a tie, it was connected TV and it was creator. Connected TV is dollars flowing out of linear TV, so not a lot of new dollars. It's just kind of a migration, but influencer or creator is pulling from all different departments.

Minda Smiley (08:40):

Yeah, exactly. And I think it really speaks to your earlier point of the landscape is always evolving and changing, and so creators have to be prepared for that, and it makes sense that audience is at the core. So let's pivot to AI. It's obviously been a huge topic over the past few years. We've seen social platforms and agencies roll out lots of AI-powered offerings to help both brands and creators, but I think a lot of marketers are still sort of fuzzy on to what extent they really should be embracing AI when it comes to their work with creators. So N'Yai, I would love to get your perspective on how Uber is approaching AI within this space.

N'Yaisha Aziz (09:17):

Generally, I do think AI can be helpful for marketers, especially when we talk about building better briefs for creators. But I also think it could be a good way to kind of jump-start ideation with creators, especially if the campaign has really targeted messaging. So in Uber's use case, I use AI to help drum up conspiracy theories around football and food for a partnership with a Webcomic series called Flork of Cows. I'm not sure how many people are familiar, but it's super internet-y, super niche and it's based on this sock puppet named Albert. But I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I don't [inaudible 00:10:02] with, but I used AI essentially to help me get into the mindset of one so that I can build out these concepts that I then shared with Brian who owns Flork of Cows. And then he used them to help create these funny comics about why football was created, essentially to get you to order food or eat more food. We're talking about Uber Eats at the end of the day.

(10:25):

So partnered with him and we created these five comics that were super funny around this sock puppet Albert and just ordering food during game time, is it every single time there's a timeout that means you open your phone and order Uber Eats. And these are all concepts that we were able to build together through AI. We had five comics and we hit over 1.3 million impressions, nearly 700,000 total engagements. And ultimately for me, I just thought it was a really great bread crumbing tactic ahead of our Super Bowl rollout, which still leans into this conspiracy theory around football and food.

Minda Smiley (11:03):

Yeah, exactly. And what about you, Rod?

Rodney Mason (11:06):

First of all, I want to say that was really fun. So I love what you guys do. So there's multiple ways to think about this. Everybody kind of thinks about going to ChatGPT and typing something in and getting something creative, or there's other platforms out there. But really the way we think about it is data, data is what drives AI. So the more data you have, the more power you have. You've seen the social platforms kind of use that and turn that into just a scroll bar for people to watch over and over again the thing that they just watched that they know will keep them sticky. But the way we think about it is how do you find the absolute best creator for each message? So we can look at performance and what they've talked about before and then do calculations based on that and identify them and help brands find better creators.

(11:53):

Also, what is the right message? And AI is a really great tool to help a creator. Think about how hard their job is. They've really got to create all this content. They've got to be on multiple platforms, take a single piece of content and at least format it for all the other platforms and then propagate it for them. So it's super, super uber time saving. And then from a creative perspective, they have to be original. But there are tools like Jasper and other tools, we have tools where the creator can go in and write and it learns their voice, so it can help them be a thought starter, can also be an image generator. You can create music and video and all kinds of other things. So super excited about AI. A lot of people ask me, "Hey, isn't AI just going to take over?" There are going to be these avatars that will replace creators. That's happened in China a little bit. It's happened in Brazil a little bit.

(12:47):

But the way we see that, there are certain people that would follow them, but they're not typically the people that follow creators. They're people that will more just looking for advice off the internet and search those kinds of things. Creators have a world view, so they have this perspective and that's how they attract and grow their audiences and their audiences are extremely loyal to them. So that's going to be hard to replace, but AI is going to help them be more efficient and reach more audiences. It's already doing that.

Minda Smiley (13:16):

Okay, that's really interesting, Rod. It almost sounds like you're saying in terms of the virtual influencer versus human influencer thing, it almost sounds like you're saying those are two different things in the eyes of users and there's not really much competition there as perhaps that some people think.

Rodney Mason (13:31):

Correct. Yes.

Minda Smiley (13:31):

Okay, that's really interesting. And N'Yai, I would also love to get your perspective on, you talked about how Uber's using it and how you're working with creators, but I'm curious to know, obviously I think creators have mixed opinions on AI just as anyone working a job does in terms of yes, it can be a really helpful tool, but it can also... I think there's a lot of fears around it as well. And so I'm wondering, in your work with creators, have you heard any of those fears or worries around how they're using it? Or do you think they're really using it as more of a tool in their toolbox?

