

Artlist AI Trend Report 2026

AI BROKE THE RULES. HERE'S WHAT'S NEXT.

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Introduction

If it feels like the creative world is moving at a thousand miles an hour, it's because it is.

Last year, we spoke of a "human renaissance" in response to AI. That renaissance has kicked into overdrive. The global AI market is projected to surpass \$1 trillion by 2031, and generative AI is now deeply embedded in how content is created, marketed, and distributed.

The opportunities once locked behind budget and access are now wide open. The lines have blurred, the pace has changed, and AI broke the rules. We're witnessing the creative industry's biggest transformation since the dawn of the internet.

The numbers tell the story. Our 2026 user survey shows **87% of creative professionals now use AI tools, with 66% using them weekly.** AI has officially moved from experimental to essential.

As **Artlist Co-Founder and Co-CEO Itzik Elbaz** explains: **“AI handles the how, freeing us to focus on the what.”** But as this report reveals, the true competitive edge now lies in the why, the purpose, strategy, and authentic vision behind the content.

For creative leaders, this means your next moves matter more than ever. Knowing where to focus your energy and resources over the next 12–18 months will define how you adapt and thrive.

This report maps exactly where those opportunities lie. Based on insights from 6,500+ creators across 140 countries and industry leaders from WPP, Meta, Google, Mondelēz, Wix, and more, we've identified the five pivotal trends set to shape the creative landscape in 2026.

1/5

The third wave of democratization

Creative professionals have navigated two decades of disruption. The first wave put a studio on our desktop. The second was the rise of the internet and social platforms, giving us a global stage. Those revolutions democratized access to tools and audiences.

What's happening now is different, and it's the biggest wealth transfer in creative work since the internet.

For creators and teams who understand this shift, the playing field just got infinitely wider.

The studio was a physical place with high barriers to entry, including a need for specialized talent and expensive equipment. That era is over. Today, the studio is a prompt, and it belongs to anyone who knows how to use it. This is making creativity more accessible and professional-grade execution much more affordable, instant, and universal, which means the thing that used to set you apart from everyone else no longer exists.

1.1 From access to intelligence

The first two waves of creative democratization were about giving us access to better tools and a bigger audience. This third wave is about intelligence that provides us with access to creative systems that think with you.

This wave is a direct response to the creator's biggest pain points.

38% of creators said their top challenge is finding time to create consistently, while 27% struggle to stand out in an oversaturated market.

AI's new breed of "thinking tools" tackles both problems head-on.

37% of creators say AI's primary benefit is helping them explore concepts quickly and spark new ideas — up from 29% last year.

AI is becoming the creative's primary partner for ideation.

This shift changes the economics of creativity. It commoditizes the very thing that used to be the moat. That glossy, high-end aesthetic that once signaled authority and quality, separating amateurs from professionals,



and challenging the big-budget production houses, no longer holds the same power.

So this raises a big question for creative strategy in 2026: If anyone can make anything look perfect, how does anyone stand out?

The answer seems counterintuitive. When anyone can execute at a high level, what matters most is what you choose to create and why. Your ideas. Your vision. Your strategic thinking. For creators and teams who lean into this reality, the economics have fundamentally tilted in your favor. This isn't a crisis. It's the biggest creative opportunity in decades.

1.2 The “In-the-box” revolution

To see what’s driving this change, let’s look at what’s happening behind the scenes. The studio-as-a-prompt has become the new creative reality.

The “in-the-box” setup is to video what Pro Tools was to music. Back in the ’90s, Pro Tools quietly did something radical, collapsing the million-dollar recording studio into software. Suddenly, anyone could record, edit, and mix on their computer. According to Quartz’s *Making Music Pop*, this single innovation re-shaped the entire music industry, giving rise to bedroom producers and reshuffling who could make a hit.

Today, we’re seeing the same transformation, but on a much larger scale. Video is moving “into the box,” replacing a full studio with a single, accessible digital space. This is being driven by advancements in AI video production tools backed by major technology companies. Google, OpenAI, Microsoft, Anthropic,



and more are all competing to push the boundaries of generative AI. These AI innovations are transforming video creation from pilot-operated complex machinery to simply telling an intelligent system where to go.

“It’s not just about faster creation, it’s about unlocking creative freedom. Now, anyone can create professional-quality work without the traditional barriers. This democratization changes everything. It’s the creative playground for the next generation.”

— Ira Belsky, Co-Founder and Co-CEO of Artlist

Platforms like Runway, Hailuo AI, and Artlist, which host the latest AI models all in one place, exemplify this shift. They fold the stages of production — from ideation, storyboarding, asset creation, voiceovers, editing, and VFX — into a unified, evolving platform. Whether you’re an indie filmmaker, a brand strategist, or a one-person content machine, the playing field is now level. The tools are accessible to everyone. The difference? Vision. And this is where new opportunities open up. What you create and why you create it, that’s what will set you apart.

1.3 The great leveling



For decades, a big budget was a key advantage. It brought a level of quality that smaller players simply couldn't afford. Now, the barriers that kept small teams and solo creators from competing at the highest level are evaporating.

We're now experiencing **aesthetic inflation** — a world where the baseline for “good” keeps rising, and fast. The cinematic lighting, crisp motion graphics, flawless *color grading*, and hyperreal textures that define premium content are achievable with off-the-shelf tools or a single AI prompt.

Polish, once a signal of investment and professionalism, has become so widespread that it no longer signifies excellence, only competence. Stunning visuals have become regular table stakes. High production value, your agency, or what your big budget afforded you, no longer makes you stand out.

Polish in creative content refers to the final layer of refinement that transforms a rough draft or raw footage into professional-grade work.

This creates a critical paradox, and **Orit Bar Niv, VP Content at Artlist** puts it perfectly:

“When the barrier to creating polished work is zero, the barrier to being memorable is higher than ever.”

With everyone able to achieve this high-quality finish, the sheer volume of new content becomes the next major hurdle. With polish now a commodity, the “great leveling” has created a massive opportunity. The tools aren't setting you apart anymore,

but who has the clearer vision.

This shift is reflected in what creators are seeing: **while 29% are excited by endless creative possibilities, 15% see the rising flood of low-quality noise.**

However, the noise now makes the signal more valuable than ever. Creators with distinctive voices and clear, strategic thinking will dominate. The market is hungry for authentic direction in a sea of perfect sameness.

When execution is free, a powerful, original idea becomes your most valuable asset.

1.4 The rise of the AI Auteur

This moment is creating a new creative elite. When everyone has access to the same tools, true talent becomes more valuable, not less. This is the rise of the AI Auteur.

AI Auteur, borrowed from film theory, describes a director with a strong personal vision who is seen as the true author of their work — such as Wes Anderson.

Today, the AI Auteur is the creative leader who has a killer point of view, incredible taste, and the talent to articulate that vision through language.

As **Joshua Davies, CINO at Artlist**, puts it:

“The cream always rises to the top when the tools are the same for everyone.”



In this way, AI is the ultimate leveler. It strips away technical barriers, revealing who has true vision and who was just good at the software.

“The problem we’ll soon be facing is user slop, not AI slop. The tool can execute flawlessly, but it can’t fix a bad idea.”

AI slop is content generated by artificial intelligence that is low-quality, mass-produced, and made to drive clicks rather than deliver real value.

This new reality is embodied by creators like Arminas Valūnas, Founder and CEO at Armada Studio, and a Top 100 AI Creator, who collaborates with brands like Runway, Freepik, and Weavy. With over a decade in motion design, Valūnas is an early adopter, curious about AI before most people understood its potential.

He sees the speed of progress as both thrilling and unsettling:

“AI is growing so fast that even if I stayed the same, my output quality would keep rising — because AI keeps improving.”

He reinforces that the Auteur’s value lies in vision. This focus on taste is redefining what “skill” means, and our data proves this shift.

In our 2025 survey, creators’ biggest concern was AI’s quality (31%). That technical barrier has evaporated. This year, the top concerns are entirely commercial, with 36% citing owning the rights to the content, and 27% if the AI model can be used commercially.

This data signals two things. First, the battle for quality is over, confirming that execution is a commodity. Second, as creators professionalize their AI workflows, the new challenge is strategic. The conversation has shifted from “Can AI make something good?” to “Is this commercially viable, and is the idea strong enough to stand out?”

This shift has real market implications. Brands are actively seeking “AI Directors” for projects that would have required entire teams just two years ago. The skill gap is real, and those who fill it first will define the market rate for the next decade.

This new landscape is exactly where the AI Auteur thrives.



Key Takeaways

01

Audit your advantage: Big budgets no longer build moats, which means small teams with sharp ideas can now compete (and win) against legacy players. This is your window to redefine your competitive position.

02

Shift spend to strategic advantage: Reallocate your budget from costly execution to creative strategy. Your competitive edge is the quality of the thinking in the room.

03

Identify and elevate your AI Auteurs: Technical skill is table stakes. Real value lies with creators who combine vision, taste, and strategic direction. These individuals will be your greatest competitive asset in 2026.

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Get up to AI speed

A strong idea is your new edge, but it's not enough. You must still develop and ship that idea at AI-speed. This is the defining operational challenge of 2026 and the key to staying ahead.

