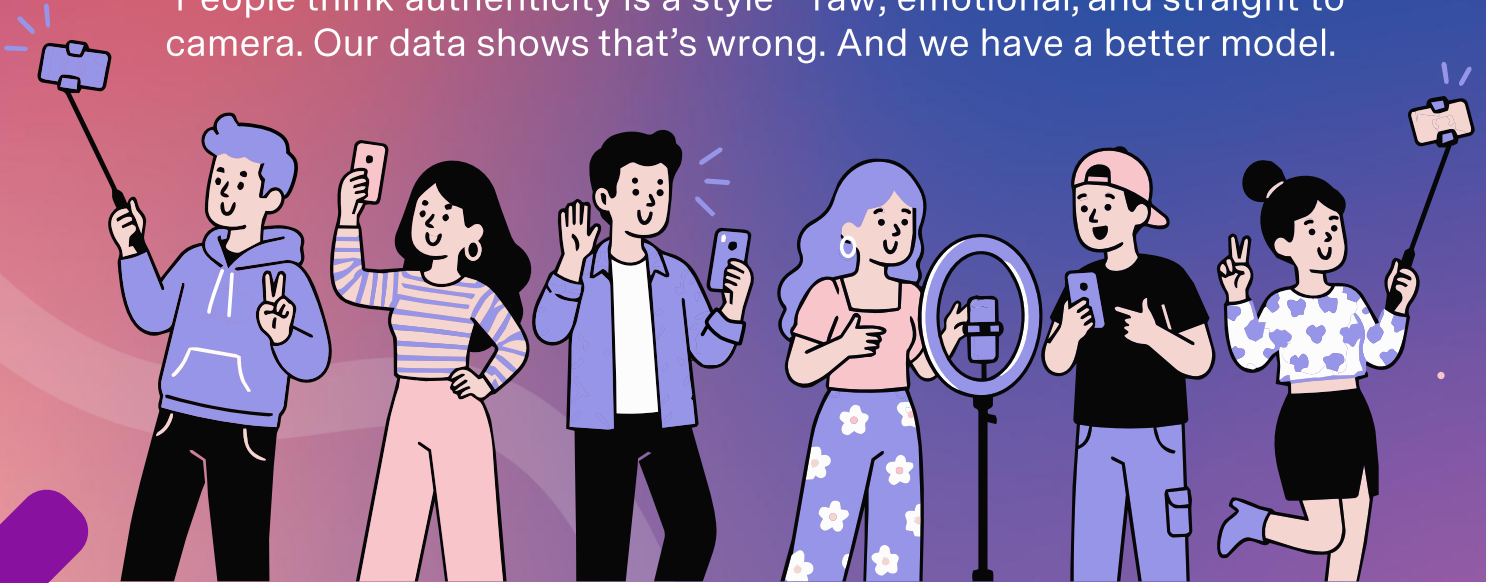


The Science of Authenticity

People think authenticity is a style—raw, emotional, and straight to camera. Our data shows that’s wrong. And we have a better model.



The Creator Economy has taken over American media

According to NRG’s annual Future of Social Video survey, 75% of Americans age 13—54, or roughly 140 million people, watch YouTube. Two-thirds of Americans in that same age range (67%) say they’ve used Instagram or TikTok. For context: only a third of American adults overall (36%) subscribe to traditional cable or satellite TV.¹

The hundreds of millions of Americans on social media have little in common. They come from all generations, regions, racial groups and faiths, consume wildly different genres of content, and find community on a growing set of platforms. **Yet they share one desire: authentic creator content.** In a recent NRG survey of 1,201 social media content consumers, **89% said that it was “extremely” or “very important” that the creator content they watch “feels authentic.”** And, when viewers see a creator as authentic they’re more likely to trust them and watch them more in the future.

The problem: too many in the creator space define authenticity incorrectly or imprecisely. Creators, consumers, brands, and writers often say that authenticity is raw, emotional, unproduced, and straight to camera. They talk about it as an innate quality that someone either has or doesn’t. They think it can only be detected by a gut feeling. And, while they correctly say that authenticity is “being true to yourself,” they struggle to measure who is and isn’t authentic.

That’s why we used statistics, survey research, qualitative methods and more to create a rigorous, empirical framework for authenticity. Our data shows that authenticity is a relationship with an audience built over time—not a static trait that a creator has or doesn’t have. Creators don’t have to be raw, emotional, or unpolished to be authentic. Creators of any style, especially those that offer content grounded in expertise and value for the viewer, can register as authentic. And character traits, like honesty and transparency, matter alongside factors like being “true to yourself.”

The new model for authenticity: REAL

RELATIONAL

Storytelling builds a **relationship between a creator and their audience**. It isn't a static quality someone "has" or doesn't have. It's built on relatability and connection.

R

EARNED

Authenticity can be built and it can be lost. Every video moves the needle, in one direction or the other.

E

ADDS VALUE

Authenticity is real value, honestly offered. **Style doesn't move the needle. Expertise does.**

A

LIMITS

Authenticity means knowing what behaviors are out of bounds. **Performative posting, careless AI usage, or failing to disclose a brand deal can damage it quickly.**

L

THE OLD IDEA

Raw and unproduced

Centered on emotion and expression of it

An instant gut feeling

Fixed — you either have it or you don't

THE NEW FRAMEWORK

Built through character and consistency

Grounded in real value, honestly offered. Authentic creators have principles

Style and aesthetic don't move the needle, but informative, expertise-led content does

First impressions matter, but so does time. It's a living relationship



This report covers the REAL model, one letter at a time



METHODOLOGY

Unless otherwise specified, data in this report comes from two sources—a general population survey and surveys of high-follower count creators from NRG's proprietary Creator Hub.

General population quant survey:

NRG surveyed 1,201 social media users age 13-54 who follow at least one creator in Q1 2026. Data was weighted to accurately reflect the target by age, gender, region and income. Market sizing was used to obtain weights.

