



Culture & Trends Report

In Search of Mainstream

How communities are rebuilding
shared culture in a fragmented world

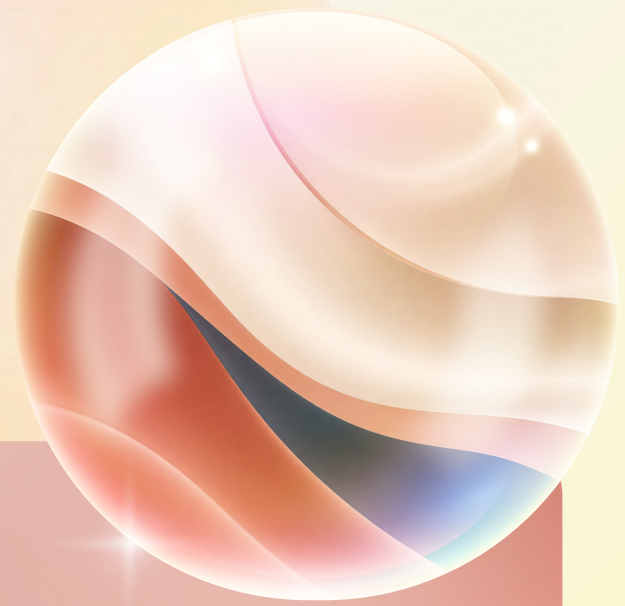
Mainstream Culture Has Changed, Not Disappeared

Our cultural landscape is more fragmented than ever, but our desire for shared experiences remains strong. The mainstream hasn't disappeared, but its meaning has shifted: digital creators and communities now stand alongside traditional cultural gatekeepers as the arbiters of what makes it into the mainstream.

Audiences have access to more content, communities, and creators than at any other point in history. The result is a culture that is more personalized and less synchronous. And yet, ideas and moments are still able to cut across those differences to become shared cultural touchstones.

Increasingly, that journey begins online. Mediums like online video enable people to discover, create, share, and participate in culture, helping ideas gain momentum within digital communities before reaching wider audiences. And even though culture is increasingly emerging from communities as opposed to institutions, certain ideas and moments still manage to capture attention on a scale that feels unmistakably mainstream.

To learn more about the modern mainstream, the YouTube Culture & Trends team partnered with NRG to review prevailing themes in recent research, analyze entertainment, media, and video trends from around the world, and run surveys asking thousands of people about their interests and attitudes toward culture. Respondents were active online, age 14–44.



63%

of online 14- to 29-year-olds agree that being into the same things as other people makes them feel part of something bigger.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=496 online people age 14–29.

Culture Is Fragmenting, But Connection Is Deepening

Younger audiences increasingly feel that traditional media doesn't reflect the realities of their experiences and worldviews. Fewer than a third of kids and teens, for example, think that movies and TV shows accurately depict contemporary family dynamics, or the role that technology and social media plays in their lives.^[1] In response, they are turning to more personalized experiences online, building deeper connections around the creators, communities, and interests they care about.

But fragmentation hasn't weakened the desire to belong. In fact, 63% agree that being into the same things as other people makes them feel part of something bigger.

According to an NRG study conducted in the U.S., 63% of people (online 14- to 44-year-olds) say that, compared to five years ago, it's more true that they watch content or follow creators that everyone they know is also watching or following.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.