For as long as we've all been working, the creative workflow has followed a **predictable linear pattern. From brief to strategist to creative to production.** Each step was a potential bottleneck, loaded with approvals, and culminating in a single, expensive big bet.

As Elav Horwitz, Chief Innovation Officer at WPP, notes, this is a fundamental rewiring of how we work:

“For the first time in history, we are probably going to be forced to change the process, which has been linear for so long, to circular.”

That linear model is now obsolete. The slow march forward has been replaced by an explosive, iterative cycle. This theory is what creators are already experiencing. **26% of our survey respondents say speeding up editing and post-production** is a primary benefit of AI today. Looking ahead, they see this trend accelerating: **21% believe AI's biggest impact will be 'producing content faster, and 22% believe the creative process will become easier.**

2.1 Building for creative velocity



This shift is economic. Teams that implement circular workflows are producing between 5 - 10x more content than before with the same resources. The constraint has shifted from budget and talent to decision-making speed. Whoever adapts fastest wins.

What this means exactly is that creative teams, whether you're an agency, brand studio, or in-house production team, need to redesign how work flows through your organization.

For agencies, move from department-by-department relay races to cross-functional pods that ideate, generate, and refine in real-time, with AI as a third collaborator.

For in-house teams, especially lean ones, a two-person team can now explore multiple campaign directions and have final assets ready faster than ever. You're no longer bottlenecked by external vendors or waiting on specialized talent.

For production companies, pre-production, production, and post-production collapse into a continuous cycle. Storyboards become animatics become near-final renders in overlapping loops. The opportunity: clients shape work as it evolves rather than approving rigid phases.

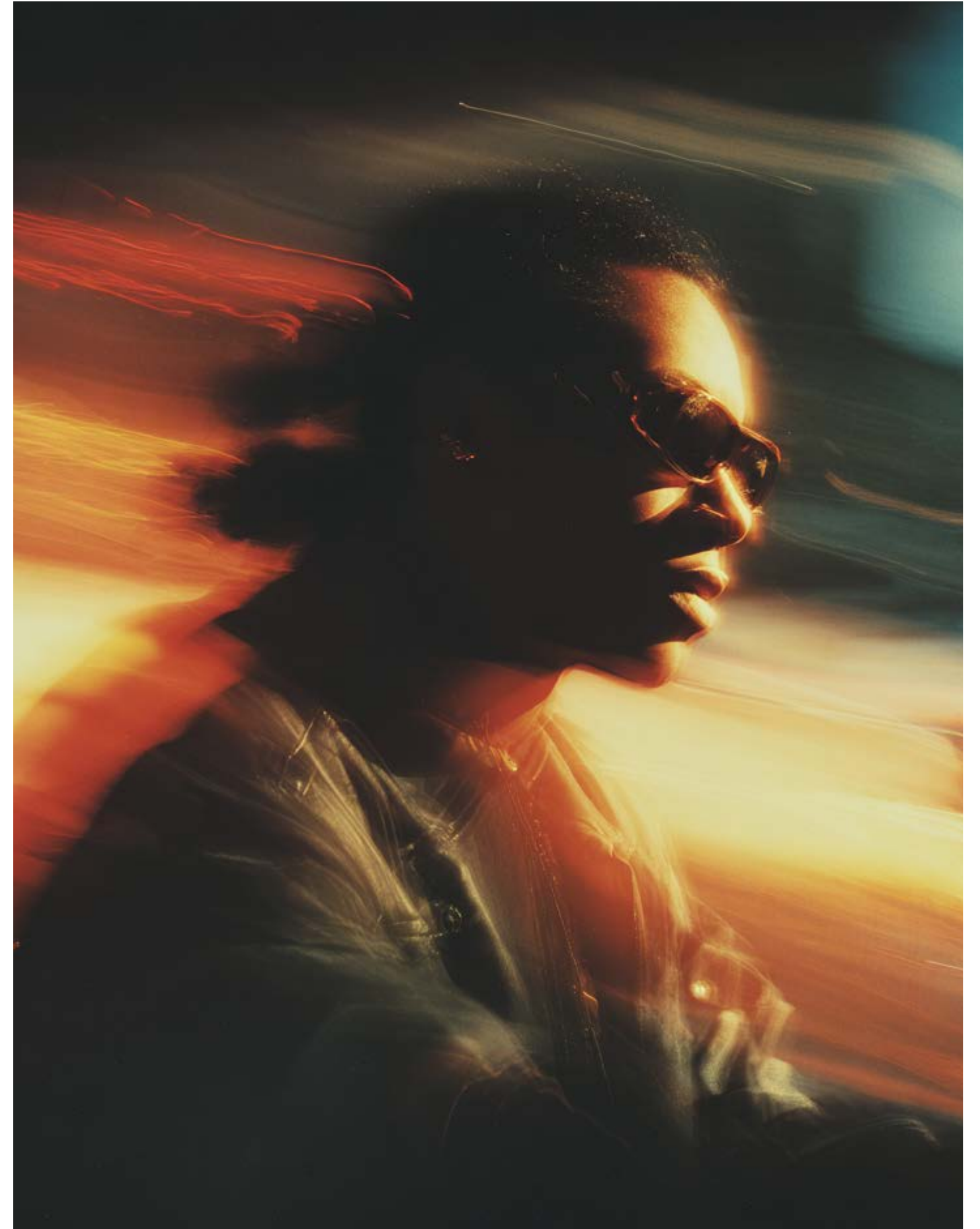
For solo creators, this is the ultimate unlock. You're no longer restricted by budget — you're competing on ideas. Arminas Valūnas, who pivoted early into AI-driven creativity, predicts that creators will soon train models to reflect their own style, building a personal creative fingerprint directly into the generative process. This means a solo creator can operate with the output capacity of a small studio while maintaining complete creative control.

“Soon it won’t be about the next version release — it’ll be about cracking the code for a perfect workflow.”

The real edge won’t just be in the tools you use, but in how you use them. The sophistication of your creative infrastructure, your workflow, your trained models, your distinctive style baked into the process, that’s what will set you apart.

This isn’t just faster work — it’s a fundamentally different operating model. As **Amit Ashkenazi, CSO at Artlist, puts it,**

“Strategy today must be a living process. Agility isn’t improvisation, it’s structured flexibility. In many ways, AI has become the modern fountain of youth for organizations rediscovering their startup roots.”



Designing the new workflow

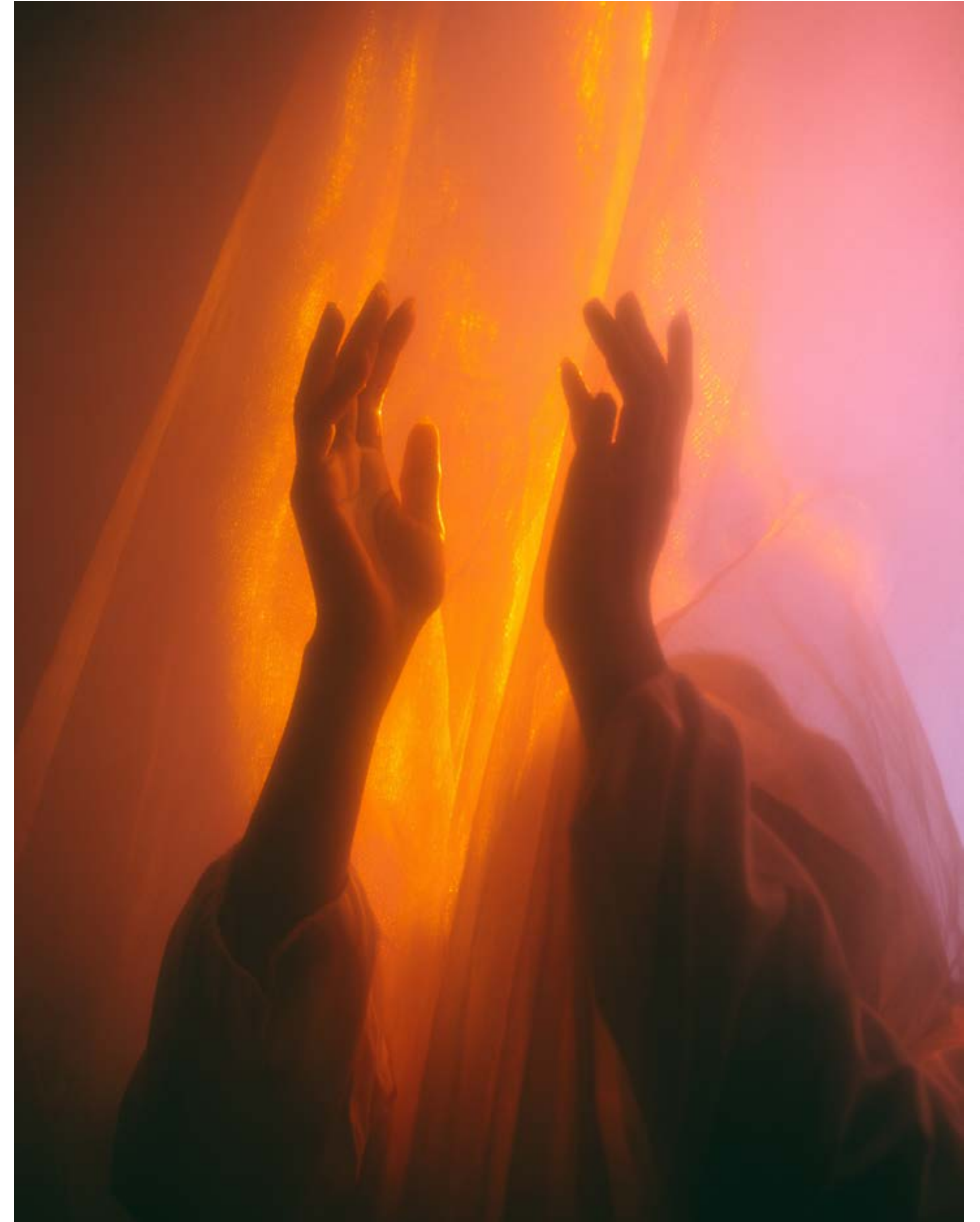
The old linear model

Brief → Strategy → Creative → Production → Post-Production → Approval → Launch

The new iterative loop

Brief → [Ideate ↔ Generate ↔ Refine] → Final Review → Launch

Teams adopting this circular workflow are already saving significant time each week on video production — and setting a new baseline for creative productivity.



