

*Whats  
Next*

# FUTURE OF INFLUENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

Influence may have once been defined by mainstream popularity. Millions of followers. Those days are long gone. This new generation holds a deeper, more nuanced definition of influence. It can't be bought. It must be earned. And in the advent of marketing budgets shifting and being poured into programmatic and Facebook ads, brands have to consider - is true influence being gained amongst these young consumers? Especially in the wake of a global pandemic and civil unrest, the tides are turning for who is influential, and whose trust is being eroded. So, who has influence? And where does influence come from? When one has influence, how are the expectations changing in how that influence should be used?

Whether you're building a brand around a product, a person, or even yourself, this resource is a playbook on what to consider to be influential in today's youth culture.

**THIS IS THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCE.**

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- 1. What Does Influence Mean To Us?**
- 2. What's The New Archetype Of Influence?**
- 3. Which People Influence Youth Culture Most?**
- 4. What Brands Influence Youth Culture Most?**
- 5. What Influences Social Change Most?**

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Complex Collective is Complex Networks' primary research & intelligence platform, forecasting what's next in youth culture & commerce.**

**Throughout April 2021, we conducted a controlled primary survey with a focus group of over 100 people from our community\* to better understand their thoughts and feelings about influence in youth culture. The respondents were a diverse cohort, ages 18 to 34, across the United States.**

**To augment the research, we held in-depth conversations with our community members, as well as experts on youth culture and influence.**

*\* Sourced from Complex Collective's community of over 30,000 members*

1

# WHAT DOES INFLUENCE MEAN TO US?

It's so much more than having a large following and getting people to buy stuff.

# INFLUENCE $\neq$ POPULARITY.

“ I may have been a popular kid in high school, but that doesn't mean I influenced people. I was usually just absorbing the actions of those around me to fit in.

ALEX, 26, CA

# POPULARITY RISKS OVEREXPOSURE.

“ Yeah, you might get a bag. But you're overexposing yourself.



REBECCA WITT,  
TALENT BOOKER @ COMPLEX NETWORKS



# 80%

THINK BEING INFLUENTIAL IS  
DIFFERENT FROM BEING POPULAR.

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**Instead, Influence Is  
A Power Or Ability To  
Affect. To Sway. To  
Change. To Persuade.  
To Inspire.**



**38%**

**DESCRIBED INFLUENCE AS A POWER  
OR ABILITY.**

(This was 2x higher than describing influence as having a large following.)

**To Us, We Associate  
Influence With Expertise.**



**95%**

**THINK PEOPLE NEED TO BE EDUCATED  
ON A TOPIC FOR A LONG TIME IF THEY  
EXPECT TO INFLUENCE OTHERS.**

It's through **deep expertise**, not the biggest following or widest exposure, that the cycle of influence begins.

“

You can be influential while laying low. If you want someone to do something your way, you can influence them without standing out to the masses.

KIM, 24, TX

“

My friend Jon Migdal (@migdallion) gave LeBron James a pair of Mac Attack 1985 sneakers that he wore in the tunnel. It was cool because this dude is pretty much unknown. He's a vintage sneaker collector with a little cult-ish following. It was interesting to see that bubble up to a mainstream level like LeBron James. Now I can guarantee you Nike is going to re-release those shoes and retro them even though they haven't come out in about 35 years. There's a cycle that starts from deep knowledge and then trickles its way up to the mainstream.



KEVIN LUYSTER,  
ASSOCIATE CREATIVE DIRECTOR @ COMPLEX NETWORKS



# INFLUENCE $\neq$ GETTING PEOPLE TO BUY STUFF.

IT'S CHANGING THEIR  
THOUGHTS, ACTIONS  
OR BELIEFS.

65%

**Described influence as changing someone's thoughts, actions or beliefs.**

(This was 20x higher than describing influence as getting someone to buy something.)

IT'S MAKING A  
POSITIVE IMPACT ON  
THE FUTURE.

40%

**Think influence matters because you can make a positive impact on the future.**

(This was 13x higher than describing influence as getting someone to buy something.)

IT'S HAVING CONTROL  
& AUTHORITY.

38%

**Think influence matters because you can have control or authority over others.**

(This was 13x higher than describing influence as getting someone to buy something.)

“

**Influence matters because  
you can make someone  
believe or do something to  
help better the world.**

MARCUS, 18, CO



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## THE TAKEAWAY

When assessing influence, whether it's a partner's or your own, look beyond the follower count and the bottom line. Instead ask:

- X **What is the level of expertise or authority?**
- X **How has it been used to make a measurable impact, especially for good?**

