Bitly’s New Data Says SEOs Are Half Right About Short Links via @sejournal, @gregjarboe



SEOs have spent the better part of 15 years telling clients to keep bit.ly links out of anything that matters. The case against them goes like this. A generic short link hides the brand and the keywords that a reader would otherwise see in the URL, it makes people suspicious, and it hands control of your links to somebody else.

A new Bitly survey of 1,507 Americans says that case is half right. But the half SEOs have been ignoring is costing more clicks than the half we keep arguing about.

Jenny Coppola, Bitly’s senior director of brand and content, published “The Click Expectation Report” on the Bitly blog on Sept. 29. It draws on 1,006 U.S. consumers and 501 U.S. marketers and creators surveyed between July 27 and Aug. 5, 2026.

Yes, a link management company ran a study that concludes you need link management. I'll come back to that. But the consumer data inside the report is more useful to SEO, paid media, and social teams than the sales pitch wrapped around it, and it's worth reading before your next planning meeting.

What SEOs Got Right, And What The Data Adds

Start with the part of the old argument that holds up. When Bitly asked consumers what makes them hesitate before clicking a link, 23% named generic shorteners that hide the brand's name.

That's a real cost. It also sits near the bottom of the list. Safety or security concerns about the URL topped it at 57%, followed by links that feel like clickbait (52%), vague descriptions of where the link goes (44%), and a mismatch between a creator's usual content and the destination (42%).

Long URLs packed with tracking characters bothered 28% of consumers. That's five points more than generic shorteners, which is inside the survey's margin of error, so call it a tie. The UTM-heavy URLs many of us paste into social posts to protect attribution look no better to consumers than the bit.ly links we tell clients to avoid.

On the other side of the ledger, 48% of consumers said a custom branded short link builds the recognition that makes them comfortable clicking. That was the top factor in the survey, ahead of personal trust in the brand or creator sharing the link (44%) and clear copy explaining where the link leads (43%).

The link equity objection was answered a long time ago. In 2011, Google's Matt Cutts said in a Webmaster Help video that shorteners using 301 redirects pass PageRank to the

destination like any other 301, as Search Engine Journal reported at the time.

The ownership objection still has teeth. Google announced in 2024 that its own goo.gl short links would stop working on Aug. 25, 2025, and then reversed course weeks before the deadline for links that still saw activity. If Google came that close to breaking its own short links, any vendor can break yours. To me, that argues for a branded short domain your company owns, rather than a vendor's domain hard-coded into every post you've ever published.

See also: When Direct Means We Don't Know: CMOs Need To Rethink Attribution In AI Search

The Bigger Leak Is The Homepage

Now the half SEOs have been missing.

79% of consumers said they had abandoned an action because a social link sent them to a generic homepage instead of the product featured in the post. Only 8% of consumers expect a social video link to land on a homepage, while 61% expect a product page.

And yet 39% of marketers and 30% of creators named the generic homepage as a top destination for their social video links. Across both groups, 34% admitted their own social video links usually route there.

The rest of the abandonment list reads like a technical SEO audit. Excessive redirects or browser security warnings drove away 76% of consumers. Another 76% walked when the promo code promised in the post wasn't on the page. Forced app installs or app store redirects cost 69%, pages that weren't built for mobile cost 51%, and the wrong region, language, or currency cost 49%.

The mobile number splits sharply by age. Only 41% of Baby

Boomers said a non-mobile page made them abandon, compared with 61% to 62% of Millennials and Gen Z. iOS users were more likely than Android users to bail on a page that wasn't built for mobile (57% vs. 47%).

My view is that anyone who has argued about search intent should recognize this immediately. A homepage at the end of a product link is an intent mismatch, with a thumb tap standing in for the query. We would never accept it in paid search, where Google rates landing page experience on how relevant the page is to the people who click the ad. We accept it on social media every day because nobody on the SEO team owns those links.

The redirect finding deserves a second look too, because a short link adds a hop. If that hop leads to a tracking redirect, which leads to a regional redirect, which leads to an app store prompt, you've built exactly the chain that 76% of consumers say makes them leave.

See also: How To Design URL Structures For AI Retrieval, Not Just Rankings

93% Are Withholding Clicks On Purpose

This is the number I keep coming back to.

93% of consumers said they had avoided clicking a link on purpose, just to keep their algorithm from serving them more of that content. 43% said they do it always or often, and among Gen Z and Millennials that figure rises to 45%.

Click-through rate has always stood in for interest. This survey suggests a large share of interested people decline to click precisely because they know the click will be counted and used to shape what they see next.