2.2 The death of the drawer



Once upon a time, a lot of the big and brilliant, often risky ideas ended up in a literal or virtual drawer. They were too expensive, too bold for the client, too weird conceptually, or just time-consuming to even visualize.

As **Sharon ‘Thales’ Refael, Director of Creative AI at Artlist**, puts it,

“That drawer is now officially dead. The gap between ‘What if we tried...?’ and ‘Here’s what it looks like’ has gone from weeks to hours.”

Creatives can now instantly visualize and test their most brilliant, weird, and wonderful ideas long before a client ever sees them. This is fueling a new culture of creative fearlessness. When the cost of trying an idea isn’t much, failure becomes fast, cheap, and instructive, removing the fear that once stifled innovation.

2.3 The AI opportunist



And that's exactly what led Noam Sharon and Tal Rosenthal, the duo behind *Too Short for Modeling* (creators of campaigns for Fiverr, Waze, and more), to create ads for brands they connected with and put them out into the world. Working with creative director *Amir Ariely*, **Founder at Ariely Original**, they created a *Liquid Death spec ad* using only AI tools. **Amir explains,**

“AI has democratized access, not taste. It's less about mastering tools and more about mastering choices. Imagination and storytelling remain the real differentiators.”

The team already had great ideas and talent, but AI removed the budget ceiling, expanding casting, location, and language options.

Noam Sharon shares,

“There is a special superpower we get with AI. We can do things we couldn't before, no budgets holding us back, and instant access to global audiences.”

This is the playbook for 2026: make the work you want to make, share it publicly, and let it attract the right clients. The traditional gatekeepers, like budgets, agencies, and production companies, no longer decide who gets to play. For small teams and solo creators, this represents a huge opportunity shift in decades.

2.4 From A/B testing to A-to-Z exploration

This new creative velocity is transformative, especially in marketing. For years, we've been A/B testing, tweaking headlines, or CTA button colors. Now, we can test entire concepts at scale. Instead of testing minor variations, we can explore multiple complete creative directions simultaneously and fully engage in A-to-Z exploration. But having endless options creates a new challenge.

As **Shahar Aizenberg, CMO at Artlist**, notes,

“AI can generate endless options, but it can't tell you which one will move an audience.”

The opportunity lies in intelligent experimentation at scale. Smart brands are running dozens of conceptual tests in the time it used to take to approve one campaign. The constraint isn't creativity, it's the ability to quickly evaluate and identify what resonates.



2.5 It's all about the vibes

Operating at this new speed requires a new kind of skill. To direct AI effectively, creators must translate ideas, tone, pacing, and mood into precise instructions—what we now call ‘prompts.’

As **Itamar Leopold, Head of AI Content at Artlist**, explains,

“Everything is about vibes now. How something feels before you can even explain why. The real craft is turning that vision into creative that captures it perfectly.”

It's no coincidence that Meta chose Vibes as the name for its AI video platform. This skill of translating intuition into language is becoming as valuable as the creative vision itself.



Key Takeaways

01

Show, don't pitch: Walk into meetings with near-final work, not concepts. Turn client reviews into collaborative refinement sessions where they shape the work in real time.

02

Kill the drawer: When prototyping costs nothing, test bold ideas immediately rather than filing them away for someday.

03

Master the new creative language: Learn to translate vibes and vision into precise prompts that generate exactly what you imagine.

3/5

The rise of the AI creative director

As Netflix CEO, Ted Sarandos claims, the tool is not the talent.

“It takes a great artist to make something great. AI can give creatives better tools to enhance their overall experience, but it doesn’t automatically make you a great storyteller if you’re not.”

This is another core opportunity of 2026: AI handles execution, freeing you to focus on vision, strategy, and story. The strategic role of the AI creative director is now essential for every creative professional. And those who excel at it will command premium rates in a market desperate for strategic talent.

You’re no longer hired just for your Photoshop or Premiere skills. Your real value is your ability to direct AI toward a meaningful outcome.

3.1 The directors’ trinity and the power of discernment

As Artlist’s **Co-Founder and Co-CEO, Ira Belsky** highlights,

“Concept is king. It’s not just about storytelling, it’s about the core concept that guides AI.”



This new role will be defined by a trinity of uniquely human skills:

Vision and strategy:

AI can analyze patterns, simulate outcomes, and even optimize for goals, but it doesn’t know why those goals matter. It still needs direction. It can map a thousand routes, but it can’t decide which one aligns with your brand’s soul or your bottom line. That’s your job.

Taste:

This is perhaps the most crucial differentiator. AI’s “taste” will always be a blend of the data it’s trained on. It can mimic style, but not judgment. Taste is the rare ability to curate and interpret, understand cultural context, aesthetic nuance, and intent.

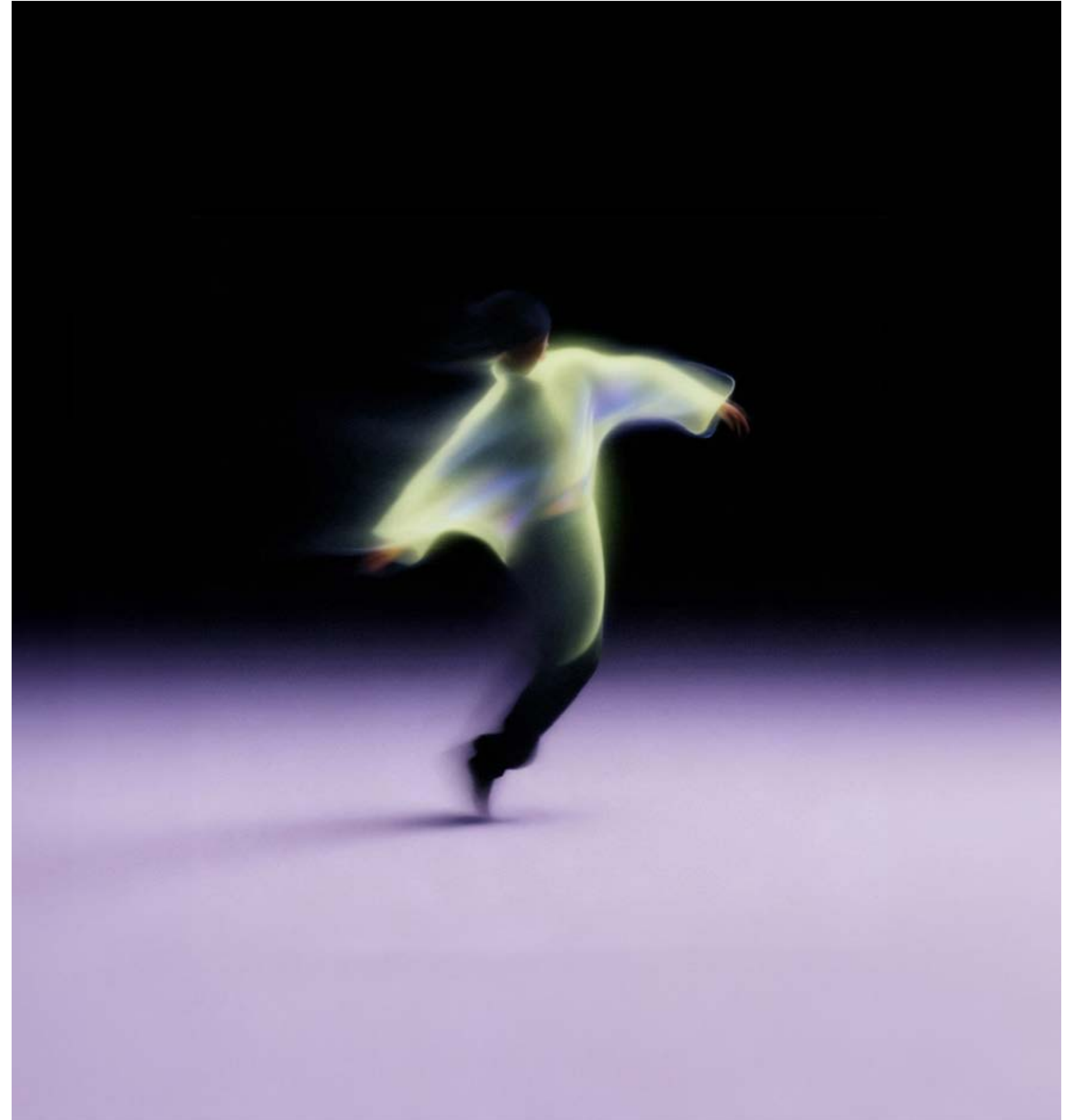
Empathy:

AI can replicate tone, timing, and even emotion, but it doesn’t understand why it matters. You hold the brand instinct, the understanding of whether an idea strengthens or dilutes what you’ve built and what will truly move an audience.

