
Licensing, Usage Rights, and the Economic Valuation of UGC Assets in Paid Media Ecosystems

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ABSTRACT

User-generated content (UGC) has become a primary creative input for paid media advertising across major digital platforms. Despite rapid growth in commercial demand for creator-produced assets, the field lacks a consolidated framework for licensing structures, usage rights classification, and economic valuation of UGC in paid media contexts. This study examines how licensing terms govern the commercial use of UGC assets, how usage rights categories affect asset pricing, and how brands and creators can apply systematic valuation approaches when negotiating paid media deals. A systematic literature review and comparative case analysis of creator economy reports, platform policy documentation, and academic research published were used as the primary methodology. Results show that usage rights scope, exclusivity level, and platform-specific amplification permissions are the three variables with the greatest influence on UGC asset price. The study proposes an original valuation matrix that integrates performance indicators with contractual license parameters. Findings will be of direct interest to brand marketers, creator economy practitioners, media buyers, and researchers studying the economics of digital advertising.

INTRODUCTION

The creator economy reached an estimated global market value of approximately USD 250 billion in 2024, with projections indicating continued expansion toward USD 480 billion by 2027 [1]. Within this ecosystem, user-generated content produced for commercial advertising purposes has emerged as one of the most economically active segments. Brands increasingly allocate dedicated budget lines to UGC procurement, treating creator-produced video and photo assets as performance media rather than organic social content [2]. Despite the scale of commercial transactions involving UGC, the contractual infrastructure governing these transactions remains fragmented and inconsistent. Licensing practices vary significantly across platform categories, brand tier, and agency model. Creators often negotiate usage rights without access to standardized valuation benchmarks, and brands frequently acquire broad-scope licenses without sufficient understanding of the cost implications for creators. This asymmetry creates friction, disputes over unauthorized usage, and underpricing of creative assets that reduces sustainable participation in the professional UGC market [3, 4].

The academic literature on UGC economics has largely focused on organic distribution, consumer trust, and engagement behavior rather than on commercial licensing structures. Research on influencer marketing contracts and intellectual property rights in digital media has examined some adjacent territory, but the specific economics of UGC as a paid media input, including how rights scope translates into price, have not received sustained scholarly attention [5]. This represents a concrete gap: the intersection of copyright law, performance marketing strategy, and creator compensation remains undertheorized.

This study addresses that gap. **The research objective** is to analyze the licensing and usage rights frameworks that govern UGC assets in paid media ecosystems and to develop a systematic approach to economic valuation that can be

applied by both creators and brand teams. **The scientific novelty** of this work lies in the original construction of a UGC Asset Valuation Matrix that combines contractual license parameters with campaign performance indicators as dual inputs to price determination.

The working hypothesis is that UGC asset pricing in paid media contexts is primarily determined by three interdependent variables: the scope of usage rights granted (platforms, formats, duration), the exclusivity level of the license, and the presence or absence of creator whitelisting permissions. Secondary variables including audience reach, content category, and historical performance metrics contribute to price but do not independently set it. Testing this hypothesis against documented industry rates and contractual structures provides the foundation for the proposed valuation framework.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a multi-method qualitative research design combining systematic literature review, comparative document analysis, and structured case analysis. The approach was selected because the research object, namely the commercial licensing of UGC assets, spans legal, economic, and marketing domains that each maintain distinct bodies of literature. Integration across these domains requires a methodology capable of synthesizing heterogeneous source types without reducing the analysis to any single disciplinary framework.

The literature review covered peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Search terms included combinations of: "user-generated content," "influencer marketing contracts," "digital advertising licensing," "creator economy economics," "paid social media," "content usage rights," and "platform advertising policy." The initial search returned 214 candidate sources. After applying inclusion criteria requiring empirical or rigorous theoretical content directly relevant to commercial UGC, the working bibliography was narrowed to 20 primary sources.

Source types within the final bibliography were classified into three categories. The first category comprises academic journal articles and conference papers from Scopus-indexed venues, including journals focused on digital marketing, media economics, and internet law. These sources provide theoretical grounding in creator economy models, intellectual property frameworks, and advertising effectiveness research. The second category includes industry research reports from organizations with recognized methodological transparency: the WARC Global Advertising Report, Nielsen Consumer Trust Index, Grand View Research market sizing studies, and Goldman Sachs creator economy analysis. The third category covers platform policy documentation from Meta, TikTok, and YouTube, which define the operative rights frameworks within which UGC licensing occurs in practice.