N'Yaisha Aziz (14:04):

I would like to hope that it's more so a tool in their toolbox, but there are always conversations around authenticity. I think that's just a major concern for creators as well as brands across the board, especially going into these partnerships. But what I think is really important when working with creators from the Uber perspective or the Uber Eats perspective is that we need to take into consideration safety. Safety is critical for us because if an AI generated content, whether it's involving video or an image, if it exaggerates or misrepresents a ride or a delivery, then we're creating distrust. And then that becomes a real safety issue for eaters, riders, drivers, and couriers. So I think all around working with creators, we're very keen on upholding authenticity. But then on my end, it's really my responsibility to really push forward that we're making sure we're instilling safety no matter the content that we create.

Minda Smiley (15:03):

Yeah, makes sense. And so I want to shift gears again and delve into measurement a little bit. According to eMarketer forecasts, we expect marketers in the U.S. to spend nearly 10 billion on sponsored content from creators and influencers this year. That's a 14.2% jump year over

year, and that doesn't even account for boosted content or anything outside of social media. So this is obviously a big space, it's a growing space, which is great for creators and great for marketers who are definitely seeing success in this space, but it's also ramping up this measurement conversation. A lot of marketers just really want to know how effective are these campaigns? How can we really get a little more granular in terms of seeing how these campaigns work? And so I'm curious, N'Yai, this is obviously a broad question, but to start off, how does Uber measure the success of a creator campaign?

N'Yaisha Aziz (15:55):

Yeah, I mean, I think it depends on what that collaboration is. So if I'm working with creators solely for in-feed content, then I prioritize shareability and comments. Shareability in particular just lets me know how sticky and relevant the content is, because at the end of the day, I want as many eyeballs on the content as possible, but I also want my content to land into group chats and private spaces, but obviously for the right reasons. And you want people to engage with that content, whether it's online or in real life through word of mouth. So if we're hitting those marks, then I would say we found success. But I've also led campaigns where social content was integrated into the in-app experience. So through push notifications that directly took you to maybe the Instagram or even the X post or we've used that content within our CRM. And through those avenues, we've been able to drive real bottom line impact, which I think is really cool.

(16:54):

And in those cases, we're considering increases in product adoption. We're thinking about upticks in rides on Uber or orders on Uber Eats. A really good example of that is bundled orders, so ordering from multiple restaurants on Uber Eats and having it delivered by the same courier in one trip. So we were able to work with a content creator to really show use case in a really fun and engaging way. And then that content was used across all of our marketing channels when we had launched the feature. So through that, we were able to increase bundled orders by 36%, and we did that within the first two weeks of launch. So I think it just shows the diversity in which you can work with these different content creators, but also there are different ways to measure it depending on how you plan on using that content.

Minda Smiley (17:42):

Yeah, I agree. And I think it goes back to our earlier point of as we see creator content infiltrate all these other marketing channels, it does make the measurement bit a little bit easier in some ways. And so Rod, what are you hearing from clients and marketers on the topic of measurement and how is LTK helping marketers better understand and measure their creator campaigns?

Rodney Mason (18:01):

Yeah, we're sort of unique because we have on average 40 million consumers that come to LTK. They're attracted by the creators, but then they come back to find other creators. So it's really turned into that social experience. And so we can provide a view on trends immediately. We have all that view, and we can share that with clients. But we have a tool called LTK 360. It gives you a full funnel view of all the awareness, consideration, clicks, everything, sentiment that's going on with your brand. You can see the top performing creators on our leaderboards. So there's just a plethora of tools. And what we try to do is help our clients synthesize that down to, hey, this is how we need to approach this program. But I think they're relying more on creators, not just for awareness or sales, but even monitoring trends or helping set trends or create trends. And the tools are out there now to promote LTK with our platform. We probably have one of the very best views, but there's a lot of great tools out there to provide that full perspective and really get smarter about trends.

Minda Smiley (19:08):

And I'm interested to see what you guys think of this. I forget the exact study, but I remember seeing something recently that it was talking about how the majority of creators say that after a campaign ends, they actually don't really have a debriefing with the brand, and they don't always have that full circle moment where they can talk about what went well, what went wrong, what they would do differently next time. And I thought that was interesting. And I guess my question for both of you is do you think that is an issue in terms of making sure that these partnerships with creators, that you are going back to them after a campaign and figuring out what you could do differently next time or do better next time? N'Yai, I'm curious how Uber navigates this.