But possessing vision, taste, and empathy isn't enough. You must apply them under pressure. AI-driven creativity is messy, high-speed, and filled with constant dilemmas that demand swift decisions with no clear answers.

This is where discernment becomes a director's superpower — the ability to see clearly through complexity. It's the practice of combining vision, taste, and empathy to make the right call when no perfect answer exists.

AI magnifies everything. A strong idea becomes phenomenal. A weak idea is instantly exposed, no matter how polished it looks, but most importantly, it magnifies true talent



3.2 The evolution of art and talent

This is what leads to the next evolution of creative talent. In tech, the 10x engineer is revered, the developer who is ten times more impactful than their peers. In the years ahead, we'll see the rise of *the 10x creator*.

A 10x creator moves fast with AI, but what sets them apart is how their ideas, taste, and direction multiply the impact of every tool they use. They don't just get more done. They create more value.

This kind of talent is the new creative capital. They're who you're competing with and who you should be hiring. The most valuable people in this new AI world are those already native speakers of this new creative language.

Like many trends, this is an evolution of a past trend. This is a pattern. As **Ori Winokur, Head of Music at Artlist**, points out, it happened in the music industry a decade ago.



“An initial overflow of digitally released music eventually gave rise to extraordinary talents like Billie Eilish, who crafted a masterpiece from home, and Kendrick Lamar, who redefined hip-hop to stand out amid 100,000 daily drops.”

We're now seeing a similar pattern with AI. As entry barriers fall, artistic standards rise, driving the next evolution of creativity.

3.3 The age of taste

If taste is the new creative currency, it's absolutely worth measuring. Smart teams are finding ways to cultivate it systematically, and, while not perfectly quantifiable, we can sense-check. Here are ways you can measure it.

Performance:

Track emotional impact through saves, shares, completion rates, and comment sentiment — not just clicks.

Peer Review:

Measure through peer ratings, award recognition, and cross-disciplinary feedback.



Perception:

Evaluate with brand audits. Does the creative align with tone and values? Is there consistent intention across assets?

Postmortems:

Strengthen taste through creative reviews. What stood out, what fell flat, and why?

3.4 Hyper-imagination

One of the most exciting outcomes of this shift is the ability to conceive and create things that have literally never existed before. 29% of surveyed creators predict these endless creative possibilities will be AI's biggest impact, and the numbers support it: the generative animation market is projected to explode from \$2.1 billion in 2024 to \$15.9 billion by 2030.

This is a massive improvement and an expansion of what's creatively possible. For creators with hyper-imagination (or hyperphantasia), AI is the tool that can finally bring their vivid inner vision to life. Visual styles that once required years of R&D can now be prototyped in hours, and entire aesthetic languages can be rendered in real-time.

This explosion enables hyper-imagined visual languages and style fusions that were previously impossible for small studios. As major players like OpenAI release full AI animation pipelines — including a feature film due in 2026 — the role of the creator shifts from technical animator to AI director.

For creators who master this, you're able to create entirely new categories of style, making better versions of what exists and imagining things that have never existed before.



Key Takeaways

01

Hire for vision, not just skill: Prioritize strategic thinking and a unique point of view over technical proficiency. Great ideas matter more than tool mastery. Skills can be taught, but taste can't.

02

Promote your people: Your best AI creative directors may already be on your team. Upskill top performers in strategy, curation, and brand thinking to turn doers into leaders.

03

Make taste a metric: Curation is now a critical business function. Cultivate and reward a culture of exceptional taste. This is your ultimate defense against a sea of mediocrity.

4/5

Authenticity 3.0

The first three trends paint a world flooded with content, from super-polished professional productions to raw, unfiltered posts — a world where anyone can create anything, instantly. While this brings incredible creative freedom, it's also made it harder to distinguish what's actually real.

This isn't a new challenge. Ever since generative AI entered our lives, we've been questioning what we see. But as the tools have become more powerful and accessible, the distinction or ability to detect what is authentic and what is artificial has become more difficult. While the barrier to creating is gone, so has our confidence in what's genuine.

4.1 When synthetic breaks

What began as simple filters and photo editing has evolved into AI systems capable of generating entirely fabricated yet convincing content in seconds.

But even before AI, reality in media was often constructed.

And this goes beyond deepfakes. It's about the everyday erosion of trust: every image, video, and voice could now be synthetic. Such as product photos of items or places that never existed. Testimonials from people who aren't real. Documentary footage generated by AI. Influencer content where we can't tell which parts are AI-assisted and which aren't.

Recent *research from Clutch* found that **57% of consumers can't identify AI-generated photos, yet 84% say brands should disclose when they use them.** This gap between detection and expectation is the trust crisis. For marketers and creators, this trust gap isn't just a media issue — it's a business one. The brands that stay transparent will be the ones audiences still believe.



4.2 From emotional authenticity to existential verification

For decades, the opposite of authentic was overly polished or corporate. Now it's verifiably fake. The challenge has shifted from an emotional question, "Is this brand genuine?", to an existential one, "Is this even real?"

It's no longer about brand values — it's about proof. Did it actually happen? The good news is this doesn't have to be a crisis; it creates an opportunity. When the line between real and fake blurs, trust becomes the most valuable currency. Brands that earn it through transparency and intention will win. This is the playbook for Authenticity 3.0, not raw, not unfiltered, but real and intentional.



4.3 Alive, intentional, unmistakably real

In the new trust economy, credibility outranks polish. The winning strategy will no longer hide the process. Transparency and authenticity 3.0 will show how concepts are made, not just the final ad.

Show your work:

The most direct way to build trust is through radical transparency. Share how AI helped shape the work. The “how they did it” becomes more interesting. The prompts, iterations, failures, and human choices that prove there’s a real person behind the screen.

Keep it human:

Human flaws, imperfections, moments of genuine emotion, are no longer mistakes to edit out. They’re proof of life, and may become your signature.

Own your weird:

As AI makes the average easier to produce, being unapologetically yourself becomes your most authentic move. Brands like Nutter Butter

and Liquid Death thrive on unhinged, surreal creative work, so strange it could only come from their brand truth.

Nutter Butter is a great example of a brand taking this idea to a whole new level. Its unhinged social presence, the “Nutterverse,” filled with surreal, absurdist posts, went viral and won two Cannes Lions in 2025 for social media, generating 3.3 billion impressions and 15 million shares — all with zero media spend.

As Sally Barton, Marketing Excellence Lead at Mondelēz International (home to billion-dollar brands, Oreo, Ritz, and Sour Patch), explains,

“After flying under the radar for so long, the team leaned into that authentic strangeness. They had the courage to commit to the bit, consistently, and with conviction. That belief, rooted in brand truth, is the magic ingredient AI can’t replicate.”

Instead of sanitizing their oddness or chasing trends, the team doubled down, even resurrecting their original bizarre mascot. By embracing their authentic weirdness, they turned micro-signals into a major cultural moment. Nutter Butter proves that strategic oddness, sustained with courage and conviction, is a brand's most defensible creative position.

We've already lived through two eras of authenticity. The curated perfection of influencers' age, followed by the raw and unfiltered realness — the messy, “no-makeup” honesty wave.

Now, audiences are craving something in between, real but intentional, imperfect yet considered. The “authentic aesthetic” is the new gold standard, something that looks crafted but still feels alive.

For individual creators, this shift opens a different door — one that leads to more freedom, faster output, and more creative ownership than ever before.



4.4 The content creator gold rush

While “owning your weird” is a powerful creative strategy, another opportunity ahead will be owning your expertise.

The AI revolution has created a massive education gap. We’re all struggling to keep up, and that confusion is creating a massive ‘Transparency Divide’ — a recent Envato report found three in five creatives are afraid to tell clients they use AI.

But while many are hiding their process, the real opportunity is in owning it. Educational content with real expertise is the new gold standard. Creators who lean in, become true subject matter experts, and show how to embed AI into real workflows will hold all the leverage. If that’s you, 2026 could be your biggest year yet.

This opportunity is confirmed by leaders across the industry. Sarah Adam, **Head of Growth Partnerships at Wix**, sees the demand firsthand.

“The AI hype is real. Technical and non-technical audiences are thirsty to learn. This could be the BEST time to become a content creator.”

The team recently worked with an AI expert who saw a 100% increase in his social media following. By focusing exclusively on AI education, he doubled his following from 20K to 40K in just 30 days.

Maayan Sarig, **Head of Communications at Meta, IL**, defines the stakes.