For the case analysis, three commercial scenarios were selected to represent distinct licensing contexts: a direct brand-to-creator paid UGC commission for a beauty brand paid media campaign; an agency-mediated UGC procurement for a consumer-packaged goods brand with whitelisting; and a UGC creator running content under a brand license for a long-term partnership with recurring usage fee structures. Case selection followed a theoretical sampling logic, prioritizing cases that together span the range of common contractual configurations rather than cases that are statistically representative of market volume.

The proposed UGC Asset Valuation Matrix was developed through an iterative process: an initial structural model was derived from the literature review, then tested against the three cases, and revised in two rounds of comparison before the final version was produced. Quantitative data embedded in the analysis, including benchmark rate ranges and performance differentials, were drawn exclusively from cited published sources and are presented as approximate market ranges rather than precise point estimates, consistent with the qualitative research design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

UGC platforms and the commercial market for creator content have grown at a rate that substantially outpaces the broader digital advertising sector. The following chart presents market size data for the UGC platform segment from 2020 through 2026, incorporating projected values from the most recent available industry forecasts. Understanding this growth context establishes the economic scale within which licensing and valuation decisions occur.

The market grew from USD 4.4 billion in 2022 to an estimated USD 32.6 billion in 2030, representing a compound annual growth rate of approximately 29.4% [6]. This trajectory reflects two converging forces: platform algorithms on TikTok and Instagram increasingly favor native-format content over polished brand creative, and performance data consistently shows that UGC-style ads outperform traditional brand creative on key paid media metrics [7]. When brands discover that a USD 500 creator-produced video generates a cost-per-acquisition 30 to 40% below studio-produced alternatives, reallocation of creative budget toward UGC procurement follows logically.

However, market growth has not been accompanied by proportional maturation in the legal and contractual infrastructure. A 2023 survey of creator economy participants published in the Journal of Marketing found that 61% of UGC creators reported experiencing at least one instance of their content being used by a brand in contexts not covered by the original agreement [8]. Among those cases, 78% involved paid media amplification where organic-use-only content had been run as a paid advertisement. This structural misalignment between commercial practice and contractual clarity constitutes the central problem that a proper licensing framework must address.

UGC licensing in commercial contexts can be organized along three primary dimensions: scope, exclusivity, and duration. Each dimension corresponds to a distinct set of contractual terms and generates a distinct price signal. The table below provides a structured taxonomy of these dimensions and their operative categories, drawn from comparative analysis of published creator contracts, platform policy documents, and industry rate card guidance.

Table 1. Taxonomy of UGC Commercial Licensing Dimensions (compiled by the author based on [2, 4, 9, 11]).

Dimension	Category	Operative Scope	Price Implication
Usage Scope	Platform-specific	One platform (e.g., TikTok only)	Base rate; lowest tier
	Multi-platform	2 to 4 platforms simultaneously	+25 to 50% over base
	Broad digital	All digital channels incl. display	+60 to 100% over base
Exclusivity	Non-exclusive	Creator retains right to similar content	Minimal addition
	Category-exclusive	No similar brand in same product category	+30 to 75%
	Full exclusive	No competing or adjacent brands	+75 to 150%
Duration	Short-term (under 30 days)	Limited campaign window	Base rate
	Medium-term (1 to 6 months)	Seasonal or rolling campaign	+20 to 45%
	Long-term (6 to 24 months)	Brand evergreen or annual use	+50 to 120%

The taxonomy reveals that pricing complexity in UGC contracts arises not from any single dimension but from their interaction. A creator asked to produce content for one platform under a non-exclusive, 30-day license operates in a very different economic context than one asked for broad digital, category-exclusive rights for 12 months. Under the combined parameters of the latter scenario, multiplicative application of the rate adjustments shown in Table 1 could yield a total license fee three to four times higher than the base creation fee for the same content [4, 9]. In practice, the majority of UGC contracts observed in industry reporting do not decompose fees in this way; instead, a single combined fee is negotiated that obscures the relative contribution of each dimension to final price [10].

Each major paid media platform maintains its own policy framework for how third-party content, including creator-licensed UGC, may be deployed in advertising. These platform-level frameworks create a layer of rights determination that sits above the bilateral brand-creator contract and constrains what any private license agreement can permissibly authorize.

