Syracuse University
Center for the Creator Economy

A FIRST LOOK

Creator, Defined.

The inaugural long-form research study from the Center for the Creator Economy

Americans define a creator by craft. Most see creators as distinct from influencers and celebrities, and 83.7% say a sustained commitment to the work is what separates a true creator.

A joint initiative of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the Martin J. Whitman School of Management

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Creator, Defined.

Center for the Creator Economy, Syracuse University
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Methodology

A two-phase, mixed-methods design

Creator, Defined. draws on a two-phase, exploratory sequential mixed-methods study.[1] Interviews with people inside the creator economy came first, and what they said informed a national survey of the public. Together, the two phases capture three vantage points on the same question: creators, the industry that works with them, and people across the country who view and interact with creator content.

Phase 1

40

semi-structured interviews

20 creators
20 industry professionals

→

Phase 2

989

U.S. adults surveyed

Fielded October 10–11, 2026
Census-matched national sample

Phase 1: Interviews

The research team conducted 40 semi-structured interviews, divided evenly between content creators and creator-economy industry professionals such as talent managers, brand strategists, public relations professionals and platform leaders. Because the definition of "creator" is the question under study, participants were not screened by follower counts, platform verification or income. Both groups qualified by self-identification. Participants were recruited through open calls on social media and LinkedIn, direct outreach and professional referrals.

Transcripts were analyzed by two coders in two cycles using a shared codebook of inductive and deductive codes.[2] Coders then exchanged transcript sets so both participant groups were coded by both researchers in NVivo, meeting weekly to reach consensus and documenting each decision in an audit trail.

Phase 2: Survey

Initial descriptive reads of the interviews informed the survey's development. Interview themes were not translated directly into survey items. Instead, comparative concepts such as authenticity and platform influence were asked about in both phases. The Qualtrics survey was fielded to U.S. adults aged 18 and older who use at least one social media or video platform weekly. Respondents were recruited through Prolific, with quotas based on U.S. Census benchmarks for age, gender, race and ethnicity, region and household income. The survey asked how respondents define a creator and how they judge creators' credibility, using measures adapted from source credibility research.[3]

Attention checks, completion-time screening and bot detection were built into the survey. The 989 respondents reported here all passed both attention checks. All study protocols were approved by Syracuse University's Institutional Review Board before data collection.

1. John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Sage, 2018).
2. Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2021).
3. Roobina Ohanian, "Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness," *Journal of Advertising* 19, no. 3 (1990): 39–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191.

Creator, Defined.

What Americans think makes someone a creator

A definition for the field

A creator is an independent studio: a 360 enterprise that collapses whole industries into one person, with or without a team, sharing knowledge with the audiences they build and carrying the expectations once placed on celebrities and institutions. They are defined by a love of the craft, a sustained commitment to it over time, and an authenticity that earns trust and keeps audiences coming back, all practiced amid the opportunities and pressures of platforms.

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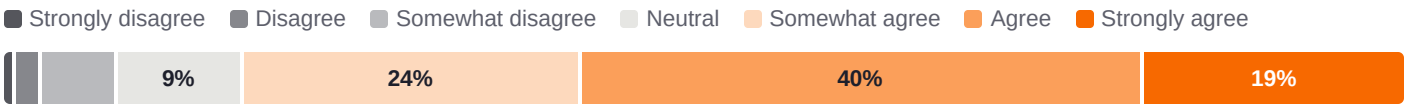
“What separates a true creator from a casual internet user who posts is a sustained commitment to their craft over time.”

83.7%

of U.S. adults agree



n = 989. Agreement includes somewhat agree, agree and strongly agree on a 7-point scale.

Key findings at a glance

75.5%
see “creator” as a distinct professional role

66.7%
see a difference between a creator and an influencer

87.2%
see a difference between a creator and a celebrity

76%
of monetizing creators see creators and influencers as distinct, vs. 58% of non-creators

69.7%
accept creators running their channels purely as a business

64.7%
say changing content to chase sponsors compromises integrity

Introduction

“Creator” is one of the most widely used and least defined words in media. Platforms, brands and millions of people use it every day. This study asked 989 U.S. adults what the word means to them and put the same question to 40 creators and industry professionals.