2

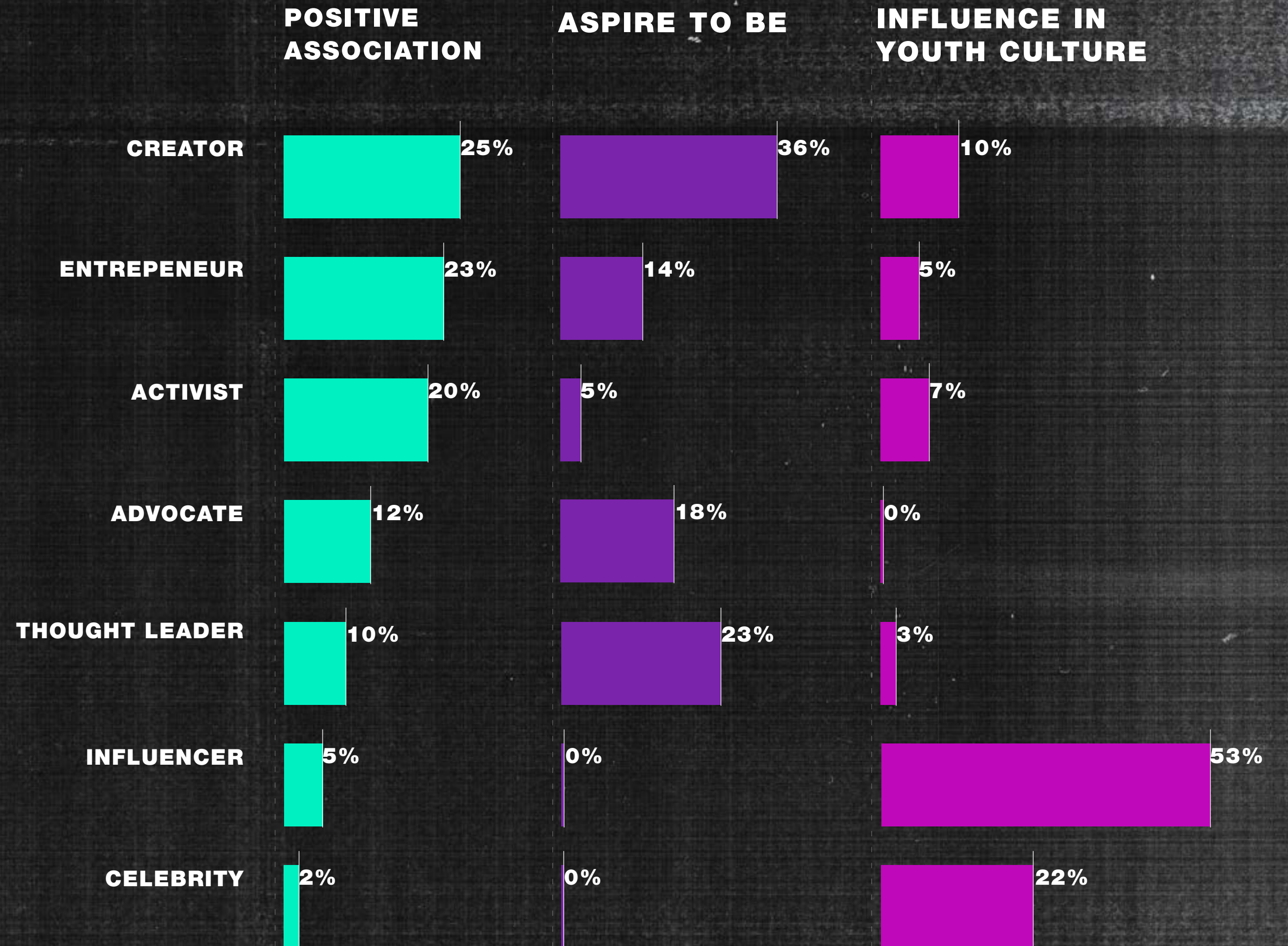
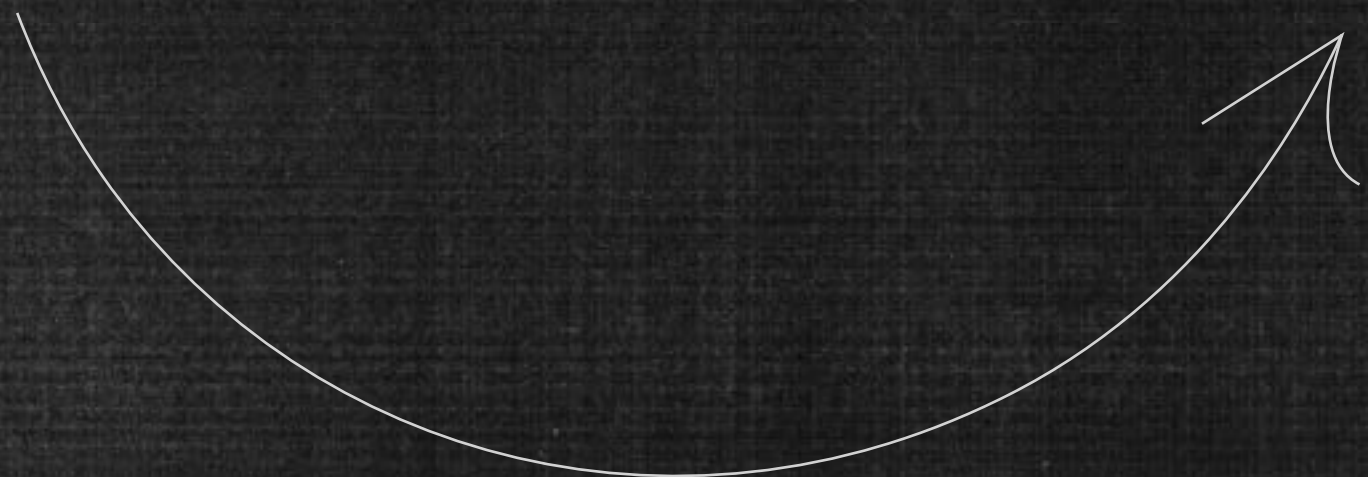
# WHAT'S THE NEW ARCHETYPE OF INFLUENCE?

The Influencer has lost its influence to  
a new wave of Creators, Entrepreneurs  
& Activists.

# INFLUENCERS & CELEBRITIES HAVE INFLUENCE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THEY'RE LIKED.

Influencers & Celebrities rank #1 & #2 as being viewed to have the most influence in youth culture.