Creator data:

NRG conducted a survey of 41 high-follower count creators from our proprietary Creator panel. Data also comes from video interviews with creators conducted throughout 2025 and 2026.

RELATIONAL:

1

A theoretical and data-driven argument that authenticity is, fundamentally, a relationship between a creator and their audience. **Creators of any style or aesthetic can forge this relationship.**

EARNED:

2

Viewers tell us how much the first impression and the long haul matter for creating authenticity.

ADDS VALUE:

3

Viewers also show that **offering real value, especially through informative content and real-life expertise, boosts authenticity.**

LIMITS:

4

Authenticity requires principles. Performative posting and transparency failures, especially around money and AI, can erode authenticity quickly.

Applying the REAL model to everyone:

5

How platforms, established creators, up-and-comers, and brands can apply this framework to their unique challenges.

RELATIONAL: Authenticity is a relationship, not an aesthetic

Most personal qualities—ranging from character traits like honesty to physical ones like height—**are easy to measure because society has agreed on a measuring stick for them.** People are honest if they say things they believe to be true. They're disciplined if they do hard things regularly. If a man says he's 6' 2" on Hinge, a literal measuring stick can tell you he's 5' 8".

Authenticity, on the other hand, is in the eye of the beholder. Like relatability, it's a social quality. Creators become relatable when they produce content and an audience feels they can relate to it. In the same way, **a creator becomes authentic when an audience watches them and judges the content as authentic.**

That's why we use survey data as our measuring stick. Our authenticity surveys (of creators and of creator content consumers) used a variety of techniques to understand what is and isn't authentic. But the two best methods for getting a high-level view were to ask people directly what made a creator authentic and to understand what beliefs were correlated with placing a high value on authenticity.²

Three pillars of authenticity emerged:

Integrity over time



Authentic creators keep a consistent personality and stay honest over time.

Relatability



They care about viewers, face similar struggles and share their interests.

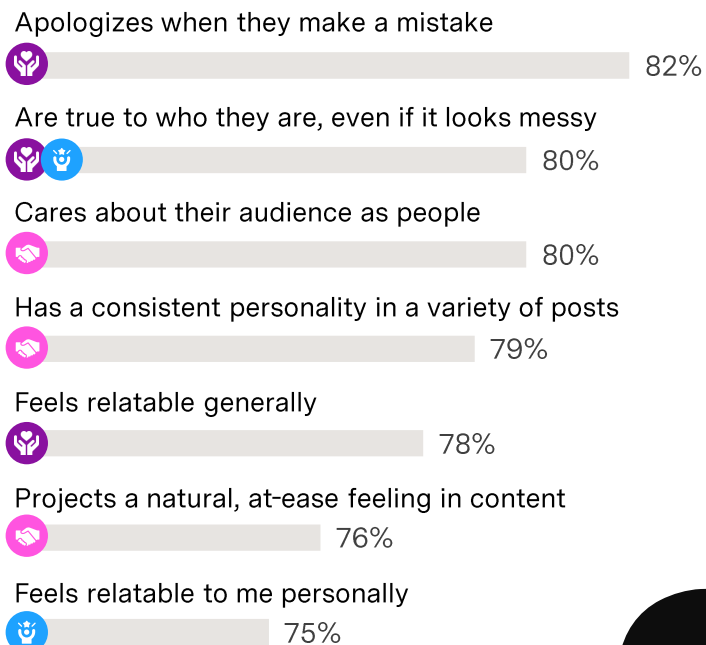
Non-Performative



They don't change their personality or interests to gain followers.

Q: When you're deciding whether a creator feels authentic, how important is each of the following?

Percentage saying "important" or "very important"



NOTABLY MISSING: AESTHETICS

In the question above, we tested the authenticity of 14 qualities and behaviors. Posting polished content and raw content were the 13th and 14th most authentic behaviors in the list. In statistical terms, rawness and polish had nearly zero relative importance for authenticity.



Authenticity isn't confined to a platform, style or subject

The study asked respondents where they saw creators behaving most authentically. No platform dominated: the top three platforms for authenticity were YouTube (38%), TikTok (21%), and Instagram (15%). YouTube was the most authentic, but it wasn't a runaway favorite.

And, on each platform, users defined authenticity differently.



There's no one authentic style: YouTube is polished and informative, TikTok is casual, Instagram is both.

Q: On each platform below, which of the following types of content feel most authentic?	 YouTube	 TikTok	Instagram
Casual, off-the-cuff content	41%	69%	43%
Polished, well-produced content	62%	35%	44%
Personal or vulnerable sharing	49%	47%	43%
Informative or educational content	62%	39%	34%
Humor or entertainment-first content	48%	54%	44%
Highly curated or aesthetic content	46%	36%	38%
Interactive or community-driven content	43%	40%	37%

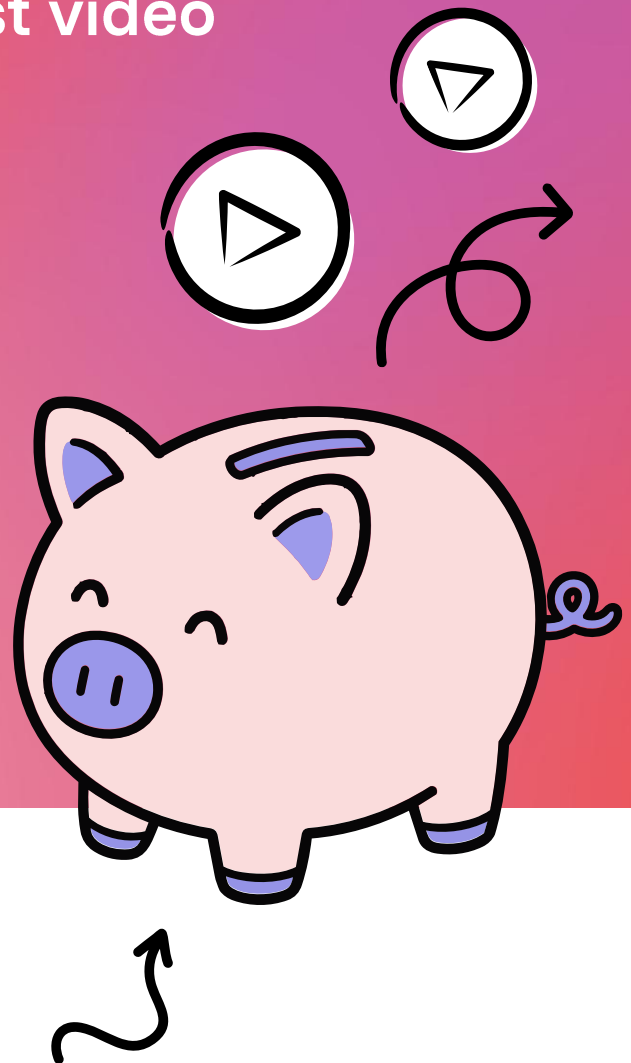
YouTube viewers said informative, polished videos were authentic on that platform. TikTok users saw funny, off-the-cuff videos as authentic there. And, on Instagram, videos of all types were similarly authentic. And on Facebook (not shown in table) the most authentic content is “personal or vulnerable sharing.” No single platform or style jumped off the page as universally authentic or inauthentic.