“AI-powered tools are redefining the creator economy. Creators who integrate AI will operate more like small media studios — producing, editing, and scaling content at unprecedented speed. Those who fail to tap into AI will quickly fall behind.”

Actionable education, like workflow hacks, tool breakdowns, and best practices, helps to build trust and establish authority. It’s the fastest way to build a real community, and it’s far more powerful than any polished ad ever could be.

But building trust through expertise is only half the equation. What audiences crave even more is something some people feel AI has inadvertently stripped away: meaning.

4.5 Why meaning matters more than ever

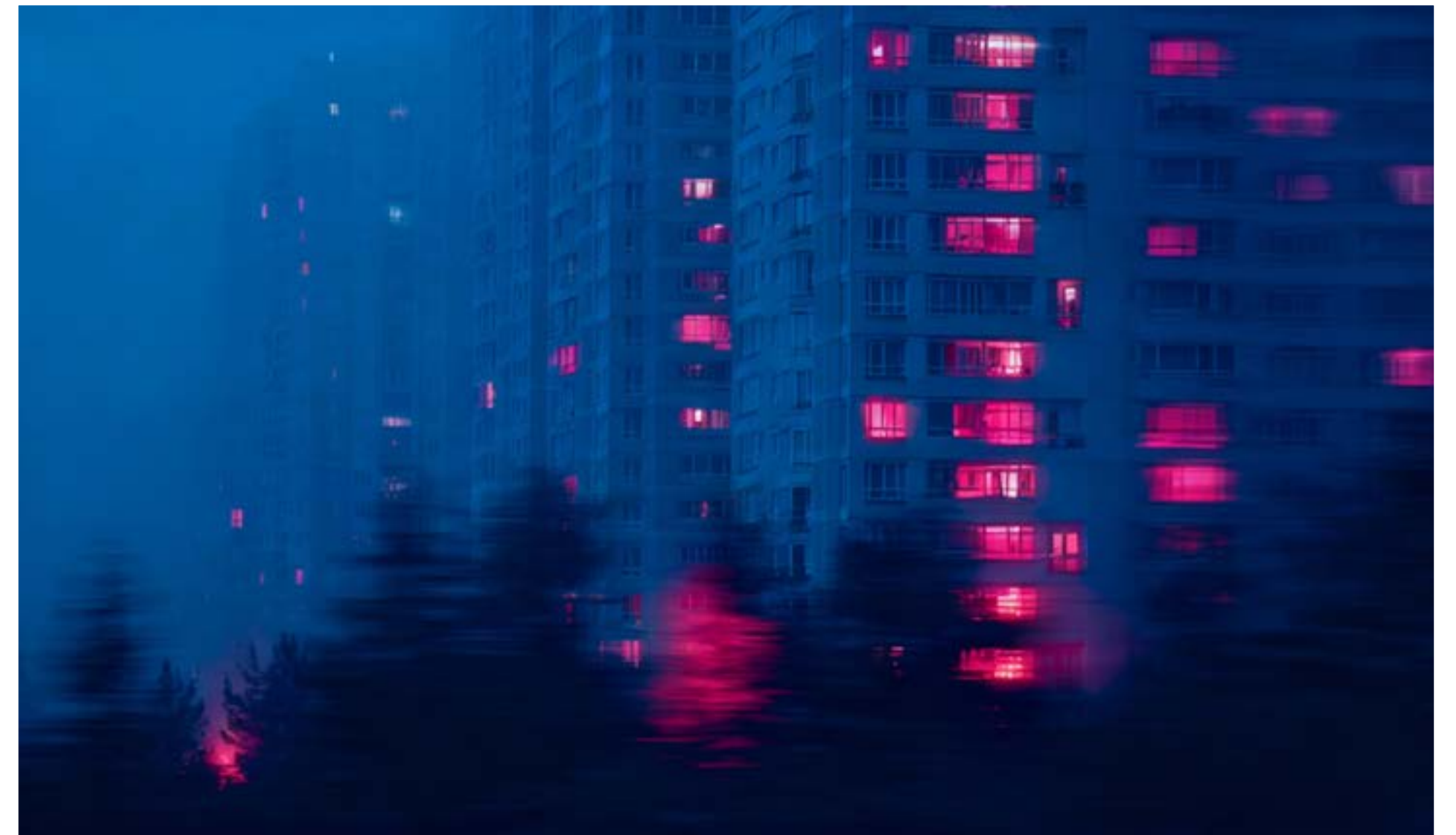
But authenticity alone isn't enough anymore. The challenge isn't just trusting what we see, it's about finding meaning in what we do.

Big Tech and AI have stripped friction from our lives in the name of convenience — one-click purchases, curated feeds, AI that writes our words — and while efficient, it's left us passive, and according to **Eugene Healey, a Brand Strategy Consultant who studies cultural shifts**, *“It's boring our society to death.”*

He notes how we're relearning that friction is what makes experiences fulfilling. A difficult hike makes the view sweeter. The challenge of learning to play an instrument makes the music more meaningful. We've been trading meaning for easy, and this has created a deep, unmet craving for experiences that demand our participation and fill us with pride and belonging.

For brands and creators, this is the new landscape, an audience that is simultaneously starved for trust and starved for meaning. This presents

an important question: what's the ultimate strategic opportunity when feeds are flooded with sameness and synthetic content?



Key Takeaways

01

Build an honesty playbook:

Decide how your brand will communicate its use of AI. Proactively showing your work will build trust, while hiding it will create immense risk.

02

Embrace your weird: Your brand's unique quirks, history, and unapologetic point of view are your greatest differentiators. Don't smooth them out, amplify them.

03

Use imperfection strategically: In an age of AI polish, showing the messy process, failed attempts, unscripted moments, and human decisions becomes proof of life and your strongest credibility cue.

5/5

You can't fake
a real experience

This leads us to the final prediction for where smart brands will find their advantage in 2026. The ultimate answer to the search for trust and meaning is both radical and simple. Escape the screen entirely.

After years of digital-first and aggressive online growth, one of the most powerful moves a brand can now make is to create a tactile, IRL moment. As our digital lives become more crowded and chaotic, fueled further by the convenience of AI,

a shared, physical experience has become the rarest and most meaningful way to connect.

We're entering a new era in which physical experiences are designed with digital expression in mind. The lines are blurring, and the best activations now thrive in both worlds.

5.1 The art of gathering

Experiential marketing isn't new, but its role is changing. It's no longer just a part of the marketing mix. In 2026, it will stand out as a powerful antidote to digital overwhelm.

As feeds overflow with forgetful, algorithmically generated content, leading to doomscrolling and ad fatigue, consumers are increasingly rejecting sameness. There is a rising hunt for unique, physical, and shared human experiences that create lasting memories.

AI now makes hyper-personalized micro-events and immersive gatherings increasingly feasible. When everyone is screaming online, you can win by talking to a small group of people in a real room. The moments that feel real — intimate, emotional, and shared — are the ones that last and get retold.



5.2 The value of friction

True differentiation now comes from designing high-friction, high-meaning experiences that algorithms can't replicate. If the goal was once to make everything accessible, we're learning that ease can erase distinction.

Design principles for meaningful friction:

Gently gatekeep to build community:

Slight barriers to entry make participation feel earned, and belonging more meaningful.

Build joyful, tangible worlds:

Create sensory experiences that feel safer and more valuable than digital alternatives.

Turn consumers into participants:

They're no longer passive spectators, but active participants who form emotional bonds through creation, discovery, and problem-solving.



Not everyone will engage, and that's the point. High-friction filters for high-value connections. When done right, the quality of connection matches the memorability of the experience, and both become your competitive moat.

5.3 The amplification flywheel



A real-world event that sparks genuine joy triggers the ultimate marketing flywheel. When a brand hosts a tactile event that demands participation, fans attend, connect, and instantly share their experience online. So, their posts become the campaign.

This is the new loop of authenticity. The answer to “How do you win attention?” isn’t louder ads — it’s real moments that people want to retell.

Hailey Bieber’s Rhode’s Beach Club pop-up in Mallorca exemplified this opportunity perfectly. Promoting her latest product, the brand created an atmosphere of perfect pastel visuals with branded umbrellas. Fans captured Instagrammable moments and shared their posts, which became the viral campaign.