However, they rank dead last for who we view positively or aspire to be.



**Influencers & Celebrities  
are increasingly  
perceived as unrelatable  
and inauthentic, and  
have an unenviable  
amount of scrutiny  
placed upon them.**

“

I think influencers spread misinformation more than any creator.

PHILIP, 31, IL

“

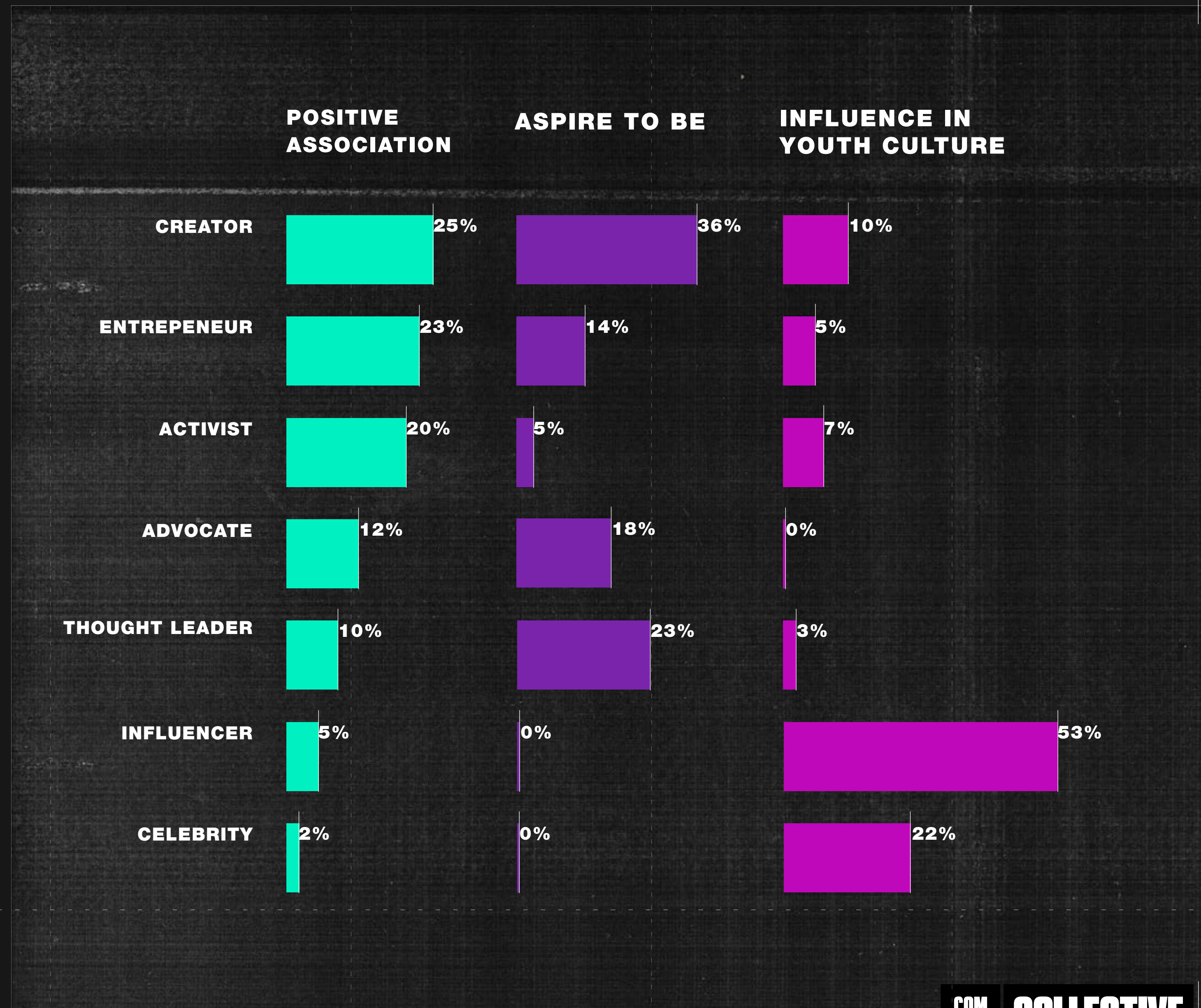
Cancel culture is so real. You are one step away from having your career absolutely killed, so you can't say anything without having it vetted by your 10 publicists.



REBECCA WITT,  
TALENT BOOKER @ COMPLEX NETWORKS

# Creators Hold The Keys.

Creators rank #1 as who we both view positively and aspire to be. They are also perceived to have the most influence in youth culture, outside of Celebrities & Influencers.