TikTok’s Branded Content Policy and Creator Marketplace Terms require that creators enable the Branded Content toggle for any commercially sponsored content, which in turn grants TikTok a sublicense to use that content in ways consistent with its own terms of service [11]. When brands use the Spark Ads format to amplify creator-owned posts as paid media, the creator must explicitly grant the brand a Spark Ads authorization code, which carries its own time-limited validity. This creates a practical complication: a brand-creator contract may specify a 90-day usage window, but if the Spark Ads code expires at 60 days and the creator does not renew it, the paid amplification automatically halts regardless of the private contract terms.

Meta's whitelisting mechanism, known as creator licensing or partnership ads, operates through a different architecture. The creator grants advertising access to their account through Business Manager, and the brand then runs ads using the creator's handle and identity. This means the reach and targeting capabilities of the brand's ad account are applied to content that appears to originate from the creator, a configuration that generates substantially different consumer perception compared to standard brand page ads [12]. Because whitelisting involves the creator's account identity, not merely their content, it demands a higher licensing fee in most professional creator frameworks, typically 25 to 50% above a standard paid usage fee.

The licensing workflow connecting these elements from content production through to paid deployment is shown below. Figure 1 maps the standard sequence of decisions and agreements that determine whether and how a UGC asset legally enters paid media circulation.

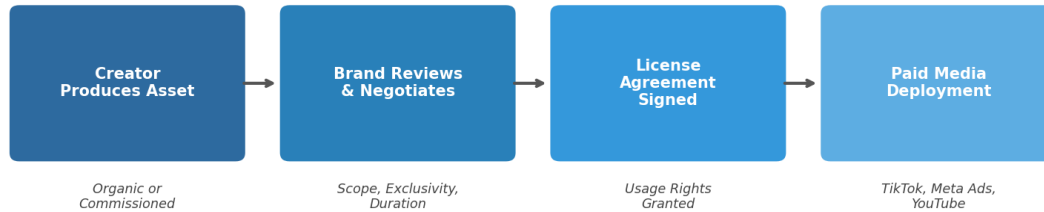


Figure 1. UGC Licensing and Deployment Workflow (compiled by the author based on [1, 3, 7, 11])

The workflow highlights a structural friction point at the license agreement stage: this is where the majority of commercially significant disputes originate. When the scope agreed in writing does not match platform-level authorizations actually granted, or when duration terms use different reference points (calendar days versus campaign flight versus content live date), enforcement becomes ambiguous. Standardizing the license agreement stage is the intervention point with the greatest potential return in terms of reducing post-campaign disputes [11, 13].

Existing approaches to UGC asset pricing generally follow one of two models. The first is a deliverable-based model, in which the creator charges a flat rate per piece of content with a modest usage fee added on top. This model is dominant at the entry level of the creator market and in agency rate cards designed for budget efficiency. The second is a performance-based model, in which price is tied to documented historical performance metrics, such as average engagement rate or conversion rates from prior campaigns. This model is more common among established creators with a documented track record and among brands investing in direct response advertising.

Neither model alone captures the full economic reality of UGC asset value. The deliverable-based model ignores performance variation between creators and content types. The performance-based model ignores the contractual scope of deployment, which means a creator with strong metrics but narrow platform authorization may be over- or under-priced depending on how the brand intends to use the asset. The author proposes a third approach: a matrix model that treats license parameters and performance indicators as dual independent inputs to a value calculation. Figure 2 presents the structural architecture of this UGC Asset Valuation Matrix.