Rhode proves that experiential marketing activations are felt first, shared second, and is a masterclass in controlled virality, applicable far beyond the beauty industry

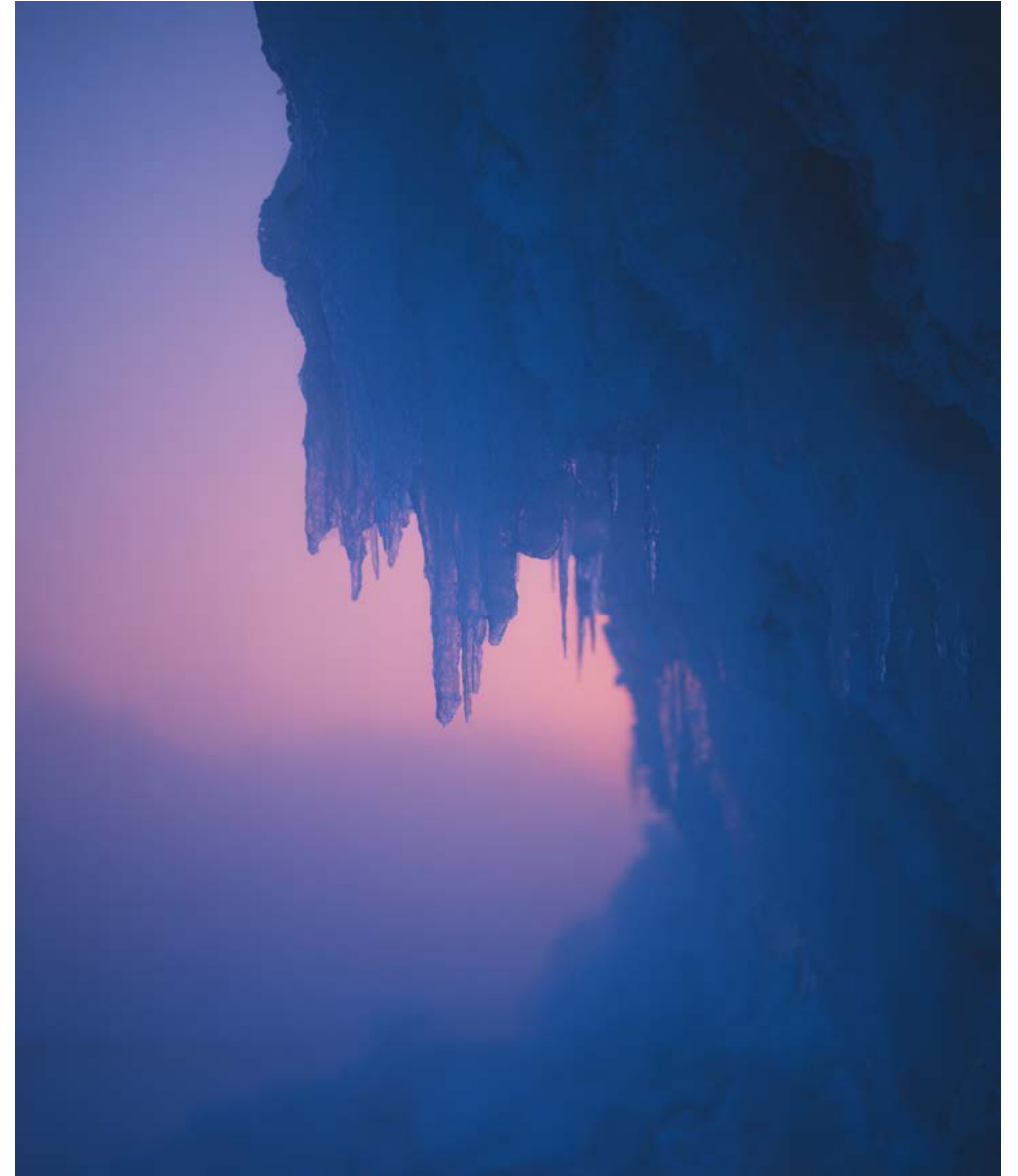
5.4 Phygital, blending AI with reality

This isn't about abandoning technology entirely but using it intentionally to enhance reality. In this "phygital" era, AI becomes the muse for the physical world, inspiring imagination that manifests offline.

Think of it as a new creative workflow,

The new phygital workflow: Human idea → AI-generated concept → human interpretation → physical experience

While AI can generate infinite digital worlds, it can't replicate the shared memory of a real experience. The creators and brands that win will create unforgettable moments in real life, reminding us we're alive, connected, and part of something genuine.



Key Takeaways

01

Make friction a design principle:
Audit your customer journey and identify where a moment of pause can encourage participation and deepen meaning.

02

Invest in a flagship IRL experience:
Allocate resources to creating something unforgettable that your audience can't get anywhere else.

03

Design for amplification: Build in shareable visual moments that transform participants into storytellers, naturally bridging physical and digital worlds.

Conclusion

The new creative AI era is in full swing, and the proof is undeniable, with 87% of creators actively using it. The most telling sign of this new age is how the conversation has matured. We’ve sprinted past the “what if” stage.

This means your creativity, your unique taste, and your strategic vision — that's what matters most now.

This new reality for 2026 is defined by five massive opportunities. Here’s the **TL;DR:**

- **Vision beats budget** – Good ideas compete without massive resources.
- **Speed favors clarity** – Moving fast requires knowing what you want.
- **Direction is the premium skill** – Orchestrating AI tools separates pros from amateurs.
- **Authenticity is your edge** – A real voice cuts through when polish is commoditized.
- **Physical experiences stand out** – Tangible moments register differently in a digital world.

These shifts aren't just coming; they're here. The only question is what you will build with them. The barriers have fallen, the potential for bold ideas is higher than ever, and the window is wide open.

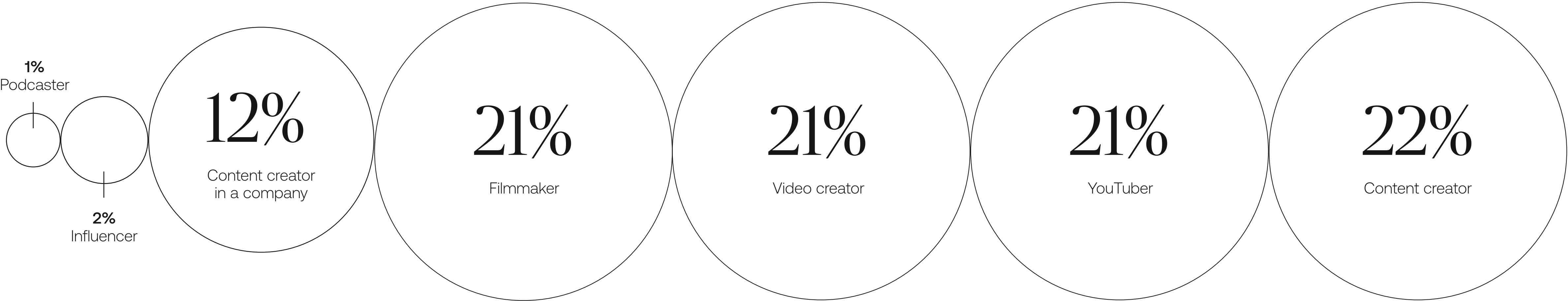
This is the most exciting time to be a creator.
Now, it's time to build.

Methodology

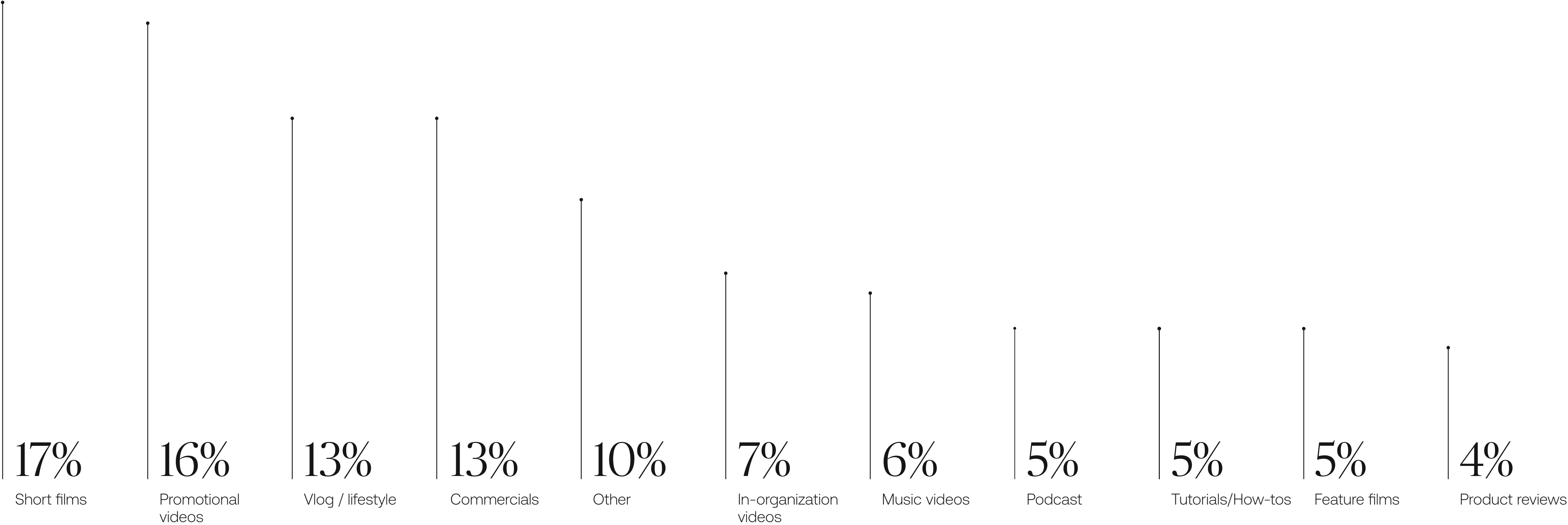
Except where otherwise stated, the data cited in this report comes from the Artlist User Survey 2026. Artlist surveyed over 6,500 creators worldwide during September 2025.