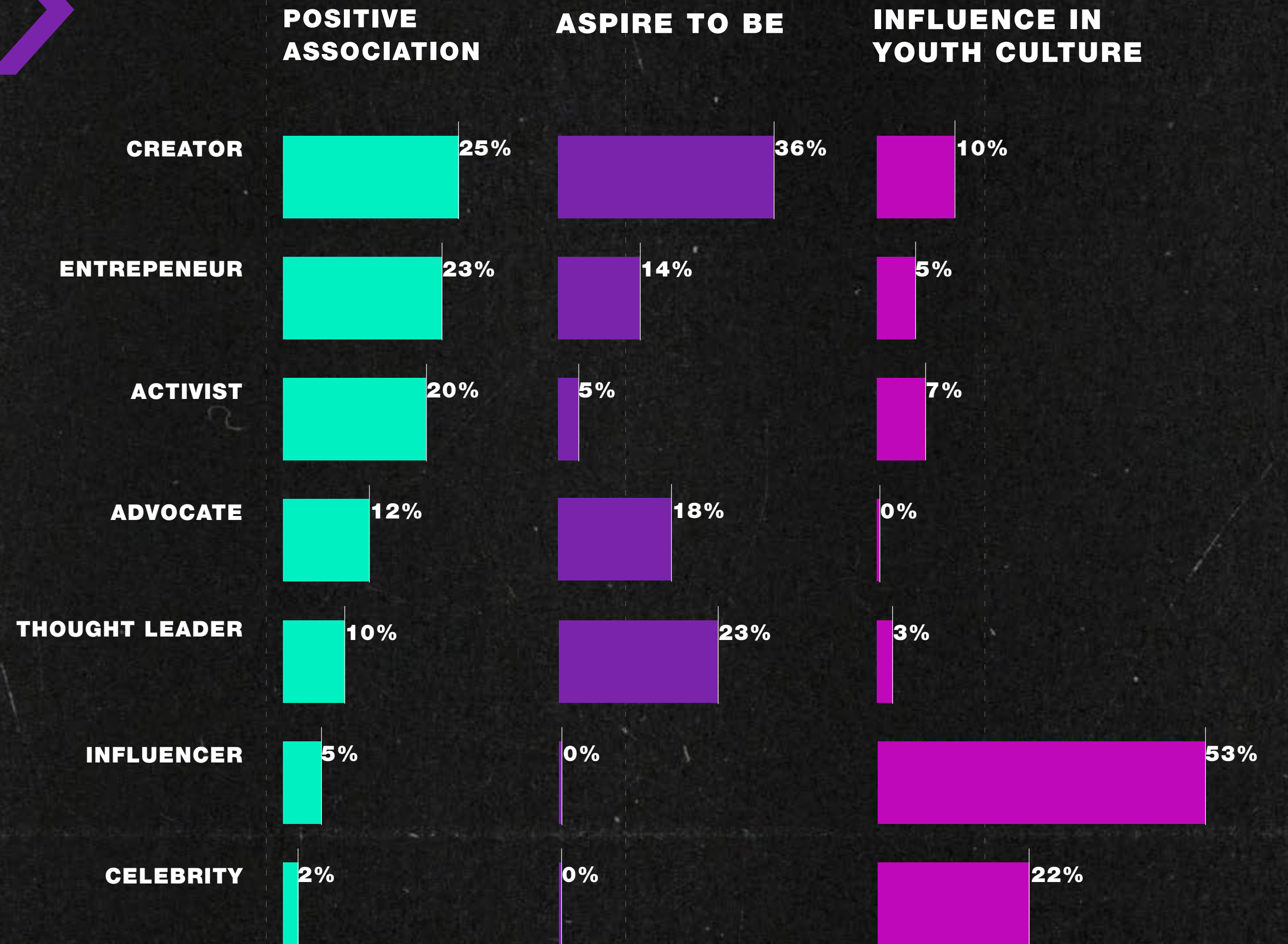
# Entrepreneurs & Activists Are Viewed As Positive & Influential... So Why Don't We Want To Be Them?



It all comes down to the relationship between influence and risk.

We're 4x more likely to view Activists positively than we actually aspire to be them. Instead, we're 4x more likely to want to be Advocates.

Similarly, we're 2x more likely to view Entrepreneurs positively than actually aspire to be them. Instead, we're 2x more likely to want to be Thought Leaders.





**"IT'S EASIER  
TO CO-SIGN  
SOMETHING THAN  
TO START THE  
INITIAL SPARK."**



**KEVIN LUYSER,**

**ASSOCIATE CREATIVE DIRECTOR  
@ COMPLEX NETWORKS**

## THE TAKEAWAY

**Partner and collaborate with the right, new archetypes of influence, especially Creators, that mirror your brand's values**

**Provide education, tools and resources that are unique to your brand, that will help us grow from passive co-signs, to taking risks and doing the hard work of the Entrepreneurs and Activists we respect**

3

# WHICH PEOPLE INFLUENCE YOUTH CULTURE MOST?

It's all about Collaboration, Pushing  
Boundaries & Giving Back.

# Who Do We View As The Most Influential Person In Youth Culture & Why?

Lil Nas X

3%

He Challenges The Status Quo For Black People & The LGBTQI Community, And Dominated The News With His Controversial Nike Satan Shoes.

Asap Rocky

3%

He Consistently Pushes Boundaries And Creates Trends In Both Music & Fashion.

Drake

3%

He Releases Chart-Topping Hits And Gives Back To Communities Consistently.

Jaden Smith

7%

He's Creating Conversation Around The Climate & Water Crisis, And His Fashion Challenges Gender Norms.

Greta Thunberg

7%

She Created A Global Environment Movement That Influenced Millions To Protest & Strike, As Well As World Leaders To Act.

Kim Kardashian

8%

She's The Influencer Of All Influencers, And Mastered Getting A Following To Buy Product.

Kanye West

15%

He Changed The Game In Music, Fashion, Sneakers, Art & Design.

Lebron James

15%

He's Influencing Social Change Through His I Promise School & Black Lives Matter Activism.

Travis Scott

20%

His Drops Sell Out & Skyrocket In Value As Soon As They're Released, Like His Nike SB Dunk & McDonald's Collabs.

\* Answers were sourced from an open-response question.