THE BIG PICTURE:
Viewers are happy to call funny, informative, personal, casual, or buttoned-up content authentic and they encounter authentic content on a variety of platforms. Aesthetics and subject matter don't make a creator or a post authentic. Creators win authenticity by building a relationship, staying honest, and offering genuinely valuable content.

EARNED: building authenticity over time, starting with the first video

One helpful metaphor for how the authenticity relationship develops: a bank account. The first time a viewer sees a creator, they open an account. And, with every subsequent video, they either build up or diminish how authentic they are to that viewer.

Our data shows that there are reliable ways that creators can build up or draw down their authenticity balance. A talented creator can build up authenticity by making a strong first impression, maintaining a consistent personality over time, admitting failure, caring for their fans, staying honest about AI and money, and offering useful information from a personal perspective. Creators can also draw down on their authenticity when they start to seem performative, fail to disclose AI or brand deals, or scale into an empire (more on this later).



**Authenticity lands fast.
First impressions matter.**

65%

Two-thirds of viewers (65%) **decide if a creator feels authentic within a few weeks** of watching (29% can tell almost immediately).

79%

Eight in ten viewers say **first impressions are important** for deciding if a creator feels authentic.

56%

Over half (56%) who say first impressions matter also say **a creator's first video signals what the rest of their content is like.**

The first deposit: a first impression doesn't tell you if a creator "has authenticity" or "doesn't have it." It's the start of an ongoing relationship.

Viewers can learn a lot about a creator from their first video: what the creator's style is, whether they seem relatable, and if they cover a content area the viewer cares about. Some see how important a first impression is and assume that authenticity is a static quality that can be detected by a quick gut reaction. Our data shows that the whole relationship and the *kind* of first impression matter.

ADDS VALUE: how informative, expertise-led content builds authenticity

Percentage rating video "very authentic"

Matt D'Avella

WINNER

33%

"30 Days of Yoga" — male lifestyle influencer who documented his own journey to learn yoga.



CNBC Make It

Polished business explainer, from a distance.

27%



Productivity Explainer

Calm, expertise-forward productivity advice.

25%



Straight to camera monologue

Casual lifestyle vlog, high on personal detail but low on substance.

24%



Vox

News explainer — high on facts, told from a distance.

20%



Straight to camera monologue

Casual, motivational monologue. Low on specific content or personal detail.

19%



Viewers say first impressions matter. So we did an experiment—and found that **personal, informative, expertise-led videos land authentically**. We showed respondents six videos, each of which was likely new to them³ and asked if the video was funny, authentic, entertaining, informative, raw, and more.

The videos included straight-to-camera monologues, informative posts by news organizations, and more. But the **most authentic video, according to viewers, was a post by lifestyle influencer Matt D'Avella about his efforts to learn yoga for 30 days**.

Matt D'Avella's video runs just under a minute and a half. He describes deciding to get into yoga, starting as a beginner, struggling to hold the poses despite being physically fit, and eventually feeling the benefits of yoga (such as improved balance and more generalized calmness). The voiceover is intercut with fun scenes of him struggling at first but steadily improving his skills. **And the value proposition is clear: it gives beginners an approachable view of what it takes to get started and the benefits they might feel after 30 days.**

The least authentic video was a 33-second straight-to-camera short that was high on motivational rhetoric and low on specifics. The video features a narrator who says, essentially, that the viewer's dream life is achievable in the near term if they improve their habits. There are no specific recommendations about how to build habits or concrete examples of people who have followed her advice and achieved self-improvement.

Information alone wasn't enough. Two videos in the dataset—one from Vox and the other from CNBC Make It—were informative. But they lacked a narrator with a clear, known personality. Without a personal hook, these videos fell into the mushy mid-range of authenticity.

When viewers said a video was authentic,
they were most likely to say it was...



And, when a viewer said
that a video was...



... they weren't quite as likely to
rate it as authentic.

Across all six videos, viewers were more likely to rate informative, engaging posts as instantly authentic.

Stylistic qualities, such as rating a video as funny, raw, or emotional, did not correlate strongly with authenticity. But a good story, engaging content, new information and other signs of strong craftsmanship made content feel more authentic.

This experiment isn't perfect. It's impossible to capture the full variety of videos on social media in just six videos. But the data suggests that saying something substantive from a personal, human angle matters. And viewers automatically tag that as authentic.