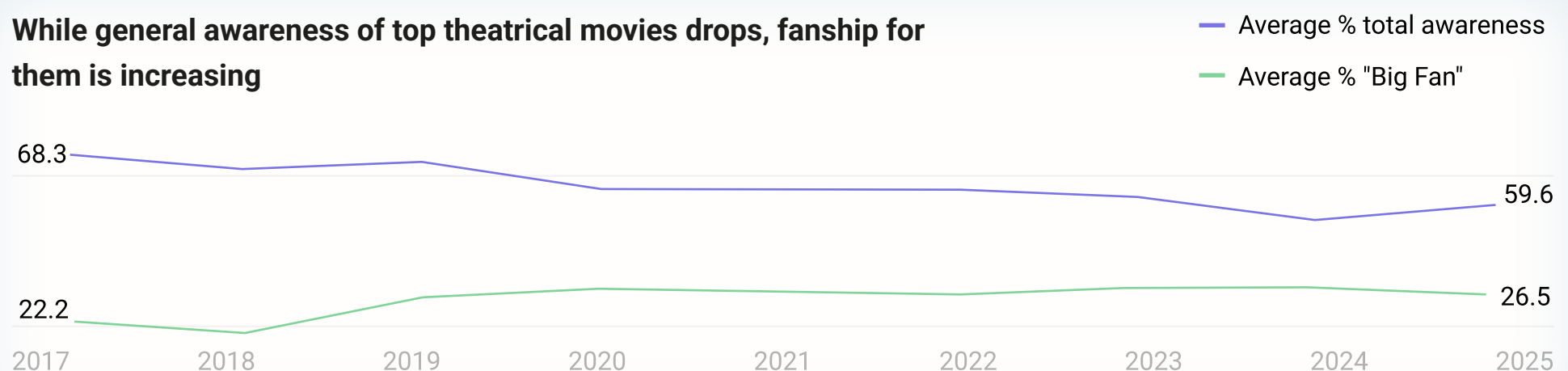
In the U.S., 67% of 14- to 44-year-olds say that, compared to five years ago, they're watching more content or following more creators no one else they personally know is watching or following.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.

NRG's entertainment tracking data reflects an important shift. Familiarity with the top 10 most powerful entertainment brands has fallen an average of 17 points over the past six years, while average theatrical awareness is also declining. Yet among the releases audiences do know, the percent of audiences identifying as big fans is increasing.

This reflects a new experience of shared culture: attention is spread across more networked communities, but connection within them is deepening. Reaching everyone at once may be harder, but that makes the cultural moments that do break through even more impactful.

While general awareness of top theatrical movies drops, fandom for them is increasing



Source: NRG Theatrical Weekly Tracking Survey, U.S., N=2700 Active Moviegoers age 12–16.

[1] National Research Group, Growing Pains: How today's young people are rewriting the narrative of childhood, 2025, <https://www.nrgmr.com/our-thinking/entertainment/growing-pains-the-scrolls-and-tolls-of-modern-childhood/>

Measuring the Mainstream

The phenomena that break through are the things that make up our mainstream culture. It has become increasingly difficult to understand when something has broken through as older signals have become less relevant in our increasingly digitally mediated culture. Through our research, we have identified three signals that shape the modern version of mainstream and can help us measure the cultural breakthrough of phenomena.

The Three Signals of Mainstream

Visibility

A measure of repeated exposure and awareness across platforms and conversations. At its peak, a topic becomes so ubiquitous that it feels impossible to ignore.

41% of 14- to 44-year-olds believe that something has gotten really big in popular culture when people are watching content about it on YouTube.^[2]

Comprehension

A measure of shared understanding across diverse audiences. At its peak, a topic requires little to no explanation, transforming into a cultural shorthand, an important quality that separates the mainstream from the merely popular.

Participation

A measure of cultural momentum as a result of active engagement with a topic. As it reaches its peak, it reflects widespread participatory behaviors—spanning commenting, sharing, creating, remixing, and purchasing.

Mainstream

41% of 14- to 44-year-olds believe that something has gotten really big in popular culture when they see memes, jokes, or references about it.^[4]

46% of 14- to 44-year-olds believe that something has gotten really big in popular culture when it's being talked about widely online.^[3]

[2], [3], [4]