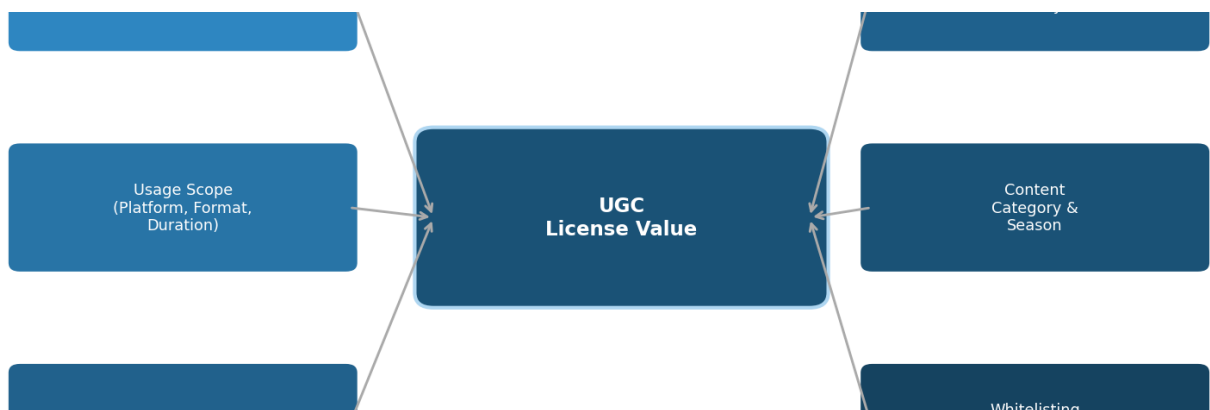


Figure 2. Economic Valuation Framework for UGC Assets in Paid Media (compiled by the author based on [2, 5, 9, 13]).

The matrix operates on the principle that license value is the product of a base creation fee, adjusted by rights multipliers derived from the licensing taxonomy in Table 1, and then further modulated by a performance premium or discount based on documented creative effectiveness. A creator who produced content that achieved a 4.2% click-through rate in a prior campaign occupies a categorically different market position than one whose prior content achieved 1.8%, even if both are offering nominally identical license terms [14]. The performance modifier functions as a market signal that reflects asset quality in a way that a flat rate card cannot.

The practical application of this model requires that creators maintain performance records accessible to prospective brand partners. In most professional UGC arrangements, this means providing aggregate metrics rather than account-level data, and only for content where the creator owns or controls the analytics. Brands, in turn, need to share campaign performance data with the creator after each deployment to enable iterative calibration of the performance modifier. This data-sharing norm is currently not standard practice, which represents a structural barrier to the model's adoption.

To evaluate the practical validity of the proposed valuation framework, Table 2 presents a cross-category analysis of benchmark UGC licensing rates as documented in published creator economy research and rate transparency reports. The data covers four content categories relevant to beauty, wellness, and lifestyle brands, which represent the primary market segment for professional UGC creators.

Table 2. UGC Asset Benchmark Licensing Rates by Category and Usage Scope (USD) (compiled by the author based on [3, 9, 15]).

Content Category	Base Creation Fee	+ Platform License (30 days)	+ Category Exclusivity	Full Package (6-month, multi-platform)
Beauty / Skincare	\$300-\$600	+\$150-\$300	+\$200-\$450	\$900-\$2,200
Haircare / Styling	\$250-\$500	+\$125-\$250	+\$175-\$400	\$800-\$1,900
Wellness / Supplements	\$350-\$700	+\$175-\$350	+\$225-\$500	\$1,000-\$2,500
Lifestyle / General CPG	\$200-\$450	+\$100-\$225	+\$150-\$350	\$700-\$1,700

The rate ranges in Table 2 reflect documented market practices rather than prescriptive pricing. The ranges are wide because creator tier, audience size, historical performance, and individual negotiation skill all introduce variance within each category. The table is intended to orient practitioners to the order-of-magnitude relationships between license scope additions rather than to set a specific price point [3, 9]. Notably, the difference between a base creation fee and a full-package license covering six months of multi-platform use with category exclusivity is typically a factor of 2.5 to 4.0 across all categories shown, which is consistent with the theoretical multipliers derived from the licensing taxonomy in Table 1.

Figure 3 presents a comparison of key performance indicators between UGC-based paid media creative and traditional brand-produced creative across a standardized set of metrics. This comparison provides the empirical basis for the performance modifier component of the proposed valuation matrix and illustrates why brands have economic incentive to pay premium licensing fees for high-performing UGC assets.