BOTTOM LINE:

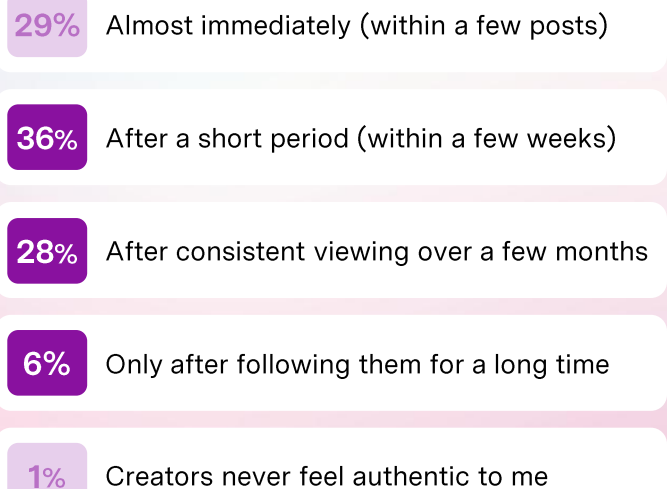
Viewers use first impressions to judge authenticity. In that first moment, they look for something substantive or new in the content, scan for skill or craft, and judge the personality of the creator (i.e., trying too hard, not being the "real them"). Having something meaningful to say, from a personal angle, boosts authenticity substantially.

Compounding interest: expertise builds authenticity over time

A good first impression lays a foundation for authenticity. But authenticity is strengthened over time. Roughly two-thirds of creator content consumers (64%) say they need a few weeks or even a few months of viewing a creator to really judge their authenticity.



Q: How long does it usually take before a
creator starts to feel authentic to you?



Creators need a way to build a steady stream of authentic content. And the data suggests that offering real, substantive expertise is the best way. NRG asked respondents about 20 creators, some well-known and some more niche. **The creators who had some kind of clearly defined knowledge or skill, regardless of audience size, were rated as more authentic by those who know them.**

Many of the most authentic creators crafted their brands around being substantive or informative.

Hank Green, the most authentic creator tested, primarily covers science. Two other creators in the top five, Dr. Inna Kanevsky and Dr. Mike Varshavski, are a psychology professor and a medical doctor, respectively. And others in the top half have built their reputation around expertise, formal or informal. Ali Abdaal is a doctor turned productivity creator. Marques Brownlee is famous for detailed tech reviews. And Noell Jett teaches home DIY.

Creators who are more focused on personality or entertainment fall further down the list. MrBeast, Emma Chamberlain and Ninja are highly popular. But their brands—which revolve around general entertainment, fashion, and gaming respectively—are more about their own personalities than a specific subject area. Hasan Piker and Brett Cooper cover the news. But both have built their following on political affiliation (Cooper is a conservative and Piker is a progressive) rather than expertise.

Creators with expertise are seen as more authentic

Q: How authentic do each of these creators feel to you?

“Very” or “mostly” authentic, among respondents who had heard of creator

■ Expertise-led creators

■ Non-expertise-led creators

	Hank Green (@HankGreen1)	87%
	Tiffany Rothe (@TiffanyRotheWorkouts)	85%
	CaseOh (@caseoh_)	85%
	Dr. Inna Kanevsky (@Dr_Inna)	84%
	Dr. Mike Varshavski (@DoctorMike)	81%
	Marques Brownlee (@mkbhd)	80%
	Ali Abdaal (@aliabdaal)	79%
	Noell Jett (@jettsetfarmhouse)	79%
	Wisdom Kaye (@wisdm)	78%
	Brittany Broski (@brittanybroski)	76%
	Lisa Schwartz (@lisaschwartz)	72%
	Theo Von (@theovon)	71%
	Drew Gooden (@drewisgooden)	71%
	Nabela Noor (@nabela)	71%
	Brett Cooper (@imbrettcooper)	68%
	Smitha Deepak (@SmithaDepak)	67%
	Emma Chamberlain (@emmachamberlain)	65%
	Hasan Piker (@hasandpiker)	58%
	Ninja (@ninja)	54%
	MrBeast (@MrBeast)	51%

The divide between expertise-driven and non-expertise-driven creators doesn't fully explain the difference in authenticity ratings. Scale plays a role too: **creators who had high name recognition or a larger following tended to score lower on authenticity.** As a creator evolves from a "businessman" to a "business, man" audiences judge them by a tougher standard. That said, being informative might mitigate these effects: the most authentic creator in our ranking was Hank Green, who runs a media empire grounded in factual credibility.

And informative isn't a perfect proxy for authenticity. CaseOh, who is a popular gaming creator like Ninja, ranks highly on authenticity. Paste has described Drew Gooden's videos as a "comedic version of investigative journalism" but he's not a top scorer on authenticity.⁴

But creators themselves recognize that substance matters. As one sports creator in our panel said, "I deeply value the ability to devote countless hours to reading articles, finding credible sources out there...that's a huge part of authenticity." A comedian in our panel also said, when making authentic content, "First and foremost, I have to make myself laugh." Others sounded similar notes: having something interesting and original to say and saying it skillfully is part of authenticity.

MEANING :

Creators who have a concrete interest and a knack for teaching have an easier route to building trust with viewers.

Personality-driven creators can be authentic. But it's easier to make a great first impression and build authenticity if you have something substantive to say.

Trust compounds. Once earned, it protects a creator through mistakes and monetization alike, but only while disclosure stays intact.

93%

say long-followed creators have **built up trust over time**

89%

find it easy to **forgive** a long-followed creator after they apologize

80%

trust a long-followed creator's sponsored **recommendations**

80%

are **more tolerant of their branded content** than of normal ads



LIMITS: How transparency failures and performative posting damage authenticity.

Creators who are skilled, substantive, and relatable from first impression through months of videos can achieve authenticity. **But if creators want to maintain authenticity, they need to avoid crossing ethical or behavioral lines that celebrities, politicians, and other traditionally famous people often do.** Our data reveals two patterns that damage authenticity: transparency failures and performative posting.



Hidden intent erodes authenticity.

Q: When you're deciding whether a creator is inauthentic, how important are each of the following?