N'Yaisha Aziz (19:55):

Yeah, I mean, I think it's a fair question. I would love to hear from other marketers about it as well. I think from an Uber perspective, this collaboration that we have with Lauren Bash, again,

the climate activist, I think lends itself really well to having this debriefing, this back and forth because we had a year long partnership. We didn't just have this one-off Instagram Reel. We had a series of content that we rolled out throughout 2024. I think having that debrief is an excellent way to share our insights with her, but also hear from her and have her tell us what her community felt or how her community felt about that content, how they received the sustainability messaging coming from a more travel focused cars on the road type of brand.

(20:41):

So I definitely welcome it. I think it gets a little bit tricky because a lot of marketers and a lot of brands are still in this one-off kind of mindset with working with creators. I don't see too many long-term partnerships, especially on the social front. And I think if we stay in that mindset, it doesn't really allow for a debrief because everyone just kind of wants to get the measurement and then just run and go about onto the next project. But having those long-term partnerships, I think allow for more insights that you can then incorporate into future ones.

Minda Smiley (21:12):

Yeah, exactly. Rod, what do you think?

Rodney Mason (21:16):

Yeah, so we've rolled out quite a few tools for creators. So we might be different, but they know where they are in the leaderboard, they know how they're performing, how they're ranking. They know market prices. And these are pretty new tools, but we've got all those out there.

(21:32):

I would second the idea of being consistent with your creators. A lot of our large clients, they want to continuously grow the number of creators that work with them, but they continue to work with their top performers so they don't just go for the one-offs. And what happens in an ecosphere like LTK, that enhances organic posts because creators share with creators. We have 350,000 creators so that... And they'll share to help their friends out or people they like. So you get a lot of organic going that way. And our leaderboards will even identify the ones that are organically promoting you, and then brands can come in and start promoting them. We encourage creators to do that and show them, hey, you're coming up on the leaderboard.

A brand could actually be working with you because you've been promoting them organically. So I think you're going to see the market move towards a lot more transparency there. We're already there, we have to be to have the relationship we have with our creators.

Minda Smiley (22:30):

Yeah, really interesting. And N'Yai, my next question goes back to something you were talking about earlier. This idea of shareability, I think is super interesting. And I actually just wrote a report, shameless plug on a topic adjacent to this around social messaging and this idea that we are seeing more social activity is happening in group chats and DMs and metrics like sends and shareability are becoming a lot more important for marketers. And so I'm curious, it sounds like it's definitely something you're already thinking about, but I'm wondering if you can elaborate on that a little bit in terms of how you're thinking through this change strategically?

N'Yaisha Aziz (23:05):

Yeah, of course. At the end of the day, I think people want to detach themselves from social platforms, but realistically, it's so ingrained in our day-to-day that we just can't help it. But for those moments when we are able to unplug, we want the content to travel with that person. So it's not just like I'm scrolling aimlessly on Instagram or I'm scrolling aimlessly on TikTok and I just like this. We want someone to stop and say, "Hey, I know about five people who are really interested in this, or I know about five people who would laugh at this just as much as I would." And then we want to make sure we're producing that content that reminds them of their favorite people, reminds them of different in real life moments that can then drive that connectivity even further.

(23:51):

And then you'll have this shared experience that brings people back to Uber, brings people back to Uber Eats. So that shareability, I would say is the most important metric for me. And I would definitely encourage more marketers to lean in that direction versus the standard likes, or even just the standard video views. You want to see how sticky that content is, and in order to see that, you need to see how far it's traveling.

Minda Smiley (24:17):

And what are your thoughts, Rod?

Rodney Mason (24:19):

Well, we just did a consumer study. 74% of consumers said social isn't social anymore, and social is the number one thing they want from it. And what that means is... What they said is, I want to be able to see and follow the people that I like and know not have stuff fed to me. Number two reason they go to social media is for entertainment. So the scrolling still works, but for that social aspect, 50% of Gen Z and Millennials said they're going other places. We know that. We see that. Our creators have seen that. So we're putting tracking in every place that we can to make sure that programs are being shared. But that's why we encourage brands to focus on creators and not social platforms.

(24:59):

Creators are all over all the social platforms, but they're also on blogs and they're on podcasts. I mean, look at what's happened to podcasts. That's really exploded in valuation and everything else, but there's just a lot of those areas. And even if you look at forums like Reddit, that used to be for technology, engineers and gamers, influencers are in Reddit, LinkedIn, and all these places that you hadn't seen them before because they're really branching out. And so I would say yes, go with the creator that's on all forms of media and be sure that you can track how they're sharing.