The Artlist User Survey 2026

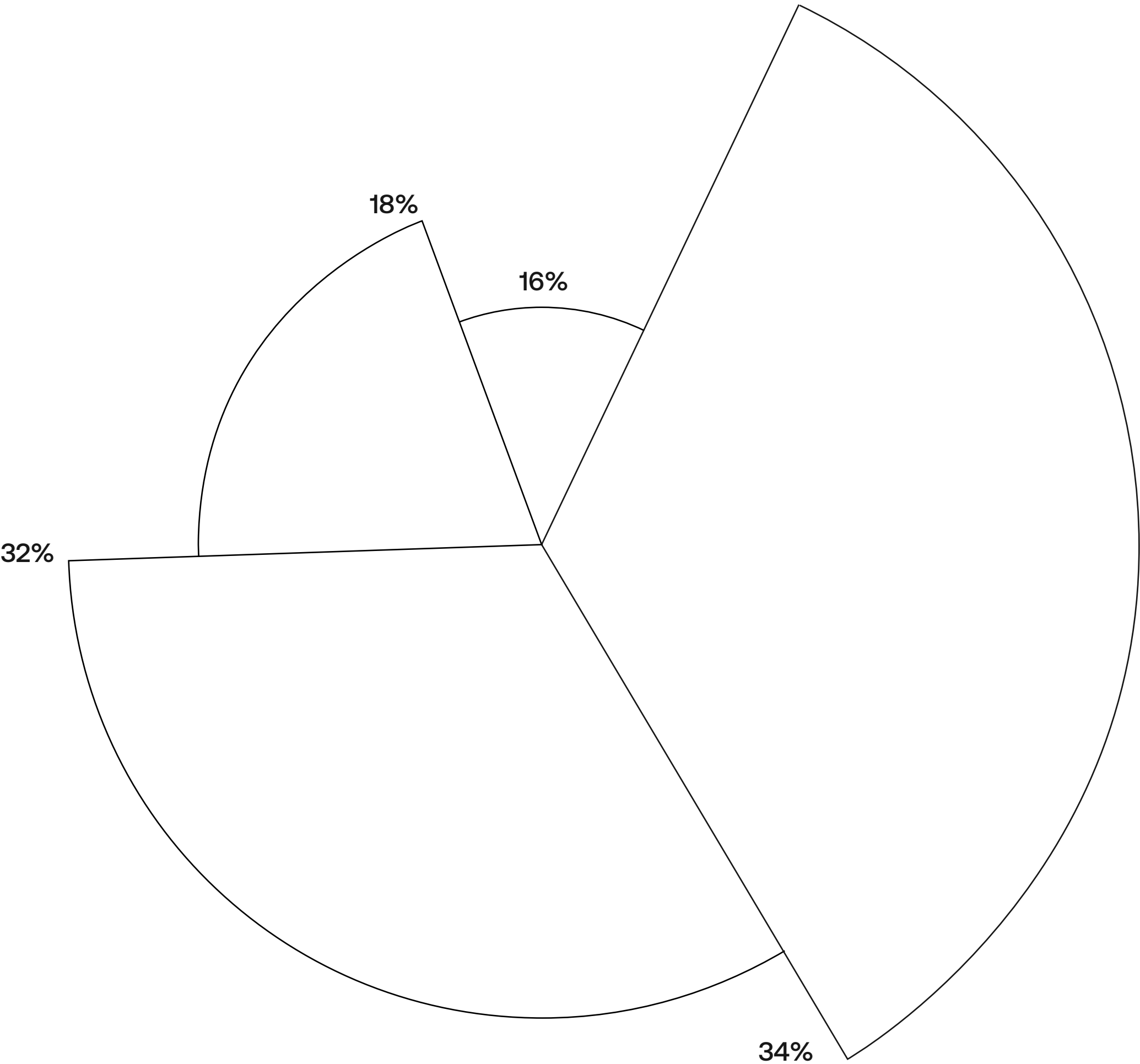
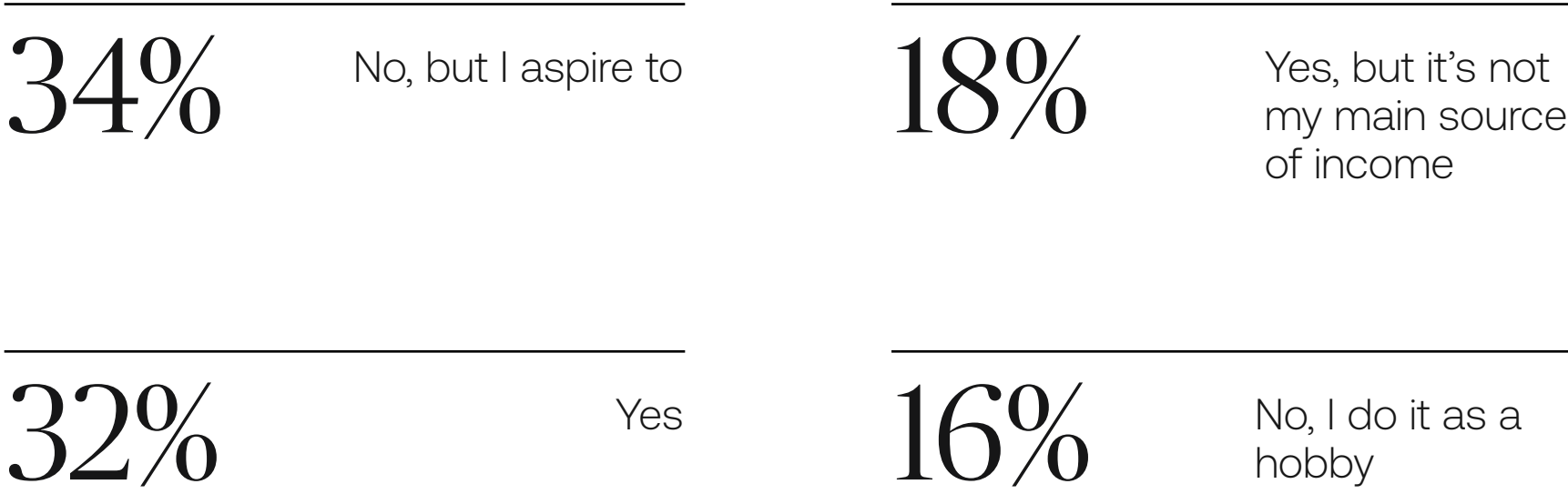
Which title best describes you?



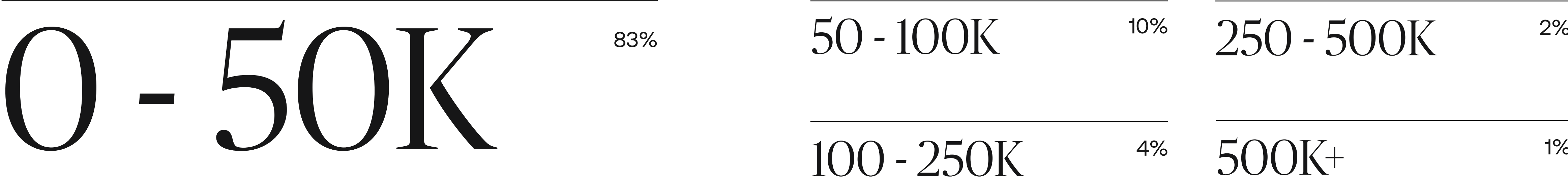
What type of content do you create?



Do you generate revenue from your videos?



Roughly how much do you earn per year
from producing video content? (US Dollars)



What's your biggest challenge as a creator right now?