Percentage saying "important" or "very important"

Changes opinions when money is involved | 75%

Feels performative rather than genuine | 73%

Changes personality to match trends | 72%

Feels overly scripted or rehearsed | 72%

Crafts posts just to gain followers | 70%

Refuses to apologize for a mistake | 70%

Has an inconsistent style, hard to pin down | 68%

Uses AI and doesn't disclose it | 68%

Picks fights / stirs controversy for views | 68%

Fails to disclose brand deals | 66%

Is too polished — life seems too perfect | 65%

Transparency Failures

Changing views when money moves, failing to disclose AI usage, refusing to apologize—all these signal that a creator is acting dishonestly or failing to be a real, fallible human on camera.

Performative Posting

These behaviors get at the motive for creation. People want to watch creators who love what they post about and care about their audience. Creators who do these things are in it for the wrong reasons.

Changing opinions when money is involved is the #1 authenticity killer. But brand deals are fine when they're disclosed

Creators can face legal consequences for failing to disclose brand deals or other forms of sponsorship. Undisclosed deals can also shred a creator's authenticity. Our data shows that **the problem isn't brand deals, it's secretive sponsorship.**

People accept sponsored content when it's helpful, transparent, and from a trusted creator

Q: Sponsored content feels acceptable to me when...

54%

The product is genuinely relevant to me

50%

The creator is transparent about why they partnered with the brand

50%

The creator has provided valuable content for a long time

5%

Sponsored content never feels acceptable to me

Nothing is off limits: most social media viewers think every ad format is fine

Q: How acceptable do sponsored messages feel when they appear in the following formats?

Percentage saying "always acceptable" or "acceptable most of the time"

57%

Product reviews or tutorials that include sponsorship

59%

Affiliate links in descriptions or captions

54%

Dedicated sponsored video or post

61%

Casual mention within a regular post or video

53%

Live or interactive sponsored content



In fact, when a creator discloses a partnership with a brand they use for a sustained period, the partnership makes them **more authentic** to audiences.

High-follower count creators agree with this assessment. According to a survey of 41 high-follower count creators, one of the most effective ways a creator can gain authenticity is by talking about a brand deal they rejected because it was a bad fit.

Viewers say disclosing a partnership or partnering for a long time makes a creator more authentic

Q: How do each of the following affect how authentic a creator feels to you?

Percentage saying makes them feel "much more" or "somewhat more" authentic

Clearly disclosing paid partnerships (e.g., #ad, Paid Partnership) **51%**

Partnering with the same brands over a long period of time **49%**

Promoting products they say they personally use **49%**

Posting sponsored content or ads **33%**

Frequently linking or selling products **29%**

High-follower count creators say talking openly about brand deals increases authenticity

Q: When a creator takes this action, does it make them seem more or less authentic?

Percentage saying "somewhat" or "much" more authentic, Creator Hub

Talks about a brand deal they declined **93%**

Friendly with fans when someone sees them in public in-person **93%**

Only do sponsored posts for products that fit with the creator's existing brand **76%**

Use messy, imperfect backgrounds/settings **71%**

Promoting or featuring lesser-known creators in their videos **68%**

Weaving a sales pitch into an otherwise normal post **17%**

Turning off or deleting comments **2%**

PUT DIFFERENTLY:

Brand partnerships can be harmful to both parties if they're undisclosed or seem motivated only by love of money. Brand deals help a creator become authentic if they reinforce the creator's existing brand.

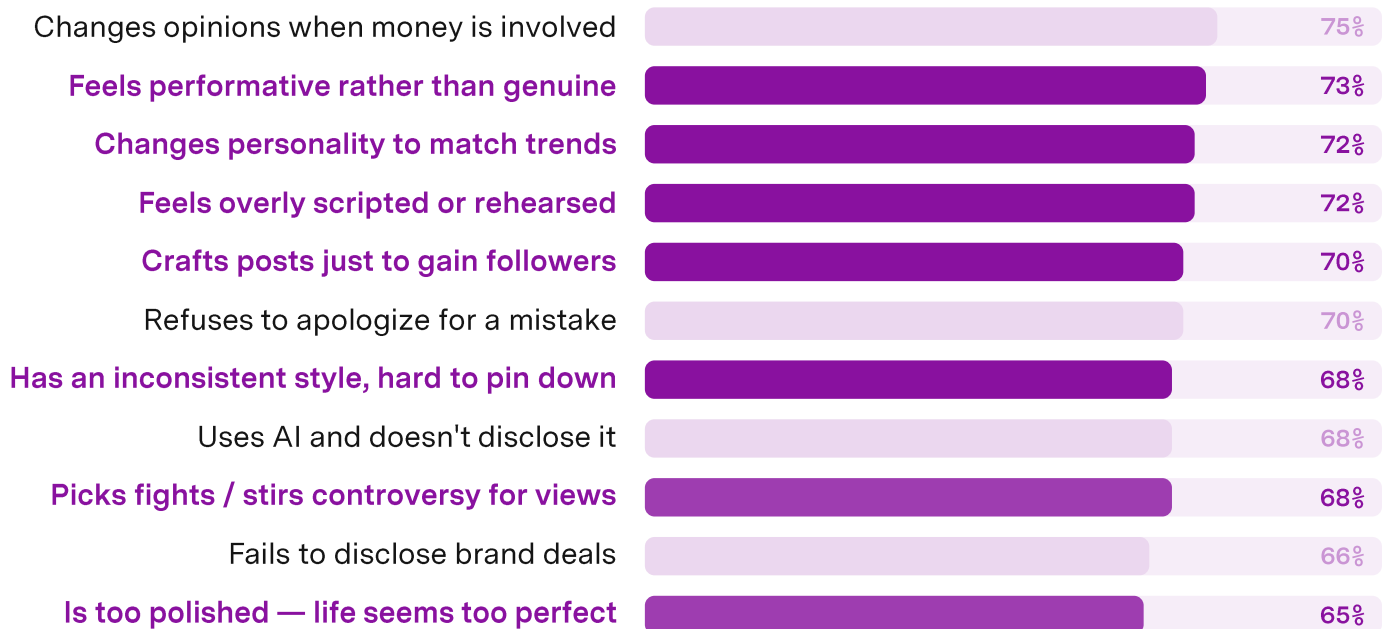
Performative posting: the #2 authenticity killer

Viewers want to feel like they have an authentic, personal relationship with their favorite creator. One of the fastest ways to undermine that relationship is to turn it into a transaction. If a viewer thinks a creator is just posting to get likes or gain followers, they will mark that creator as inauthentic.