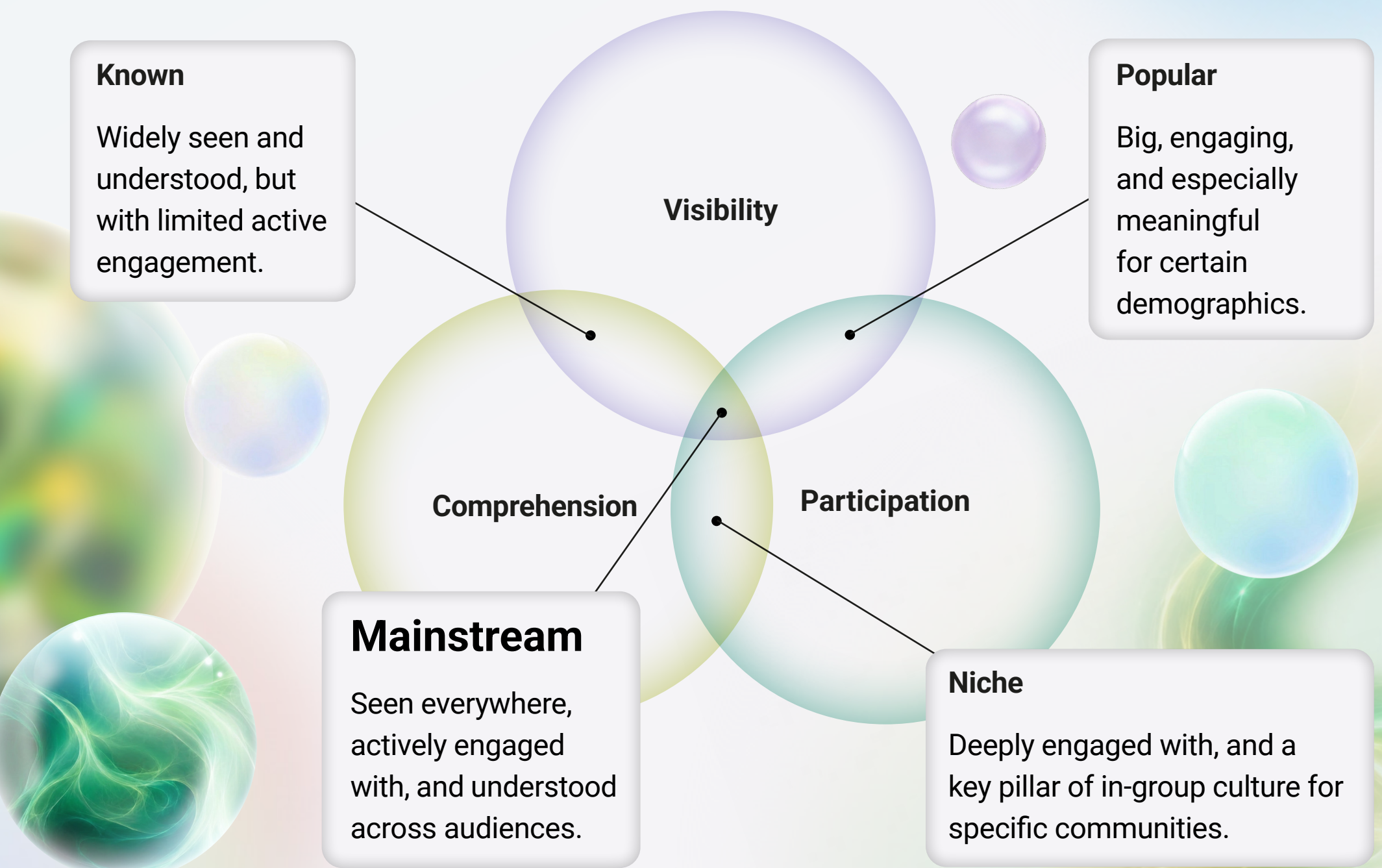
Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online age 14–44.

There's More Than One Way to Matter

Not everything visible becomes mainstream, and not everything meaningful needs to be. Ideas that achieve strong visibility, participation, and comprehension across all audiences become part of the mainstream, while those that fall just short remain outside of it.

On this mainstream map, some ideas are widely known but only strongly embraced by certain audiences. Others may be less visible overall but inspire deep engagement within specific communities. The mainstream sits at the point where all three signals come together: people know it, engage with it, and understand it across a broad range of audiences. Importantly, something does not need to reach that point to be culturally important or successful.

Together, these signals help define four cultural positions: niche, known, popular, and mainstream.

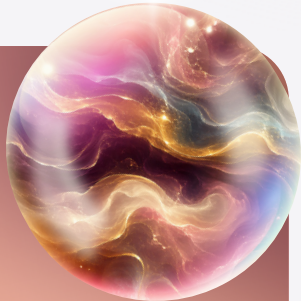


Participation Has Become a Key Driver of the Mainstream

As people spend more of their time online, digital platforms have become the primary environment where people discover and connect with culture. But more than shifting where exposure happens, digital platforms fundamentally transform how audiences experience what they encounter. Digital culture is inherently participatory, and properties that actively embrace these dynamics can accelerate into the mainstream from unexpected places, a shift that has fundamentally reshaped what modern mainstream culture looks like.