The answers point to a clear definition. Most Americans see creators as a category of their own, distinct from influencers and especially from celebrities. What sets a creator apart is craft: a sustained commitment to the work over time. Earning money is broadly accepted, but changing the work to chase sponsorships is seen as compromising it. Initial findings from the interviews point to the same line.

Part 1

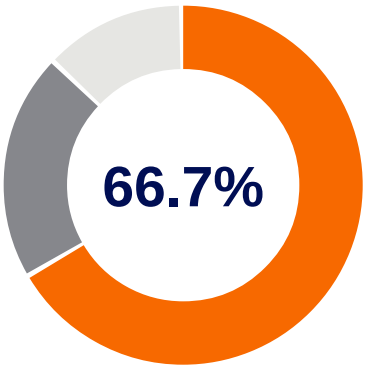
The word: “Creators” are a category of their own

Respondents were asked whether a creator differs from two neighboring labels: the social media influencer and the celebrity. Most said yes to both, but not to the same degree.

Is there a difference?

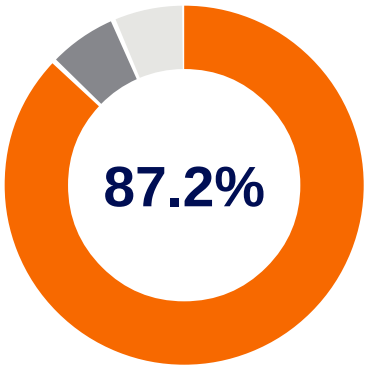
Share of respondents answering yes, no or not sure

Creator vs. social media influencer



Yes 66.7% No 20.5% Not sure 12.7%

Creator vs. celebrity



Yes 87.2% No 6.4% Not sure 6.5%

n = 989.

Influencers are the closest neighbor

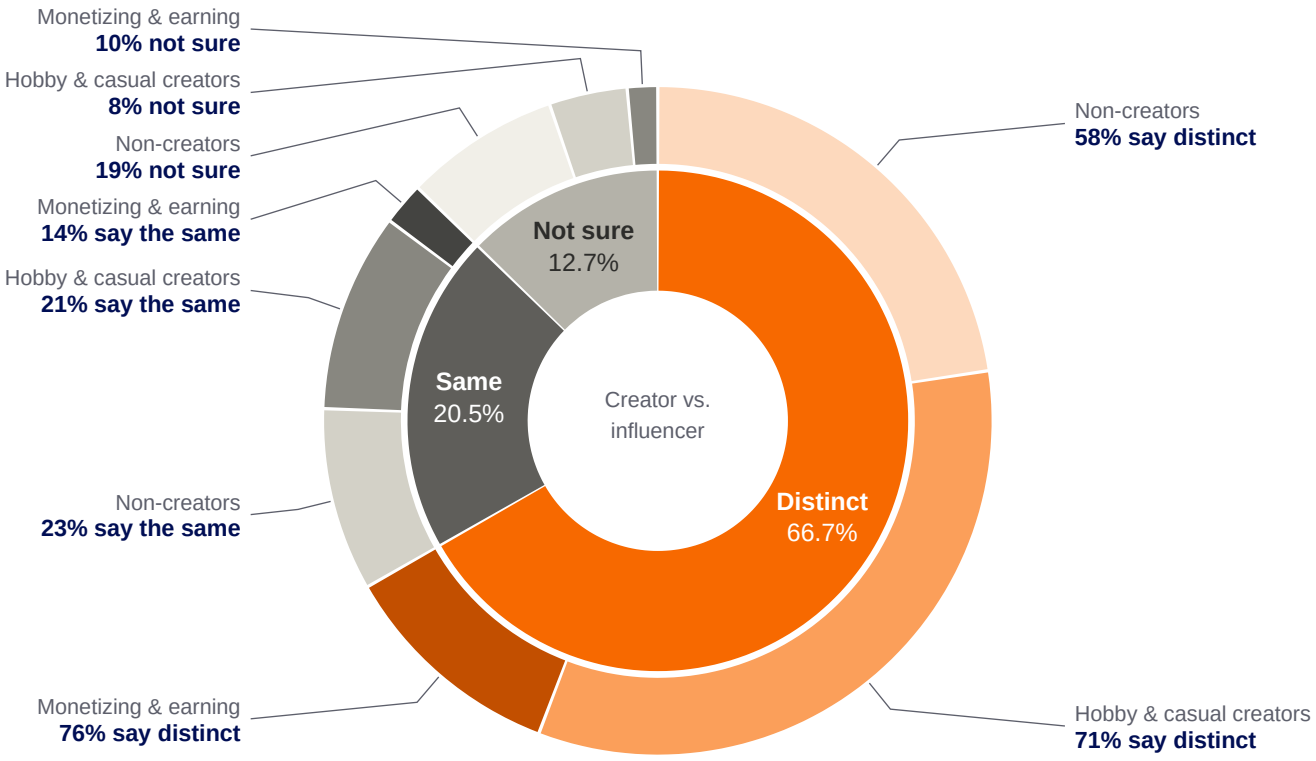
Two-thirds of respondents (66.7%) see a difference between a content creator and a social media influencer. Nearly nine in ten (87.2%) say the same about creators and celebrities. Celebrity is clearly a separate category in the public mind. Influencer is the adjacent one: a third of respondents either see no difference (20.5%) or are unsure (12.7%). The influencer result is likely a conservative measure. The survey's working definition told respondents that creators may include people "sometimes referred to by other terms (e.g., 'influencer,' 'streamer,' 'blogger')." Two-thirds still drew a distinction.