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# THE ANATOMY OF TRAVIS SCOTT

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE INFLUENTIAL IN YOUTH CULTURE?

\* Answers were sourced from an open-response question.

**QUALITY SKILLS**  
"His influence is on another level because he rarely takes L's."  
Joshua, 19, California

**GIVING BACK**  
"He has small town hero vibes. He has a way of giving back to the younger generation."  
Valeria, 33, Texas

**CONSISTENT OUTPUT**  
"He's got new music often."  
Complex Collective Member



**ASSOCIATIONS WITH PEOPLE & BRANDS**  
"It's that Kardashian-Jenner effect."  
Fallon, 28, Texas

**MULTI-DIMENSIONAL**  
"He has a mad range of influence across all kinds of subjects. He is not limited to just one or two."  
Philip, 31, Illinois

**AUTHENTICITY**  
"He collabs with what he loves. Passion comes through."  
Complex Collective Member

## THE TAKEAWAY

To assess the influence of a potential new partner, look beyond their follower count or bottom line. Instead, measure based on this checklist of indicators:

### ✓ ASSOCIATIONS & COLLABORATIONS

- Collaborations With Influential People & Brands
- Followed & Commented On By Influential Accounts On Social
- Associations With An Influential Significant Other Or Family

### ✓ QUALITY SKILLS

- Awards & Accolades Won
- Records Broken

### ✓ MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY

- Activity In Multiple Areas Of Culture, On Social & In Press

### ✓ GIVING BACK

- Consistent Engagement In Local Community
- Significant Money Or Product Given Back To Community
- Elevated Others Within Community Through Own Success

### ✓ AUTHENTICITY

- Authentic Connection With Audience Via Above Average Engagement Rate On Social

### ✓ CONSISTENT OUTPUT

- Frequent Releases Of Content, Product, Experiences

4

# WHAT BRANDS INFLUENCE YOUTH CULTURE MOST?

It's all about being an open platform for people  
and communities to build their own influence.

# What Do We View As The Most Influential Brand In Youth Culture?

Nearly every brand mentioned was either in Sneakers & Streetwear (85%) or Tech & Social (12%).

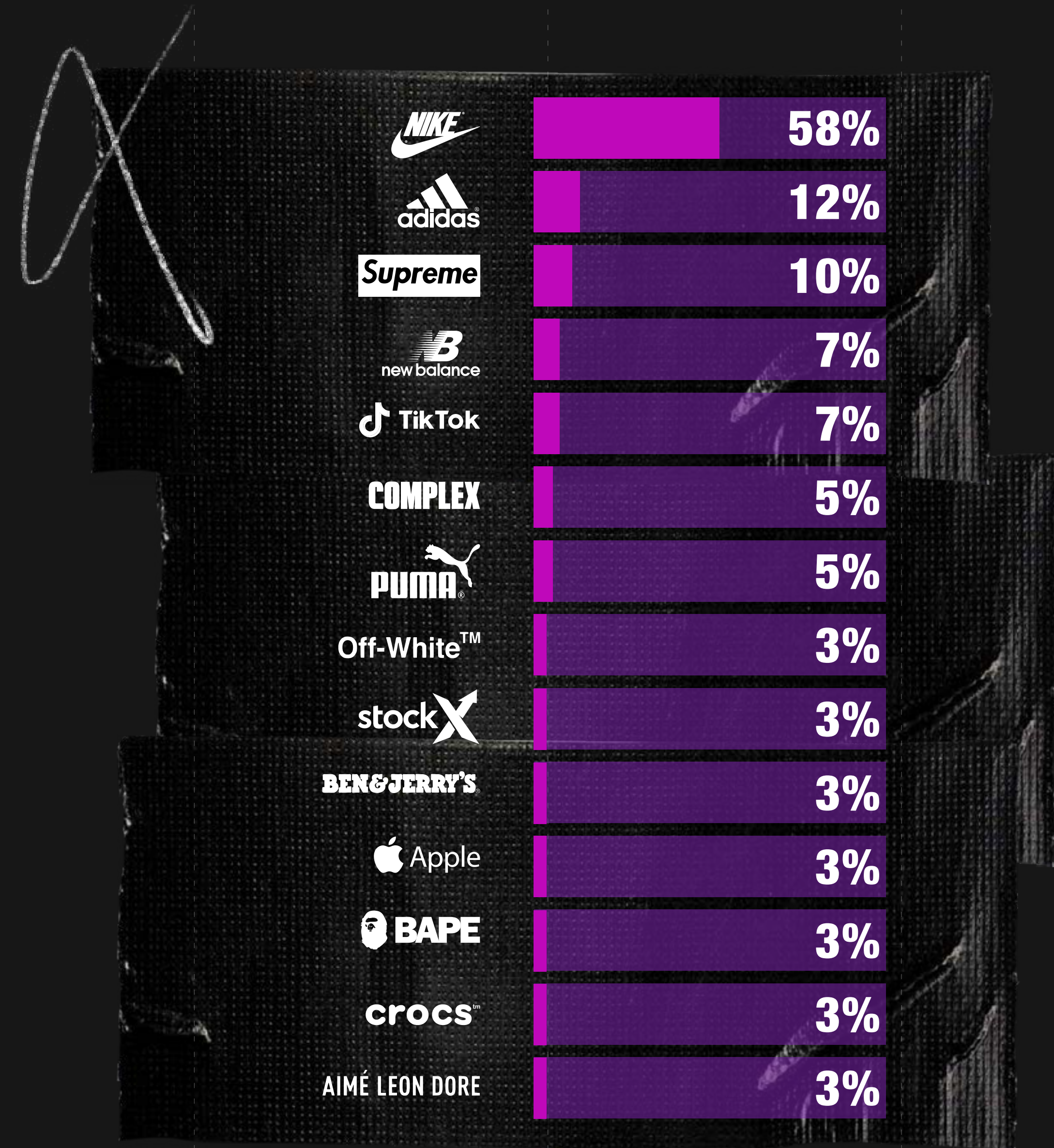
The top reason mentioned as to why these brands are so influential is because they function as an open platform for people and communities to build their own influence, whether it's at a talent-level or a consumer-level. They're a platform for people to create or collaborate. A platform for people's voices, especially marginalized ones, to be heard.