Most viewers say performative posting is “important” or “very important” in determining if a creator is inauthentic.

Q: When you're deciding whether a creator is inauthentic, how important are each of the following?

Percentage saying “important” or “very important”



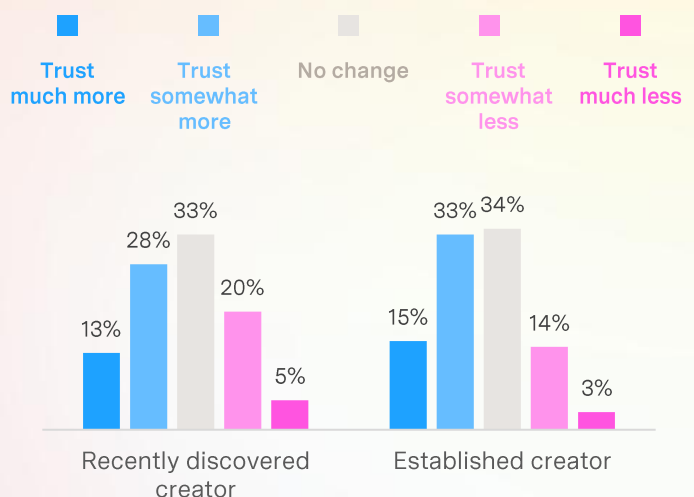
Two antidotes to performative posting:

- 1 Post from real passion:** Viewers want to follow creators who care about a subject and offer real value. Posting from a place of passion for a given topic is the best way to prevent performative posting.
- 2 Freely admit failure.** Viewers understand that creators are human. In fact, that's the core advantage social media creators have over other types of entertainers. Owning up to flaws and admitting failures make a creator *more authentic*.

MEANING :

Human moments, like apologizing, build authenticity. Performative posts break it.

When a creator makes a mistake and admits it, they gain trust with viewers. Q: When a creator makes a mistake and admits it, does that increase or decrease trust in them?⁵



The new drag on authenticity: failing to disclose AI and replacing core creative tasks

Most social media viewers are open to creators using AI. Six in ten respondents (63%) were split between saying that AI usage had a positive, neutral, or conditional impact on how much they trusted the creator. Four in ten (37%) trusted creators less when they used AI.

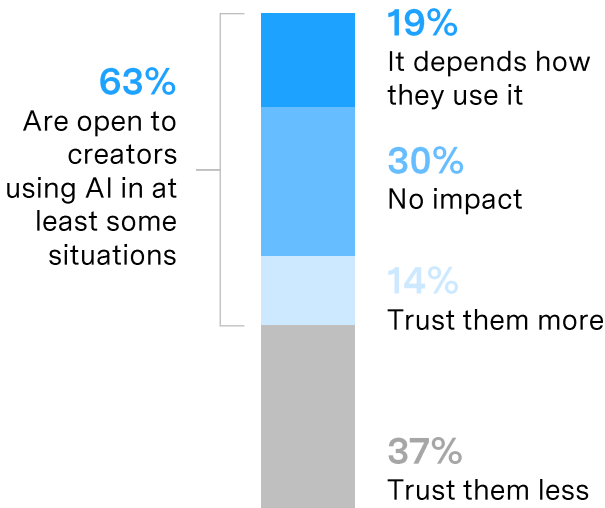
And, when creators do use AI, audiences want the creators to say so clearly in the post description or caption. Watermarking isn't quite as effective, and other forms of explanation or sharing aren't as clear to viewers.

But creators must disclose AI usage and keep control over core creative tasks—or risk diminishing their authenticity.



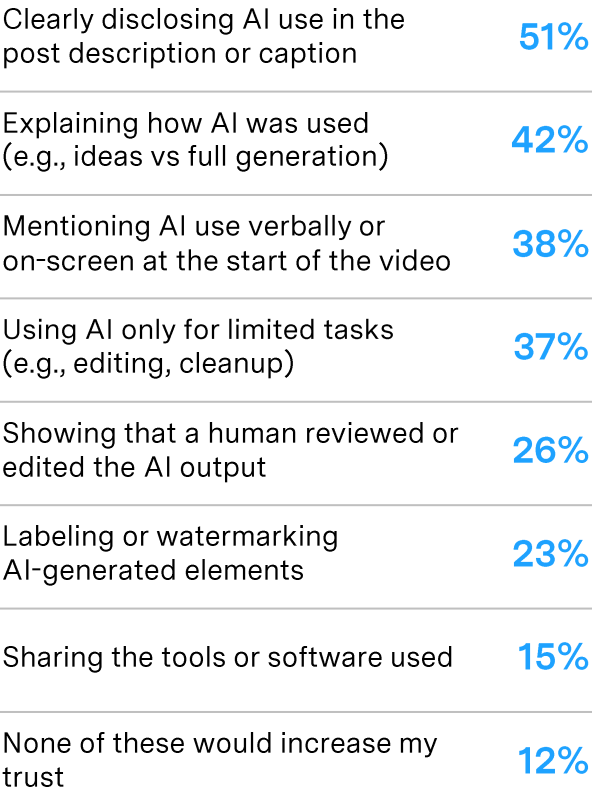
AI is conditional: how a creator uses AI impacts whether it's a danger to trust

Q: When a creator uses AI, do you trust them more or less?



Disclosure, especially in the caption, builds trust

Q: Which of the following would most help you trust creators who use AI in their content?



People are more comfortable when AI partners with creators without fully taking over. Audiences are open to the idea that AI could be a video editing workhorse or a brainstorming partner. Almost half of respondents said that it was “always” acceptable or “acceptable most of the time” for creators to use AI for editing or generating ideas for posts. But, in cases where AI took over core creative tasks like writing or fully generating a post, respondents felt less comfortable.