The closer people are to the work, the sharper the line

Whether someone sees a difference depends on their own relationship to content creation. Among respondents who don't create content, 58% distinguish creators from influencers. Among hobby and casual creators, it rises to 71%, and among creators who are monetizing or earning, to 76%. Non-creators were also the most likely to be unsure (19%, compared with 8% to 10% of creators). The distinction matters most to the people inside the creator economy.

Who sees creators and influencers as distinct?

Inner ring: all respondents. Outer ring: the share of each group giving that answer.



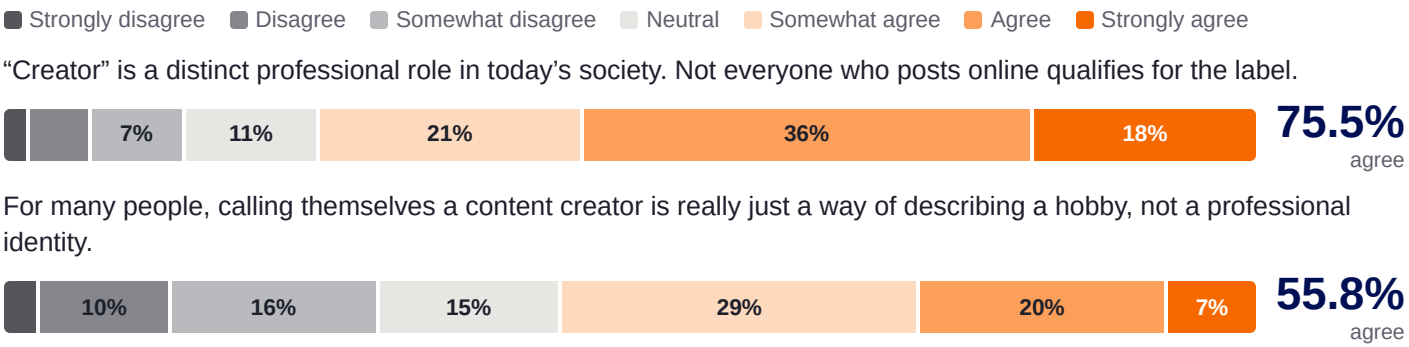
n = 989. Groups: non-creators (n = 385); hobby and casual creators, who create for enjoyment or are open to earning (n = 461); monetizing and earning creators, who are pursuing or earning income (n = 143). Outer slices are sized by number of respondents; labels give the share within each group. The association between creator status and this answer is statistically significant (Cramér's V = .137, p < .001).

A professional role, and a loose label

Three-quarters of respondents (75.5%) see “creator” as a distinct professional role that not everyone who posts online qualifies for. At the same time, more than half (55.8%) say that for many people, “creator” is really just a way of describing a hobby. These views are not in conflict, and at least three in ten respondents agreed with both. People hold a high bar for what a true creator is while recognizing that the label is often used loosely.

Profession or hobby?