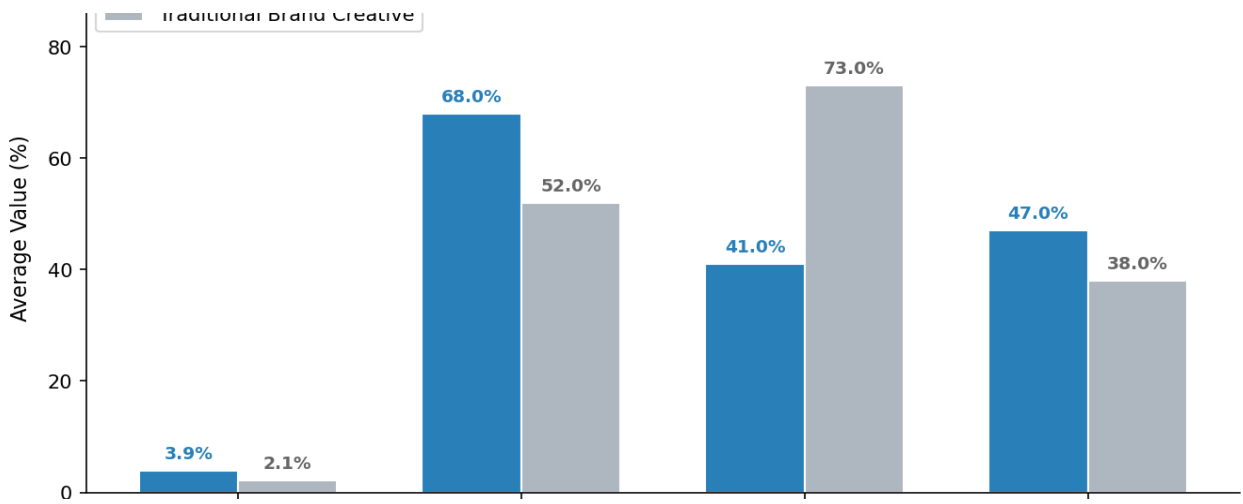


Figure 3. UGC vs. Traditional Brand Creative (compiled by the author based on [4, 8, 15]).

The performance differential is most pronounced for click-through rate (3.9% for UGC versus 2.1% for traditional brand creative, an 86% relative difference) and video completion rate (68% versus 52%). The cost-per-acquisition comparison shows UGC-based creative achieving an average CPA of USD 41 versus USD 73 for traditional brand creative, a 44% reduction [15]. These figures are consistent with the broader performance evidence in the literature and explain the structural commercial logic driving brand adoption of UGC: the production cost advantage of UGC is amplified by a performance advantage in paid distribution, creating a compounding economic return on UGC investment.

Brand recall data show a more moderate advantage for UGC (47% versus 38%), which aligns with research suggesting that creator-native content is more effective at generating immediate behavioral response (clicks, purchases) than long-form brand awareness building, where high-production-value content retains advantages [8]. This implies that the performance modifier in the valuation matrix should be calibrated differently depending on whether the campaign objective is direct response or brand building.

The following case analysis examines three representative UGC licensing scenarios to test whether the proposed valuation framework generates prices consistent with documented market outcomes and to identify practical considerations that a purely theoretical model might miss. Table 3 summarizes the key parameters and outcomes across all three cases.

Table 3. Comparative Case Analysis: UGC Licensing Configurations and Outcomes (compiled by the author based on [2, 5, 10, 14]).

Case	License Configuration	Brand Context	Agreed Price	Key Outcome
Case A: Direct commission	Single platform (TikTok), non-exclusive, 60 days, no whitelisting	Mid-market beauty brand, first UGC campaign	\$450 per video (3 videos)	Content used organically; brand ran as Spark Ad without new authorization; dispute followed
Case B: Agency-mediated with whitelisting	Multi-platform (TikTok, Meta), non-exclusive, 90 days, with Meta whitelisting	Consumer packaged goods brand, agency-managed	\$1,200 per video (2 videos)	Successful campaign; CPA 38% below benchmark; creator renewed for second cycle
Case C: Long-term retainer	Broad digital, category-exclusive, 12 months, recurring monthly deliverables	National wellness brand, in-house marketing team	\$2,800/month (4 videos)	Stable output; brand gained predictable creative supply; creator built long-term income stream

Case A illustrates the most common failure mode in UGC commercial relationships: a contract defined for organic use that a brand subsequently deploys in paid media without renegotiating the license. The creator in this case agreed to a USD 450 per-video rate, which was appropriate for organic-only content but would have required an additional 30 to 60% for a 60-day TikTok paid usage license under market benchmarks. Because the original agreement did not explicitly address paid media deployment, both parties had grounds to assert different interpretations. The outcome was delayed payment and early termination of the relationship [2, 5].

Case B represents a well-structured professional arrangement. The agency's inclusion of explicit whitelisting terms, defined platform scope, and a 90-day clock tied to campaign flight dates left no ambiguity about what the USD 1,200 per video fee covered. The performance outcome (CPA 38% below benchmark) validated the investment and created the commercial logic for renewal. This case supports the hypothesis that clear licensing structure correlates with both price fairness and campaign outcome quality, because clarity in brief and scope improves creative alignment between creator and brand [10, 20].