Viewers are okay with AI helping with creativity. AI is least acceptable when it “fully” takes over a core creative task

Q: How acceptable does it feel when creators use AI in the following ways?

■ Always acceptable ■ Acceptable most of the time ■ Occasionally acceptable ■ Never acceptable

AI **fully** writes scripts with no human edits



Creator posts a **fully** AI-generated image from scratch



AI **fully** generates voice or narration



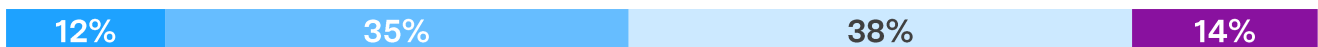
AI **fully** generates video visuals



AI assists with voiceover or narration



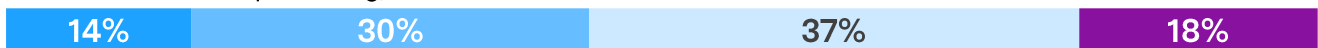
AI generates ideas for posts, and the creator decides what to make



AI generates ideas for posts, and the creator makes them



AI assists with script writing, with human edits



AI helps a creator edit an image before posting



AI assists with video editing



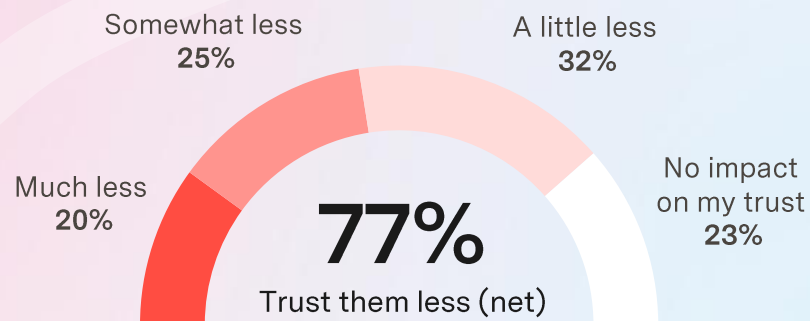
Ask for permission, not forgiveness: the Hank Green case study.

Hank Green, the most authentic creator tested in this survey, illustrated these points in July and August of 2026 (after the surveys in this paper had finished fielding). Green came under fire for relying too heavily on AI in his content. He admitted he overused AI and apologized publicly (a behavior that increases authenticity). He reassured his audience that he didn't use the tools for writing, addressing one of the behaviors that damage authenticity most. And he pledged to reset his process and change his AI habits, even if it meant producing less.⁶

Green nailed some of the core parts of trustworthy AI usage. He apologized (a much better move than trying to deny or let it blow over), and he used the tools primarily as assistants rather than creative replacements. **But Green didn't disclose the AI usage ahead of time, which explains why he had to deal with sustained blowback from fans.**



Q: If a creator used AI, didn't disclose it initially but later did, how would that impact your trust?



REVIEW

LIMITS creators must maintain in the REAL framework

Stay honest about AI and don't outsource creativity to it. Fans come to creators to see their human work. AI as a workhorse, assistant, or thought partner can work. But viewers don't want it to replace the creator.

Doing the right brand deal and disclosing it can increase authenticity. Viewers understand that creators need to make a living. If a creator truly uses and loves a product, they can fold it into their own authenticity. That's the best partnership.

Avoid performative posting. This turns a relationship into a transaction.

THE THROUGHLINE:

Authenticity is a relationship where creators can (and should) show flaws and vulnerabilities. Stay honest about everything, including brand deals and AI. Anything else will seriously damage the relationship with the audience.

What the REAL framework means for brands, platforms and creators

This framework for authenticity—recasting it as a relationship built on substance and trust rather than a skill or an intangible—has different implications for each subgroup within the creator space. It's impossible to cover the ways that every part of the creator economy might use this framework. But we'll move quickly through the lessons for this framework for four core groups: platforms, established creators, emerging creators and brands.



Brands

Brands will be well-served by following a three-step process: understand what audience they're trying to reach, find the creator with authenticity there (and not just a high follower count in general) and then let the creator create.

All three of these steps revolve around the basic principle: find a creator who loves (or would love) your product and work with them to enhance the brand's (and the creator's) authenticity.

Wisdom Kaye and eBay might be the best example of this kind of fit. Kaye is known for creating content around secondhand fashion, styling, high-low looks, and giving clothes a new life. Wisdom Kaye shops at eBay, and that's part of what makes him who he is. Their partnership feels natural, even authentic, to viewers.

Not every brand partnership will be this seamless. And, in some cases, a brand partnership that works on paper might not work in practice. For brands, the goal is to shoot for this kind of relationship: find a creator who has credibility with your audience, partner with them over the long term, and let them create content that feels natural. A great partnership will help the creator and the brand: the creator will build on their persona by using the brand, and the brand will feel closer to the consumer and truly authentic to them.

Platforms

Right now, YouTube leads in authenticity. Four in ten (38%) say YouTube is the most authentic platform, with viewers counting informative, thought-out content as authentic there.

But not every platform needs to be YouTube.

TikTok comes in second, with 21% saying it's the most authentic. But TikTok viewers say casual, off-the-cuff content is authentic there. **We believe a synthesis is coming: space for a platform that combines casual authenticity with the value add of expertise-led long form.**

As viewers spend more time with short-form video, long-form creators will find ways to better package their content for short form. And short-form creators will find ways, over a series of videos, to build credibility and depth. **The platform that becomes home for this type of hybrid content will likely climb the authenticity leaderboard.**

Percentage saying creators seem most authentic on this platform

38%

YouTube



Informative or educational content +



Polished, well-produced content

Top "most authentic" quality on that platform

21%

TikTok



Casual, Off-the-cuff content

15%

Instagram
(including Reels)



Polished, +
Humor/entertainment

12%

Facebook



Personal or vulnerable sharing

4%

YouTube Shorts



Humor or Entertainment-first content

3%

X (formerly Twitter)



Informative or educational content

3%

Reddit



Informative or educational content

2%

Pinterest



Highly curated or aesthetic content

2%

Twitch



Interactive or Community-driven content

1%

Snapchat



Humor or Entertainment-first content

Established Creators

For established creators, the framework has one core message: stay human.