Agreement with each statement



n = 989.

Part 2

The craft: commitment is what makes a creator

The survey gave respondents a working definition of a creator as someone who “regularly produces and shares” original content online. Asked what separates a true creator from everyone else who posts, respondents pointed past that baseline to something more demanding.

Craft over time is the defining standard

More than eight in ten respondents (83.7%) agree that a sustained commitment to their craft over time is what separates a true creator from a casual internet user who posts. It is one of the most strongly endorsed statements in the study. Regular posting was part of the definition respondents were given. Commitment to craft is the standard they added.

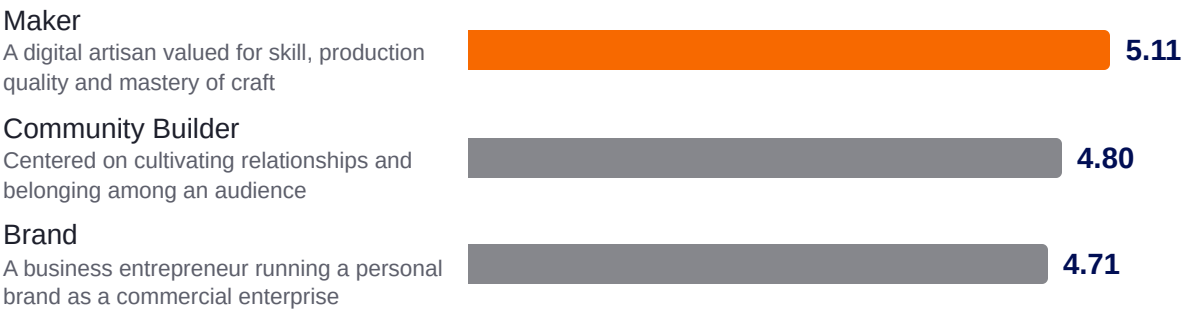
> Regular posting makes someone eligible. Sustained commitment to craft is what makes them a creator.

The Maker is the closest fit

Survey respondents read three descriptions of what a creator is and rated how well each one fit. The descriptions adapt research on entrepreneurial passion, which identifies three role identities that drive founders: inventor, founder and developer.[4] The Maker, a digital artisan valued for skill and mastery of craft, was rated the best fit, ahead of the Community Builder and the Brand. Each description was written as a trade-off: the Maker's value comes from craft "more than business success or community-building." The differences are statistically significant but modest. All three personas scored above the scale's midpoint, so the public sees some of each in what creators do.

Which description best fits "creator"?

Average fit score on a 1 to 7 scale, combining three rating items per description



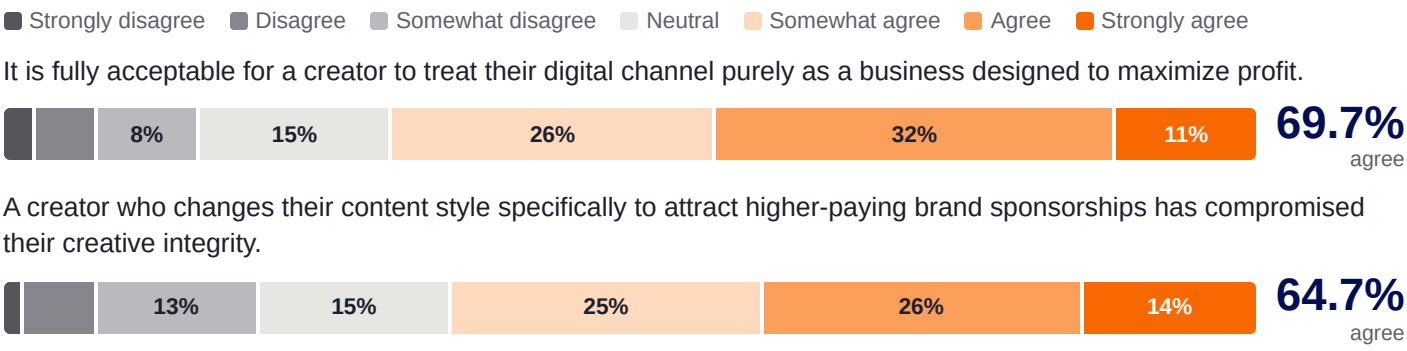
n = 989. Bars start at 1, the bottom of the scale. Repeated-measures ANOVA, $F(1.99, 1970.73) = 26.98$, $p < .001$, generalized $\eta^2 = .015$.