38%

Finding time to create consistently

18%

Monetizing my content

27%

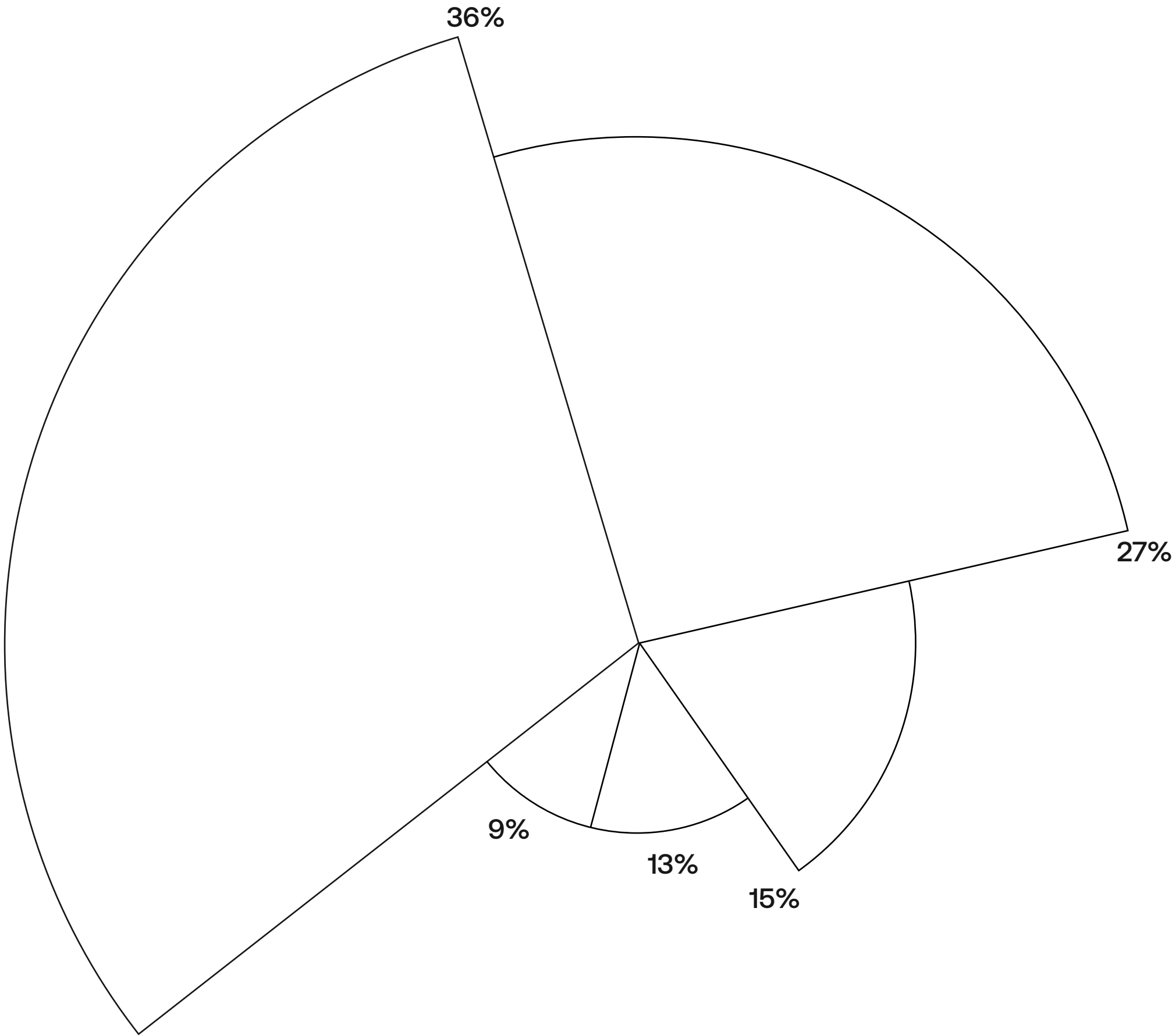
Standing out in an oversaturated market

16%

Understanding AI tools and features

If you create AI-generated content, which is MOST important to you?

36%	That I own the rights to the content
27%	The AI model can be used commercially
15%	Learning the tool quickly, and it's easy to use
13%	I don't plan to create AI-generated content
9%	Following ethical guidelines in creating and using the content



How does AI help you with your work?

37%

I can explore concepts quickly and spark new ideas

24%

For the entire creative process, from concept to final product

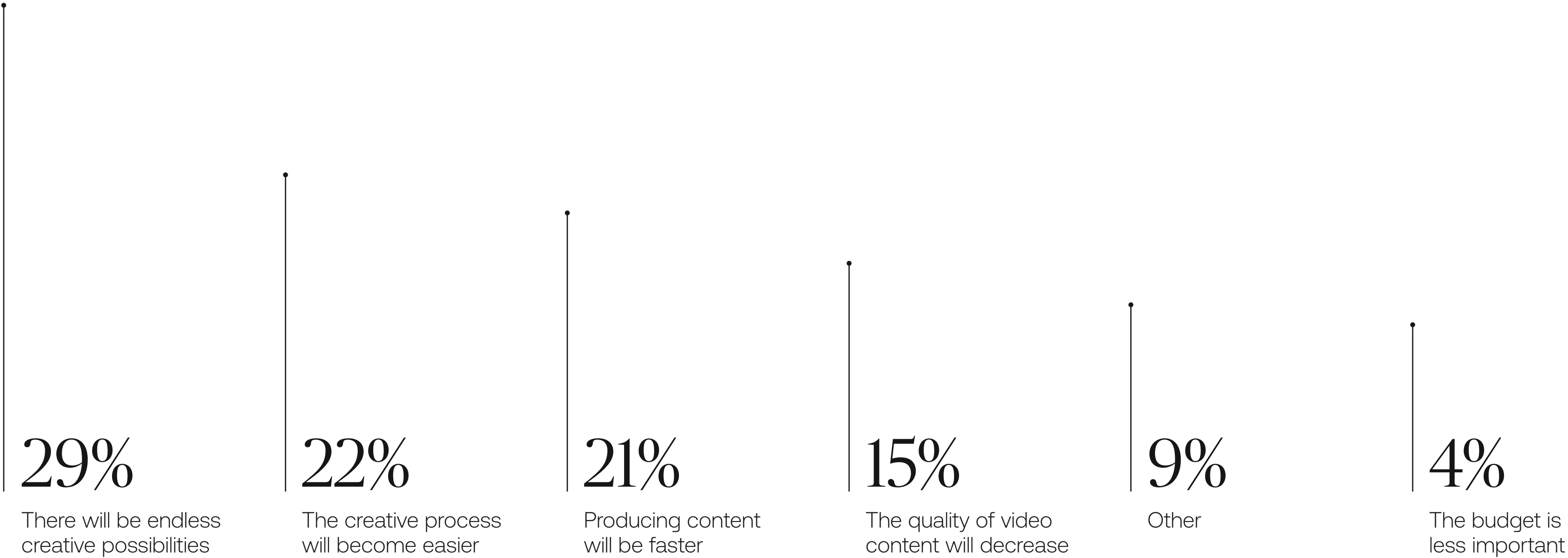
26%

It speeds up editing and post-production tasks

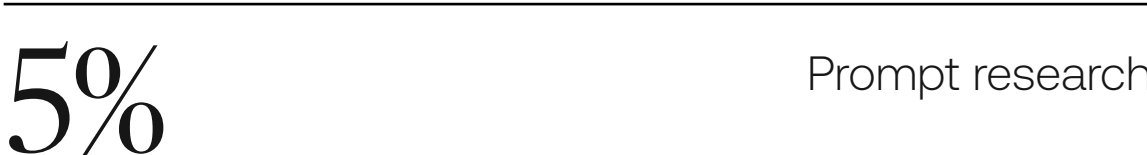
13%

I don't use generative AI tools

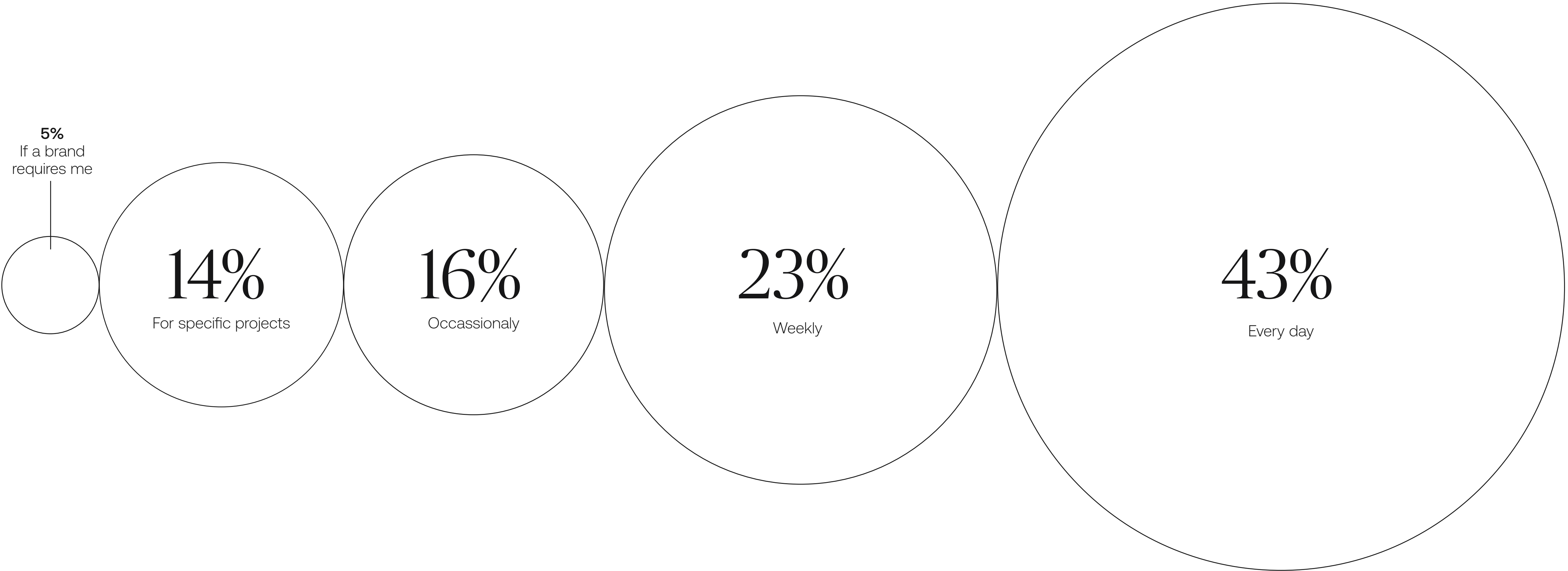
What do you think will be AI's biggest impact on creators in 2026?



What do you use AI for today?



How often do you use AI tools?



Build your brand for 2026