Established creators, whether they realize it or not, often built their brand by becoming a trusted voice on a subject they care about. They made a strong initial impression on their audience and followed up with a long string of excellent posts. But if their empire grows, they'll face new temptations. The blowback for making a mistake will be louder, so they may hide errors. They might neglect the first impression, assuming people in their target audience already know them. And they might try to sacrifice some of what made them unique in pursuit of a larger audience.

If established creators resist these temptations, they can hold onto their authenticity as their audience balloons.

Emerging Creators

For emerging creators, the core lessons are to patiently build expertise over time (rather than chase trends) and disclose more than you believe you need to.

When a creator first gets started, they might want to chase trends or craft posts simply for the purpose of gaining followers. But our data shows that this kind of posting damages authenticity. If a creator can choose a subject they care about and add value to the viewer's life, they'll build a durable form of authenticity.

Just as importantly: Emerging creators must disclose brand deals and AI usage. Today's new creators are entering a world that's wildly different from that of past generations. Some of their peers will use AI as a creative shortcut rather than a creative tool. And others will take any brand deal they can find. Both of those strategies come with short-term rewards and long-term risks to a creator's authenticity.

Patience is key. Building authenticity by providing value to viewers and maintaining honesty—about AI, brands, and more—can take time. But creators who follow this roadmap will build a better, longer-lasting relationship with their fans.



Authenticity will only get harder to find. Having the right framework will help.



Social media is, by its nature, performative and transactional. That's what makes authenticity so valuable. If a creator seems authentic, they rise above the sea of creators who are transparently tap-dancing for likes and follows. They forge a real relationship online—a venue that is, by definition, not real.

As the AI era progresses, authenticity will only become rarer and more valuable. Low-quality creators will use AI to post faster than skilled creators who need to protect their brand. Audiences will become more skeptical of everything they see online. And the authenticity relationship will get harder to build.

Some creators will respond to this AI-flooded internet with a misguided version of authenticity. They will think that an increasingly raw style, a steady flow of straight-to-camera talk or an overly emotional style will make them “authentic.” Some brands will chase them with fistfuls of money. And, ultimately, both the brands and the creators will be disappointed.

We believe there's a better way: be substantive, stay honest, and build a real relationship with people on the other side of the screen.

People see creators as authentic when they offer viewers new, useful information that they're passionate about. Creators need skill, too. Videos that tell a good story rise above those that don't. And creators need time. A creator might seem authentic in one video. But, to be truly authentic, they need to maintain and grow that authenticity by treating fans well and creating excellent, consistent content over years. This approach is difficult. But our data shows that brands and creators who value this kind of authenticity will ultimately win in the new creator economy.

CREDITS

Writing and data:

David Byler
Hena Naghmi
Fotoulla Damaskos
Max Thomson
Toby Zhang
Fergus Navaratnam-Blair
Alex Trudel
Amber McBenttez

Design/graphics:

Emily Murphy
Liv Horn
Grace Stees

Appendix

Sources cited throughout this paper.

1. Park, Eugenie, and Colleen McClain. "83% of U.S. Adults Use Streaming Services, Far Fewer Subscribe to Cable or Satellite TV." Pew Research Center, July 1, 2025. [Link](#)
2. Specifically, we asked "How important is it to you that creator content you watch feels authentic?" We then looked for responses to other questions that predicted whether someone placed a high or low value on authenticity. This method allowed us to get at a question in the vein of "When someone says they value authenticity, what concrete creator behaviors do they value? And what doesn't matter?"
3. Respondents were randomly shown two videos, with roughly 400 respondents seeing each. Traffic on these videos is low enough that it's safe to assume that no large chunk of respondents would have seen the videos prior to taking the survey.
4. Wilbur, Brock. "Drew Gooden and Danny Gonzalez: The John Olivers of YouTube Culture." Paste Magazine, Sept 9, 2019. [Link](#)
5. Detailed question wording: Imagine you discover a creator for the first time, and then they post a video admitting they made a major mistake in a recent recommendation, or were involved in controversy. For a creator you just discovered, how does this affect your trust?" and "Imagine a creator you have followed for years posts a video admitting they made a major mistake in a recent recommendation. For a creator you follow closely, how does this affect your trust? n=1,201
6. Ha, Anthony. "YouTuber Hank Green Says His AI Usage Is 'Not Healthy.'" TechCrunch, August 1, 2026.. [Link](#)

The voices behind this research

The creator surveys in this report draw on NRG's proprietary Creator Hub: a vetted network of multi-platform creators offering real-world insight into content, culture, and monetization, backed by NRG's research expertise and built for fast, high-quality activation.

240 of 500
creators recruited,
and growing

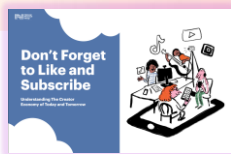
5K-7M
follower range
represented

>20K
median follower
count

~60%
primary income
from content

Gaming, Beauty, Careers, Comedy, DIY, Education, Fitness, Health, Music, Family, Sports, Product reviews, and more — building toward 125 creators with 250K+ followers and 25 with 1M+.

More from NRG on creators



The Creator Economy

What drives fans to follow, and unfollow, creators — a survey of 3,500 creator fans across the US, UK, Canada and Australia. (2022)



Google B2B Buyer Journey

With Google: how AI, search and creator content are reshaping the B2B buyer's path to purchase. (2025)



The Rise of the Workfluencer

How B2B influencers earn trust and build audiences in professional fields, from interviews with eight leading "workfluencers." (2025)



Creators: From Passion to Profit

Eight Creator Hub members on how they define professionalism, navigate brand deals, and build a sustainable business. (2026)

Want to work with us? Email:

→ fotoulla.damaskos@nrgmr.com

→ hena.naghmi@nrgmr.com