Nobody Here Was Buying It Anyway

The sacrificial SKU, demographic assignment and the material preconditions of brand deinfluencing

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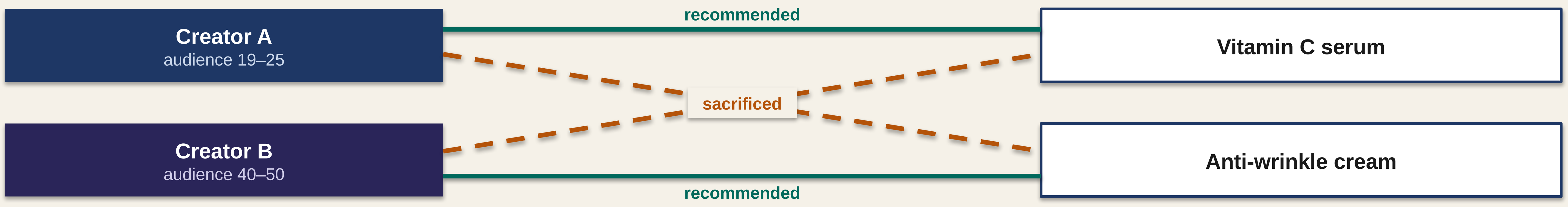
A skincare brand paid one creator to tell 19-to-25-year-olds its anti-wrinkle cream was not worth the money, and paid another to tell 40-to-50-year-olds that it was.

Neither audience saw the other video. Content telling you not to buy something is not always resistance to advertising. Sometimes it is the advertising.

DEMOGRAPHIC ASSIGNMENT · one campaign, two briefs, opposite claims about the same product



Neither audience sees the other video.

The firm gives up only sales it was never going to make.

INTRODUCTION

Brands were paying for deinfluencing before TikTok gave it a name

What has to be true of a firm before it can pay a creator to talk an audience out of a purchase?

Deinfluencing turns an audience away from a purchase, either by advising against it or by staging a comparison that makes the case without stating it. Brands were commissioning the unstated kind before the term appeared on TikTok in January 2023. Where the criticism falls on a competitor, a firm needs only the freedom to make the comparison. Where it falls on the firm's own range, it has preconditions. The two literatures that formed after 2023 read audiences and videos, so neither carries an account from anyone who commissioned it.

METHOD

Three practitioners, chosen for maximum variation in what constrains the claims their content can make

Semi-structured interviews of roughly 60 minutes, held over Microsoft Teams between 12 June and 9 July 2026 under research ethics board approval. Participants received CAD 100 whether or not they completed. Recordings were transcribed on-device and never uploaded. Names are pseudonyms. I coded each transcript by hand and treated the comparison between the three cases as the unit of analysis.

FINDINGS

Turning an audience against the firm's own product needs three things at once

1 Assortment depth

The sacrificial SKU

A product a firm gives up in a creator's hands, by criticism or unfavourable comparison, in order to sell a different product in the same range. A firm with one product cannot run this campaign at all.

"Skincare brands have the depth to put one down and position another." Facundo, agency

2 Audience data

Demographic assignment

Choosing which product a creator criticises according to the audience that creator reaches. The criticism lands on people who were never going to buy it, so the firm gives up sales it was never going to make.

Influencer platforms predict audience demographics for every creator on a roster (Bishop 2021).

3 Permission to name a target

The condition that governs the other two

Seishiro's firm holds range and audience data and can act on neither. Every claim comes from a library a medical regulation team maintains, and the roster is cleared before a brand manager sees it.

Depth and data produce nothing on their own.

DISPLACEMENT

Where permission is withheld, the criticism moves to places the rules do not reach

Manufactured silence

Contamination reports concerned lead in mass gainers. Sponsored content praised the same firm's isolate and grass-fed lines for clean ingredients. Nobody defends the mass gainer.

Affiliate partnership

Regulated firms reach micro-creators through retailers "to keep their hands clean." The creator criticises one line and earns commission on another. Both belong to the firm.

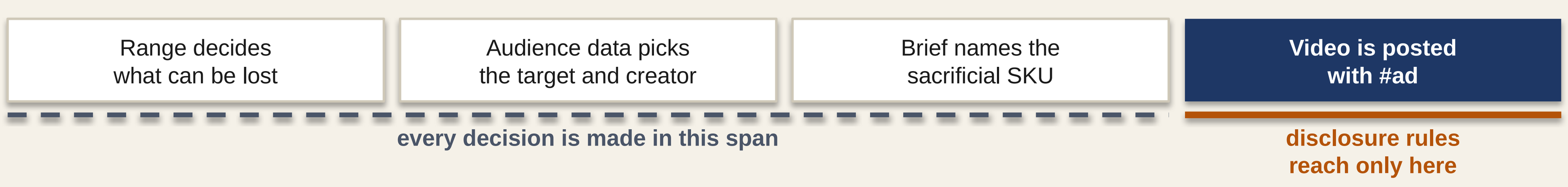
Foreclosure

Erin's app resells surplus restaurant food. Telling viewers to stop paying full price attacks the restaurants that supply it, so the own-range form has no target. Silence and affiliate content leave traces. Foreclosure leaves an absence.

WHAT REGULATION CANNOT SEE

Disclosure rules arrive at the one stage where nothing is decided

A creator pushing a competitor's cans aside makes no verbal claim, so nothing needs substantiating. Where a creator criticises one of a firm's lines while earning commission on another, no provision asks what else the seller of the advertised product sells (§255.5(a)).



CONCLUSION

What a firm is able to say about consumption follows from what it owns

- Whether a firm can buy this content follows from what it holds: a range deep enough to absorb the sacrifice, data precise enough to place it, and clearance to name a target.
- Firms holding the first two and failing the third displace the criticism onto a neighbouring line or onto accounts they do not commission, and the range still collects the sale.
- Firms whose suppliers are the only available target produce nothing.
- Every outcome is fixed before a creator is briefed, beyond what a reading of finished videos can recover.
- Three interviews cannot show how often this occurs. No creator appears in the sample.

TABLE 1 · PARTICIPANTS

Participant, role and sector	What constrains the claims	Position in the commissioning chain
Facundo — Account supervisor, Toronto content agency. Beverages, fashion, automotive, skincare.	No approved-claims library, no cleared roster	Agency. Assembles campaigns and briefs creators.
Seishiro — Marketing manager, supplements and nutraceuticals. Prior pharmaceutical marketing.	Internal medical review of every claim	Brand. Commissions from a pre-cleared roster.
Erin — Manager, B2C marketing (North America), surplus-food marketplace app.	Two-sided marketplace: suppliers are the only in-range target	Brand. Briefs creators directly, no agency.

KEY SOURCES

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Full report