“ The ownership of these brands and products elevates yourself, as well as your perceived self-worth and influence.



AIA ADRIANO,  
DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL  
@ COMPLEX NETWORKS

\* Answers were sourced from an open-response question.





## Being a launch pad for the individual's influence, in turn, makes the brand influential.

Travis Scott's brand collaborations have been nonstop. His Fortnite collab drove [12.3 million concurrent players](#), breaking the record for the biggest live audience in the game's history. His McDonald's collab helped turn the brand's [8.7% sales drop in Q2 to a 4.6% gain in Q3](#). His AB InBev collab drove the [highest first-week rate of sale](#) for a variety pack in the brand's history.

The common theme of his collaborations is that each brand didn't tell him what to make for them (make us something to make us popular). They helped him make something he wanted to make for himself (let us help you make something that builds your influence).

The takeaway isn't that all brands need to collaborate with Travis Scott. It's that brands need to think about how they can turn what makes them unique into an open platform for both talent and consumers alike, at all levels, especially those who are genuinely consumers of the brand, to create the content, products and experiences they want to make.

Working with Travis Scott now seems obvious. But looking back to his early days, he wanted to release his first record Rodeo on a USB drive, bundled with his own action figure, sold in toy aisles. Imagine the influence a brand would have gained if they took a risk on him then, to help further his own journey of building influence.



**Brands may still think they're gatekeepers but to be honest, today's youth are defining their own terms and leading the charge on what's hot, what's not and what's next. The power to define culture now lays in their own hands, so they don't need to rely on brands to dictate what they should like, do, think. In fact, they are making and shaping culture in ways that mean brands need to follow their lead and cater to their needs.**



MEENA CHARAIPOTRA,

SENIOR DIRECTOR, TALENT RELATIONS  
@ COMPLEX NETWORKS

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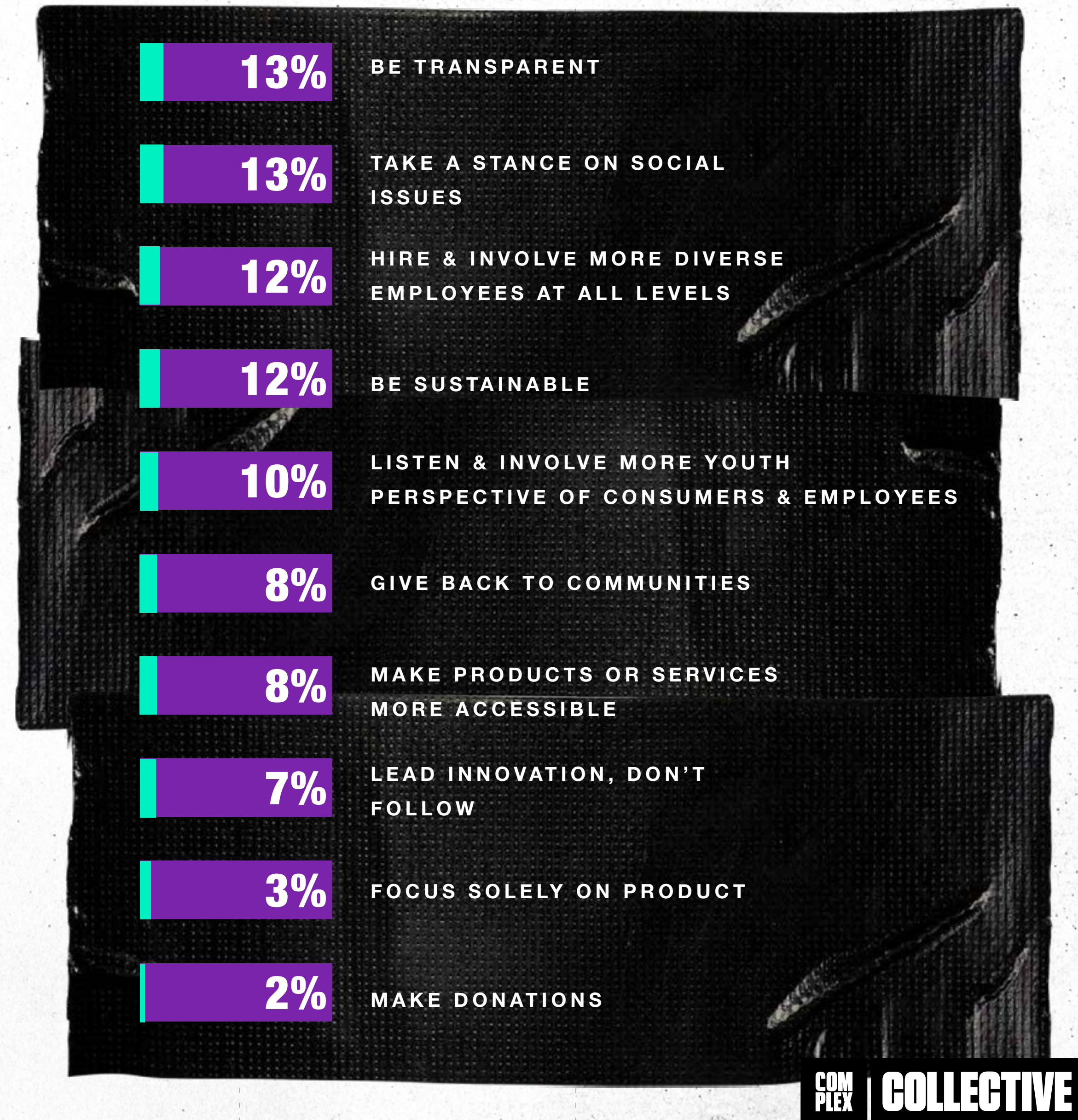
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# What Else Is The Most Important Thing For A Brand To Do To Be Influential In Youth Culture?