This shift is already visible: when asked what many people seem to be into nowadays, digital entities such as YouTube creators (77%) and memes (78%) were perceived to be as widely known as Hollywood celebrities (79%) and the Super Bowl (83%).^[5] This shared belief about what's popular shows online culture has now achieved mainstream status alongside institutional mainstays. Creation and sharing sit at the center of this shift. A majority of those surveyed consider themselves to be content creators, reflecting a world where participation is no longer a niche hobby but a mainstream behavior. When niche communities actively create videos for their peers and share them outwardly, they act as the engine for mainstream breakthroughs. This intense, localized participation is what ultimately strengthens and forces the expansion of the other cultural signals. This proliferation of new content about a topic increases the topic's visibility and provides more access points through which people can understand the topic.

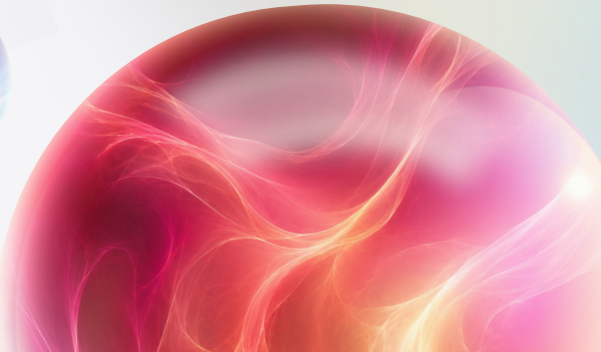
The content people watch reflects this desire to watch community-created content, too: 71% have watched videos unpacking stories within a specific fandom or community, while 69% have watched content from a community they would consider niche.^[6] This is a signal that audiences are actively exploring and helping shape what becomes important next, and that the average person's cultural diet may now consist of more niche ideas than mainstream ones.



70%

of 14- to 44-year-olds describe themselves as video content creators.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online age 14–44.

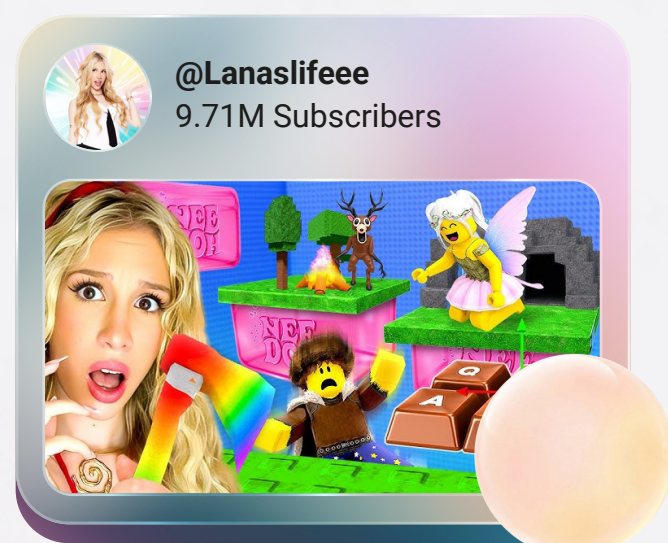


[5], [6] Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online age 14–44.

From Digital Culture, the New Mainstream

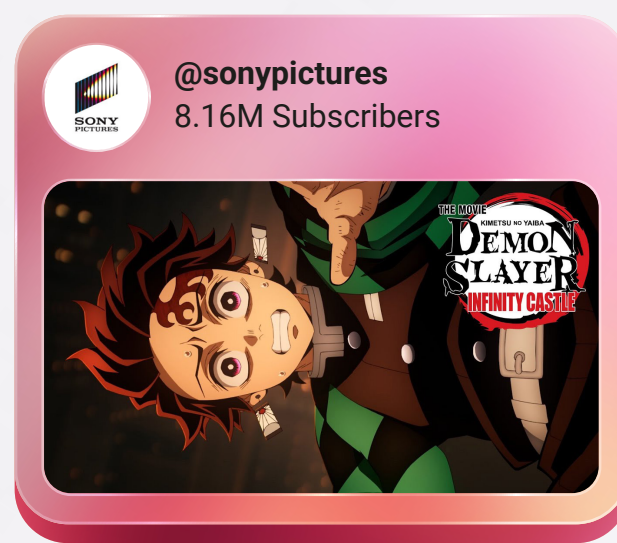
Digital culture has created new pathways to mainstream success. The ideas that break through are those that inspire participation, foster communities, and sustain conversation, building the visibility, participation, and comprehension needed to become mainstream.