Money is fine. Letting it define the work is not.

A craft-first definition does not mean the public objects to creators earning a living. Seven in ten survey respondents (69.7%) find it fully acceptable for a creator to treat their channel purely as a business designed to maximize profit. But nearly two-thirds (64.7%) say a creator who changes their content style specifically to attract higher-paying brand sponsorships has compromised their creative integrity. The line falls between earning from the work and reshaping the work to earn. Commerce is accepted. Commerce that changes the craft is not.

Business, yes. Selling out, no.

Agreement with each statement



n = 989.

4. Melissa S. Cardon, Joakim Wincent, Jagdip Singh, and Mateja Drnovsek, "The Nature and Experience of Entrepreneurial Passion," *Academy of Management Review* 34, no. 3 (2009): 511–32, https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2009.40633190.

Part 3

The view from inside: initial interview findings

Interviews with 40 creators and creator-economy industry professionals add the perspective of people who work in the creator economy every day. These initial findings reinforce what the survey shows.

Creators are defined by the work, influencers by persuasion

The survey shows that most people separate creators from influencers. Interview participants suggest where that line falls.

How creators and industry professionals describe the difference

Initial interview findings

Creators

Defined by the work

Participants described creators through labor and autonomy, handling content from start to finish.

"A creator to me is really someone who's doing a 360 business… they are writing, directing, producing, editing, doing the marketing campaign strategy."

Influencers

Defined by persuasion

Participants described influencers through outcomes, moving an audience to buy, consume or act.

"An influencer I think in the way I use it is more as somebody who is persuading you to buy, consume, or move."

Describing a creator as someone who writes, directs, produces and edits is a description of craft: sustained, hands-on work across every stage of making content. Defining the influencer by persuasion places commerce at the center of that role rather than alongside it.

Passion and craft over transaction

Participants described the passion, artistry and care someone puts into their content as what makes them a creator, moving beyond the more transactional influencer. It is the interview counterpart to the survey's central finding on craft.

A profession taking shape

Three-quarters of survey respondents see “creator” as a distinct professional role. Interview participants described that role taking shape. Industry professionals pointed to new training and career paths, and creators to content creation’s drift toward the entertainment business.

> *“My son went to a creator economy camp… there’s a bunch of tracks now that legitimize the path of it as a business.”*
>
> Industry interview

> *“I think it’s become more complex the more that content creation and posting on social media has started to drift towards what people see in the mainstream entertainment business, like film and television.”*
>
> Creator interview

Authenticity gives selling its credibility

Survey respondents accept creators earning money but object when sponsorships reshape the work. Industry professionals described the same relationship from the other side: authenticity is what makes a creator’s selling credible. A creator who has built a genuine reputation around their work earns the standing to recommend products.

> *“Having that credibility, they can talk about everything they’re selling more authentically.”*
>
> Industry interview

Notes on the data

Survey results are from 989 U.S. adults surveyed October 10–11, 2026, through Prolific, all of whom passed both attention checks (mean age 45.4; 50.9% female, 49.1% male). Before answering, respondents read two working definitions. “Content” was defined as original material a person produces and shares publicly online, such as videos, podcasts, newsletters, photography, written posts or social media posts, but not reposting, resharing or commenting on other people’s material, or private posts shared only with friends and family. A “creator” (also called a “content creator”) was defined as “an individual who regularly produces and shares this kind of original content on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, or Substack. This may include individuals sometimes referred to by other terms (e.g., ‘influencer,’ ‘streamer,’ ‘blogger’).” Agreement items used a 7-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Unless noted, reported agreement combines somewhat agree, agree and strongly agree. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Interview findings are initial results from the study’s 40 interviews with creators and industry professionals. Quotes have been lightly edited to remove filler words. Open-ended survey responses are being analyzed separately and will be reported later.

Center for the Creator Economy, Syracuse University

The nation’s leading academic center dedicated to the full creator economy ecosystem. A joint initiative of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the Martin J. Whitman School of Management.

Defining the Discipline. Leading the Industry.