There's a growing expectation that brands need to use their influence to make a positive impact on young, diverse communities, and the social issues that affect them.

This is exponentially more important to us than focusing solely on product or throwing money at a problem. Taking a stance and actively working towards specific solutions are key.

*\* Answers were sourced from an open-response question.*



“

**Staying silent  
speaks volumes.**



AIA ADRIANO,  
DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL  
@ COMPLEX NETWORKS

“

**Show that it's  
cool to get  
involved with  
bigger issues.  
Knowledge  
really is power,  
and kids should  
pay attention  
because the  
future is theirs to  
make better.**

VALERIA, 33, TX

# What Is The Biggest Barrier For Brands To Convert Cultural Influence To Purchase Influence?

Do I need this? If I do, can I afford it? If I can, will I even have the chance to get my hands on it?

These are the questions we ask ourselves, that ultimately prevent us from ever having bought something from the brands we love most. In fact, Off-White, Supreme and BAPE were the Top 3 most mentioned brands that we love, but have never bought from, despite also ranking amongst the most influential brands in youth culture.

**7% NEED**

“Ben & Jerry’s does good work by using their platform to advocate for changing systemic racism, but I’m lactose intolerant so I don’t eat ice cream.”

A.D., 26,CT

**17% ACCESS**

“I like KITH’s aesthetic, but it’s impossible to get my hands on their New Balance collabs.”

EVA, 30,CA

**52% PRICE**

“I enjoy the work of Virgil Abloh, but his retail prices are too steep for my pockets”

JOSHUA, 19,CA

\* Answers were sourced from an open-response question.

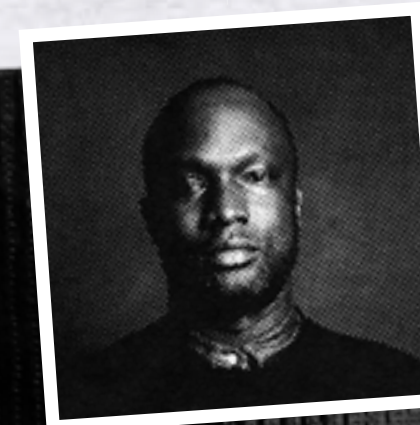
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**Overall, brands can buy impressions, views, click-thrus, followers. But they can't buy influence. Influence must be earned.**

“

**It's all about creating moments that move commerce and leave the community in a better place. Data and measurement are valuable tools, but there is extreme value in authentic connections with the community and understanding the people who support the brands. I've also seen the opposite of measurement-obsessed brands which the kids call "clout chasing." The goal is to find a balance, but maintain authenticity.**



**STANLEY LUMAX,  
MANAGING DIRECTOR @ CLIMATE**

## THE TAKEAWAY

-  **Transform What Makes Your Brand Unique Into An Open Platform That People & Communities Can Use To Gain Their Own Influence, Authority & Expertise**
-  **Make A Positive Impact On Young, Diverse Communities & The Social Issues That Affect Them**
-  **Nail The Right Balance Between Price, Access & Need**

5

# WHAT INFLUENCES SOCIAL CHANGE MOST?

It's all about facilitating the  
conversation.

**IT WAS A BIG YEAR FOR  
INFLUENCING CHANGE ON  
SOCIAL ISSUES. >**

**58%**

**Said their perspective on a social issue  
was changed in the past year or so.**

(THE MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED VIEWS THAT CHANGED  
WERE ON RACISM, POLICING AND VOTING.)