Video Games



For more than a decade, video games have expanded beyond their player bases and into mainstream culture. Asking survey respondents about things that “lots of people seem to know about,” the results showed platforms like Minecraft and Roblox (75% recognition) now rival major entertainment franchises like Marvel (84%).^[7] “Grand Theft Auto” best illustrates this shift: sustained momentum through memes, creator content, and livestreams has kept the franchise culturally relevant between releases, helping make “Grand Theft Auto V (2013)” the most profitable entertainment product in history.

Anime



Anime is one of the strongest examples of a niche fandom becoming a global cultural force. While the genre has existed for decades, online communities accelerated its journey from dedicated fan circles into the zeitgeist, demonstrating how sustained participation can transform a highly specific interest into a widely recognized cultural category. “Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba Infinity Castle” exemplified this shift, earning \$70 million in its U.S. opening weekend in 2025, the market’s biggest anime debut ever.

Podcasts



Podcasts, whether audio or video, have become one of the defining media formats of the past decade. More than half of Americans age 12 and above now listen monthly,^[8] while 83% of online audiences age 14–44 have watched a video podcast in the past year.^[9] As audiences increasingly seek deeper explanations, commentary, and conversation around topics they care about, podcasts have become one of the primary ways ideas move from awareness into understanding.

[7], [9] Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online age 14–44.

[8]Source: <https://podcaststatistics.com/>

Success Is Increasingly a Collective Achievement

For decades, authenticity was tied to alternative culture and resisting the pull of the mainstream. For Gen X, “selling out” was the worst thing an artist could do. Millennial hipsters inherited a version of that mindset too, with discovery and niche taste becoming forms of cultural currency.

Today, younger audiences see success differently. In a world where achieving scale is harder than ever, seeing a creator break through is increasingly viewed as a sign of quality rather than compromise. Mainstream acceptance has become a form of validation for both the creator and the community that first supported them.

This reflects the changing role audiences play in building culture. Before, popularity was manufactured top-down by corporations; today, fans help build and validate that success themselves. Communities shape the mainstream by creating, sharing, discussing, and amplifying content.

63%

63% of fans (online 14- to 44-year-olds who identify as fans) agree with the statement, “I feel successful when the person or thing I’m a fan of experiences success”.

Source: Google/SmithGeiger, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2025, N=500 online Gen Z age 14–24.

63% of online 14- to 29-year-olds agree that being into the same things as other people makes them feel part of something bigger, nine points higher than 30- to 44-year-olds (54%) who said the same.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=496 online age 14–29, and N=443 online age 30–44.

63%

As such, consumers feel a genuine sense of ownership when something they love succeeds. Among fans aged 14–44, 60% say they feel proud of the success of a person or thing they support because they believe they played a part in it.^[10]

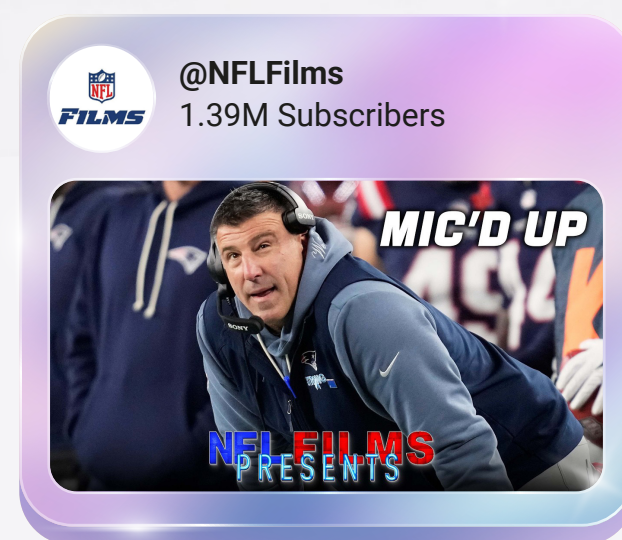
For younger audiences especially, success feels increasingly collective. Creators and properties grow alongside the communities that champion them, turning cultural breakthroughs into shared achievements. Rather than gatekeeping fandoms, audiences want to discover them early, contribute to their growth, and celebrate their success.