Minda Smiley (25:37):

And I'm actually writing a report on Reddit right now, so I feel validated after hearing you talk about Reddit in the mix.

Rodney Mason (25:43):

If you want to know what's going on on Reddit, just Google, because Reddit pops up every single time.

Minda Smiley (25:48):

Yeah. Well, this is great. I have one more question for both of you, and then I think we might have a few minutes for some audience cues coming in. I know we're wrapping up, so I want to hear what your thoughts are for the year ahead. Any hot takes, any big predictions, any big changes you think we're going to see? We'll start with you N'Yai.

N'Yaisha Aziz (26:06):

Yeah, I am very, very keen on seeing how broadcast channels evolve. I know there are brands who use them and they tend to use them to kind of push promos through it or exclusivities of some sort. But I kind of feel like there's this interesting use case, and I'm going to use Gymshark as an example. Gymshark or any the fitness clothing brands, they typically have a whole collective of creators that are called athletes and they create content, different posts about the items that they're wearing and so on and so forth. But these athletes also have broadcast channels. So I'm very keen to understand how you can have these longer term relationships with a whole roster of different creators and have them lean into the broadcast channels, which has typically the most engaged, involved, and committed members of these creator communities. How can you feed in messaging in that way to the most active and see what the impact is there? So I kind of want to see that evolution and see which brands dive in on it and what happens.

Minda Smiley (27:13):

Yeah, I agree. That's definitely something I'm keeping an eye on as well. Rod?

Rodney Mason (27:18):

Yeah, so I think a couple of things. I don't want to say this selfishly, but you guys have said it. This is pretty much the, you're a creator, and I think it's only going to grow more. If you think of sports television, Abercrombie decides because of Taylor Swift, who's sort of a creator, let's do a line of women's NFL wear because everybody on social media is following her and everything going on there. And then they come to us and they're like, "Hey, how could you help us here?" And we're like, "Well, we have NFL wives and girlfriends and let's just have them talk about your products because they really use them." And so you're going to see more of this integration of all the media come together. And I think AI is going to be a big component of that as well, just from the tracking and looking at a campaign holistically. So it's not just a television spot and you've got some radio, you're just going to have full integration. Sometimes creators will be on TV, but they'll also be supporting all those campaigns.

Minda Smiley (28:12):

Yeah. All right, I think we have time for one question. This is a fun one. What is your take on blogs? Are they still relevant? Are people still reading blogs from companies and brands? N'Yai, do you want to jump in on that one?

N'Yaisha Aziz (28:27):

Yeah, I mean, I kind of lucked out with Lauren in that she has a very active blog and community there, so I took full advantage. But I do think everyone seems to be migrating onto this Substack. We're in this Substack era, which kind of feels like a blog, but it's essentially just a whole bunch of different posts. I feel like that is the realm. I don't see too many people really dedicated to blogs in the way that maybe, I don't want to date myself, but a typical Millennial maybe remembers, especially the gossip blogs. But Substack seems to be a pretty popular alternative and that leads itself to more engagement, more interaction, and you can talk to different communities and then it kind of turns into a forum. And I think that extends the shelf life of the blog format.

Minda Smiley (29:16):

Exactly. Rod, any final thoughts?

Rodney Mason (29:18):

Yeah, I think you're going to see a return of blogs more as like a central hub. LTK is a central hub for creators, which is more video and entertainment and all the things that creators do. But creators, they're starting to do more blogging. And I agree with the last statement that content's being spread all over everything, but that's almost like their thought or focus. They can put that out there and then they can divide it. So I think you'll definitely see some more podcasting and you'll kind of see what I call micro-blogging, which is what Twitter used to call it back in the day. You're just going to see chunks of blog all over the place.

Minda Smiley (29:56):

All right, well N'Yai and Rod, thank you again for this great conversation. We really appreciate it.

Marcus Johnson (30:02):

That's all we have time for for today's episode. Thank you so much to Minda, N'Yaisha and Rodney for the conversation. Thanks to the whole editing crew, of course, Victoria, John, Lance, and Danny. Stuart who runs the team and Sophie does our social media. Thanks to everyone for listening in to Behind the Numbers: an eMarketer video podcast made possible by Zeta Global. Tune in Monday, February 24th for the next episode of Behind the Numbers where me, Minda, who you just heard from, and Jasmine will be discussing all things Meta.