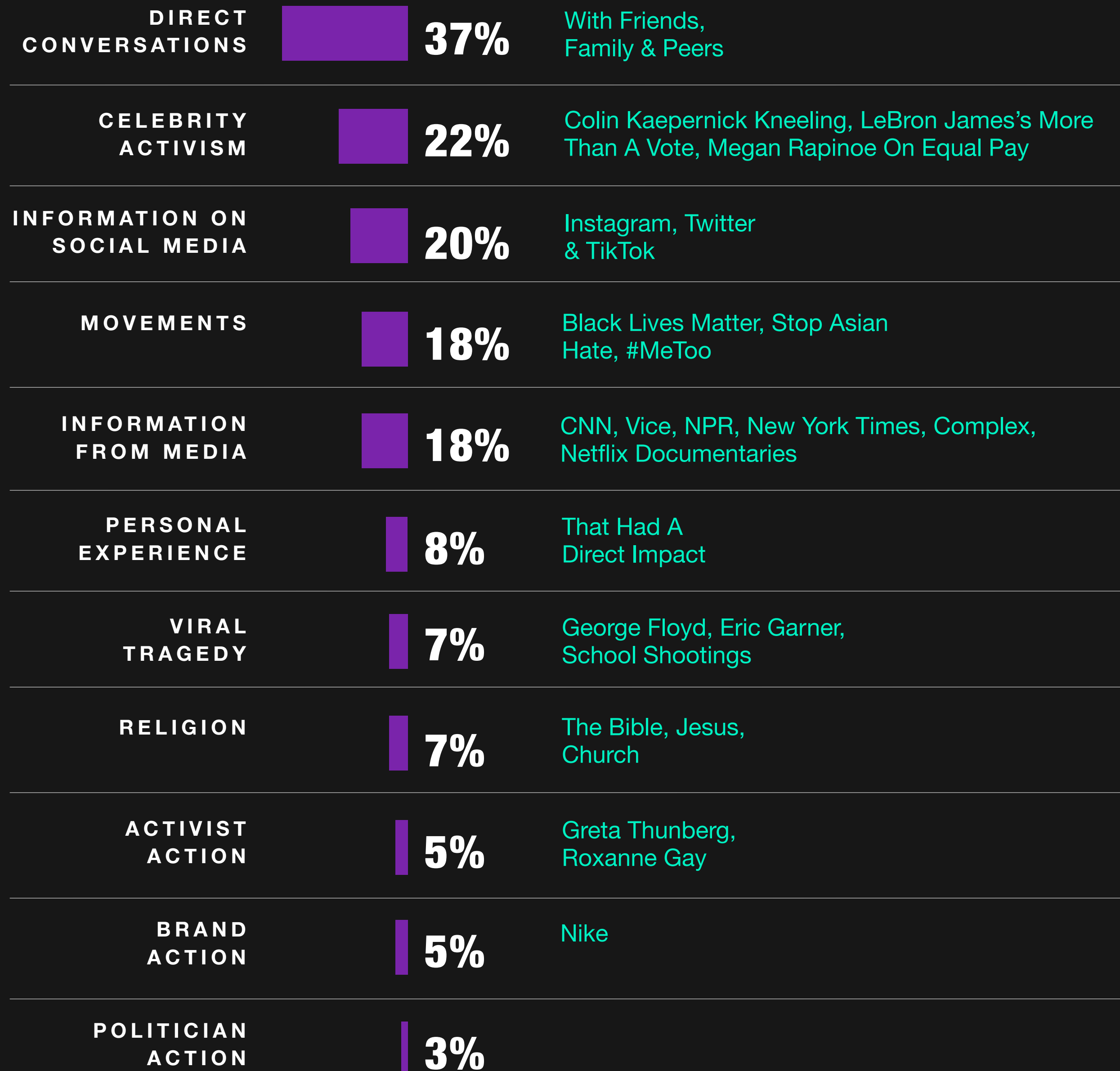


# What Influenced Us To Change Our Views On Social Issues?

Direct conversations with friends, family members and peers have exponentially more influence over our views on social issues than anything else.

Also, when it comes to who we trust about political and social issues, celebrities usually rank dead last. With Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James and Megan Rapinoe, however, they're really not viewed as celebrities in this specific case. Instead, they have transcended that category into an activist category. This goes back to the point about the relationship between influence and risk. In putting their careers, pay and popularity on the line, their influence and trust have increased. And it's not entirely surprising to see Nike as the only brand mentioned here, when the only athletes referenced are Nike athletes, who are taking risks and building influence, and in turn, bringing the brand along with them.

*\* Answers were sourced from an open-response question.*



# THE INFLUENCE OF CONVERSATION

“

People realize mis and disinformation in the media is informing everything they're seeing, and they're exhausted by it. They're searching for real facts and less polarization, so they only trust a small group of people. With influencers and institutions, they can be paid, fake, or bots, so eventually people start looking to their family and friends instead.



CHRISTINA PEÑA-BROWER,  
FOUNDING PARTNER @ A/B PARTNERS

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF CONVERSATIONS THAT INFLUENCE US?

## SMALL, TRUSTED INNER CIRCLE

“

In my experience, these moments have occurred in one-on-one or small group settings in which trust was established.

LEX, 35, CA

## UNDERSTANDING & NON-JUDGMENT

“

I thought cancelling someone was an effective way to teach someone a lesson but I realized it was doing more harm than good.

JOSHUA, 19, CA

## FACTS

“

There needs to be extensive knowledge and the ability to discuss at length. If all you know is a headline you read, then it won't persuade me.

KIM, 24, TX

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## THE TAKEAWAY

**Think beyond one-sided communication and virtue signaling - a social post, a statement, a black square. To be influential in youth culture, take what's unique about your brand and transform it into a platform for two-way conversations - a dialogue that's intimate, trusted, non-judgmental, fact-led about the specific social issues that affect your audience most:**

- ✓ START A NEW ONE
- ✓ AMPLIFY AN EXISTING ONE
- ✓ FACILITATE OR ENCOURAGE HOW TO HAVE ONE

THIS REPORT WAS CREATED BY:

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Our primary research & intelligence platform, forecasting what's next in youth culture & commerce.

We offer a direct line to Complex Networks' cultural expertise, as well as feedback from our young, diverse community of over 30,000 members, to power world-class business solutions and brand initiatives.

**Interested in creating a custom study to better understand influence in youth culture or other topics?**

**Ask Collective.**

[collective@complex.com](mailto:collective@complex.com)

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