[10] Source: Google/SmithGeiger, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2025, N=500 online Gen Z age 14–24.

YouTube Creates New Entry Points into Culture

Every mainstream idea begins with an entry point. Before audiences can participate, share, or understand something, they first need to discover it. Over the last two decades, YouTube has become one of the internet's most important discovery platforms, creating new ways for audiences to enter fandoms, digital communities, and cultural conversations that increasingly shape the mainstream.

Case Study: Fueling The NFL's Digital Expansion



This isn't only true for emerging creators or internet-native culture.

The data shows that established brands also rely on YouTube to reach new generations. YouTube Culture & Trends report, "The Expanding Entertainment Universe of the NFL," showed how the league extended its cultural relevance through digital-first entry points. Across 11 official YouTube channels and countless fan communities, NFL content generated more than 20 billion views in 2025,^[11] with viewership up 250% since 2020.^[12]

56% of 14- to 24-year-old sports fans watch or engage with sports commentary/analysis from creators or fans on at least a weekly basis.

Source: Google/SmithGeiger, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2025, N=365 online Gen Z sports fans age 14–24.

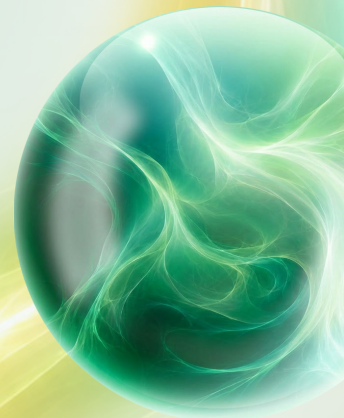
82% of online 14- to 24-year-olds turn to YouTube for content, conversation, or information about what they're a fan of, and of those, 95% use YouTube to consume content about the person or thing they're a fan of at least weekly.

Source: Google/SmithGeiger, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2025, N=405 online Gen Z who use YouTube for fandom age 14–24.

Rather than replacing live broadcasts, these experiences reinforce them. NRG's "The Attention Game" study^[13] found that sports fans who regularly watch highlights and clips spend significantly more time watching live games, making YouTube a key entry point for new generations of fans.

[11], [12] YouTube, Culture & Trends Report, The Expanding Entertainment Universe of the NFL, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/trends/report/tr26-nfl-trends-report/> [13] National Research Group, The Attention Game, 2026, <https://www.nrgmr.com/our-thinking/sports/sports-fans-are-everywhere-now-and-thats-good-news-for-the-live-game/>

YouTube Creates New Entry Points Into Culture



@kanepixels
3.54M Subscribers

Kane Parsons' YouTube channel experienced its largest day of subscriber growth on March 31st, 2026, the day that the trailer was released for "Backrooms."

Source: YouTube data, Global, April 15, 2015–June 30, 2026.

The true breakthrough came when creator Kane Parsons (@KanePixels) adapted that mythology into a series of found-footage films. His first short, "The Backrooms (Found Footage)," went on to amass 90 million views, introducing the concept to new audiences before eventually leading to a theatrical adaptation directed by Parsons himself. The movie opened to \$118 million globally, including \$81.4 million in North America, becoming A24's biggest opening weekend to date and making Parsons the youngest director to top the global box office. What was once a niche concept had grown into a mainstream phenomenon, culminating in a fan-driven theatrical event.

Case Study: Creating Hollywood's Newest Blockbuster

Some of today's biggest cultural phenomena begin online. "The Backrooms", for example, started as a single eerie photograph before an anonymous post transformed it into one of the internet's most enduring collaborative myths. Communities expanded the concept through fan art, theories, stories, and forums, generating more than 15 billion YouTube views for "Backrooms"-related content.^[14]

Backrooms

A24

OFFICIAL TRAILER



@kanepixels
3.54M Subscribers



@A24
1.92M Subscribers

Videos related to the Backrooms have been viewed more than 15 billion times.

Source: YouTube Data, Global, Lifetime.

[14] YouTube Data, Global, Lifetime.