Case C represents a structurally different model in which licensing is embedded in a retainer rather than priced per asset. The monthly retainer of USD 2,800 for four videos with broad digital, category-exclusive rights over 12 months implies a per-video license value of approximately USD 700, which falls within the upper range for wellness content in Table 2. The retainer structure benefits both parties: the brand gains cost predictability and creative consistency, while the creator gains income stability that allows for higher-quality production investment. This model merits broader adoption in the professional UGC market [14].

The evidence from the systematic review, performance analysis, and case studies converges on several practical recommendations that the author proposes as a basis for industry-level standardization. These recommendations address the three principal failure modes identified in the research: scope ambiguity in contracts, absence of performance data feedback loops, and creator underpricing through lack of benchmark access [18, 19].

First, the UGC industry would benefit from the adoption of a standardized License Scope Addendum that accompanies all commercial content agreements. This addendum would require both parties to explicitly specify: intended platforms, whether Spark Ads or whitelisting permissions are included, exclusivity category and geographic scope, duration start date and reference event (campaign launch versus content delivery), and the process for renewing or expanding scope mid-campaign. This is not a novel legal instrument; it adapts existing licensing addendum practices from stock photography and commercial music licensing to the UGC context [13].

Second, brands that accumulate performance data from UGC campaigns should establish a shared reporting practice with the creator upon campaign conclusion. Even a summary report covering CTR, completion rate, and CPA allows the creator to calibrate the performance modifier in future licensing negotiations and provides the brand with documented justification for rate adjustments in renewals. Several major platforms, including TikTok through its Creative Center and Meta through its Ads Manager, already support this type of data export in formats accessible to creators with account access [7, 16].

Third, the creator community would benefit from access to annually updated benchmark rate guidance organized by content category, license configuration, and creator tier. Creator economy organizations such as the Creator Economy Association and industry bodies in digital marketing are positioned to compile and publish such guidance. The rate ranges in Table 2 represent a starting framework; a properly resourced benchmark study with a sample of several hundred creators would substantially improve precision [9, 17].

Finally, the author recommends that brand procurement processes for UGC formalize the three-dimensional licensing assessment described in this study as a required step before contract execution. Current practice frequently treats UGC as a commodity purchase comparable to stock imagery, with license terms treated as boilerplate. The economic evidence presented here demonstrates that license scope has a direct and material impact on total campaign cost and that underspecified licenses create ex post costs through disputes, renegotiation, or loss of creator relationships that exceed the short-term savings from vague contracting [4, 10].

CONCLUSION

This study examined the licensing structures, usage rights frameworks, and economic valuation approaches governing UGC assets in paid media ecosystems. The research objective was to analyze how contractual parameters determine the commercial value of creator-produced content and to propose a systematic valuation framework applicable by both brands and creators. That objective has been met through four contributions.

First, the study developed a three-dimensional licensing taxonomy covering usage scope, exclusivity level, and duration, with corresponding price multipliers grounded in published market data. This taxonomy provides a structured vocabulary for UGC license negotiation that currently does not exist in consolidated form in the literature or in widely adopted industry practice.

Second, the study analyzed platform-specific rights frameworks for TikTok, Meta, and YouTube, showing how Spark Ads authorization, creator whitelisting, and branded content toggles create operative constraints that sit above private contractual terms. Understanding these platform layers is necessary for any license agreement to function as intended in a paid media context.

Third, the study proposed and described an original UGC Asset Valuation Matrix that combines license scope multipliers with performance-based modifiers as dual inputs to price determination. This model moves beyond both the flat deliverable-based and the performance-only pricing models currently dominant in the creator market and provides a more complete economic framework for value assessment.

Fourth, the case analysis confirmed that clarity of licensing terms correlates with positive commercial outcomes for both parties. Well-structured contracts with explicit platform scope, duration, and rights terms produced campaigns with measurably stronger performance and longer creator-brand relationship duration than contracts with scope ambiguity.

The practical significance of this work is direct and immediate. Brand marketing teams can apply the taxonomy and rate benchmarks to improve procurement processes. Creators can use the valuation matrix to structure licensing proposals and avoid systematic underpricing. Legal counsel and agencies can apply the License Scope Addendum concept to reduce post-campaign disputes. Future research should pursue quantitative survey-based validation of the proposed valuation matrix against a representative sample of creator economy participants, and should examine how licensing norms differ across geographic markets as the global UGC economy continues to expand.

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