Cultural Understanding Matters and YouTube Plays a Key Role



When people think about what makes something feel culturally significant, the signals are overwhelmingly digital first. When asked which signals make something feel like it has gotten really big in popular culture, online conversation (46%), memes (41%), and people watching content about it on YouTube (41%)^[15] emerge as some of the strongest indicators that an idea had broken through.^[15] More traditional markers of success, such as headlines and sponsorships, rank lower. In other words, culture earns its status through participation and visibility before it receives more traditional recognition.

NRG's survey data reveals YouTube occupies a particularly important role within this process. For many audiences, seeing something discussed, explained, reviewed, or reacted to on the platform helps validate its place within the culture. It acts as a bridge between awareness and understanding, giving people a space to explore why something matters rather than simply discovering that it exists.

At the same time, YouTube remains one of the primary places where audiences deepen their personal interests, turning short-term attention into long-term cultural relevance. In an era where visibility is abundant, understanding has become the scarcer resource. Increasingly, YouTube is where audiences make sense of culture and decide what is worth caring about.

65%

of 14- to 44-year-olds agree that something feels more real or legitimate when they see it show up on YouTube.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.

73%

of 14- to 44-year-olds agree that YouTube is the best place for them to deeply explore their interests.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.

72%

of 14- to 44-year-olds agree that they stay interested in things long after they discover them because of YouTube.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.

[15] Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.

Digital Culture Is Becoming Mainstream Culture

Despite the compounding impact of digital amplification, real-world conversation remains the single strongest signal that something which has truly broken through is worth people's time. Culture may start in our feeds, but it achieves a different significance when it transcends them. Increasingly, that movement is happening in real time, as digital phenomena travel into our everyday discourse and even physical spaces through adaptations, live experiences, and entirely new cultural formats.

As properties achieve undeniable scale online, traditional entertainment industries have started to adapt to this new reality.

42%

of 14- to 44-year-olds think that something feels like it's worth their time when people they know in real life are talking about it.

Source: NRG, YouTube Trends Survey, U.S. April 2026, N=939 online people age 14–44.



@MrBeast
514M Subscribers

But big-budget adaptations and cross-platform deals are symptoms of the broader cultural shift rather than the source of it. They are extensions of a mainstream status that has already been won. We see this as gaming properties like Minecraft and Five Nights at Freddy's expand into blockbuster film franchises, digital-native stories like "Backrooms" leap from YouTube to movie theaters, and creators like **Markiplier** leverage independent community support to bring projects like Iron Lung to the big screen.

Having already built massive, mainstream engagement on their own terms, digital-native creators and concepts are actively expanding into traditional entertainment spaces. Traditional industry recognition—whether it's **MrBeast** expanding into streaming via Beast Games or **Kareem Rahma's** "Subway Takes" securing a Primetime Emmy nomination—is simply acknowledgment of a cultural center of gravity that has already shifted.

How Culture Works Now

Mainstream Hasn't Disappeared, It's Been Rebuilt

Despite widespread perceptions of fragmentation, strong broad-based agreement still exists around major cultural touchpoints. What has changed is not the existence of mainstream culture, but the path toward it. Today's mainstream is built through a combination of visibility, participation, and comprehension.

Communities Are Replacing Institutions as Cultural Gatekeepers

Cultural influence is no longer concentrated among a handful of broadcasters, publishers, and entertainment brands. Instead, online communities are the entities that determine what gains momentum, gets shared, and, ultimately, breaks through.

Comprehension Is the New Gateway to the Mainstream

The ideas with the greatest impact are those that move beyond awareness to shared understanding. The biggest cultural phenomena develop a meaning that travels beyond the communities that first embraced them, becoming recognizable across a wide array of differing audiences, demographics, and communities.

Digital Culture Is Redefining the Mainstream

Internet-native properties now achieve levels of awareness and engagement comparable to long-established entertainment institutions, while platforms like YouTube help transform niche interests into both visible and broadly understood cultural phenomena. By providing a space for explanation, commentary, and participation, YouTube acts as a layer of cultural validation, helping ideas move from fleeting attention into lasting relevance.

Success Is Increasingly a Collective Achievement

Younger audiences are much less likely to view success as a sign of selling out and more likely to celebrate it. As communities become active participants in those successes, they increasingly see the rise of creators and fandoms as something they have a personal stake in.