That fits what SEOs already see in zero-click search and AI answers, where people get what they need without visiting a site. Clicks were never a clean measure of interest, and people are now deciding how they want to be profiled one tap at a time. Low click-through can sit alongside high attention. If CTR is the only signal in your report, you're missing some of the people you actually reached.

Trust Depends On Who Shares The Link, And Where

LinkedIn was the platform consumers trusted most when deciding whether to click a link, at 19%. YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit tied at 17% each. With a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 points on the consumer sample, that's a four-way statistical tie, and the overall ranking matters far less than the splits underneath it.

Instagram was Gen Z's top pick at 33%, nearly double the 18% of Millennials who said the same. LinkedIn climbed with age, becoming the top choice for Gen X (22%) and Baby Boomers (24%). TikTok fell at every generational step, from 12% among Gen Z to 2% among Boomers. Reddit belonged to Millennials, at 21%.

That Reddit number should catch the eye of anyone tracking where AI answers pull their citations. The platform that a large slice of 30- and 40-somethings trusts for links is also one whose visibility in AI answers SEOs already track closely, and that overlap is worth watching.

Who shares the link matters as much as where. Consumers trusted corporate brands more than independent creators for six of the seven link types in the survey. The widest gap was app or software downloads, where brands drew 88% of trust and creators 12%. Curated resource lists were the one exception, splitting evenly at 50/50.

The practical read is simple. People trust a brand to handle a transaction and trust a creator to point them toward something worth their time. If your creator program sends followers straight to an app download, you're asking creators to spend trust they don't have.

Attribution Is Broken From Both Ends

Marketers and creators told Bitly they expect links in social profiles and content to drive an average of 39% of their revenue over the next 12 months. That's a lot of revenue to forecast from a channel most of them can't fully measure.

Difficulty tracking traffic across channels and formats was the top challenge overall, cited by 36% of marketers and creators (41% of marketers, 30% of creators). Connecting platform analytics to website or campaign data tripped up 29% of marketers but only 17% of creators. In-app browsers stripping tracking parameters or cookies hit creators harder, 27% vs. 18% for marketers.

The two groups also measure differently. Marketers lean most on native link tracking inside social media management platforms (39%). Creators lean most on post-purchase or post-signup surveys that simply ask customers how they found the product (33%). Marketers use manual UTM parameters nearly three times as often as creators, 23% vs. 8%, and 10% of creators and 3% of marketers aren't measuring their links at all.

For SEOs, the lost social clicks don't vanish. When an in-app browser drops the referrer or the parameters, those visits tend to show up in analytics as direct or unattributed traffic, which muddies every channel report that sits next to organic.

Read The Methodology Before You Quote The Numbers

The survey was fielded through an opt-in online research panel, and the results are unweighted. Bitly gives margins of error “assuming a simple random sample,” which an opt-in panel isn’t. An AAPOR task force on online panels advised back in 2010 that “claims of ‘representativeness’ should be avoided” for this kind of sample.

A few other details are worth knowing before you put a slide in front of a client. The claim that custom domain links see a 2.3x lift in clicks comes from Bitly’s sales copy, not from the survey, and the report doesn’t say how it was measured. The FAQ cites figures, such as 34% of marketers relying on link management tools and 29% using link-in-bio pages, that don’t appear in the body of the report. And the infographic describes the 79% as abandoning “a purchase,” while the text says “an action.” Use the text.

None of that makes the findings useless. It makes them directional. Quote them as “Bitly’s survey found,” not “consumers say,” and you’ll be on solid ground.

How To Apply This To Your Strategy

You don’t need to buy anything to act on this report. Here’s where I’d start.

1. Audit where your social links actually land. Pull every link in your bios, pinned posts, video descriptions, and recent paid social ads into one sheet, with the destination URL next to each. Then check your analytics landing page report for social sessions. Any link that promises a product and delivers the homepage gets repointed to the product or category page, and any mobile app link gets a deep link with a web fallback instead of an app store detour.

2. Put your short links on a domain you own. If your team uses short links at all, move them to a branded short domain or subdomain your company controls, whichever vendor you pick. Keep the chain to a single 301 hop, tuck the UTM parameters behind the short link so the visible URL stays clean, and ask the vendor in writing how you'd export and repoint your links if you ever leave.

3. Tag brand traffic and creator traffic differently. Write a UTM convention that separates links your brand posts from links creators share, with the creator's handle in a consistent field. Then open those links inside the Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn in-app browsers and confirm the parameters survive the trip, because the survey says they often don't.

4. Borrow the creators' attribution survey. Add a "How did you hear about us?" question to checkout or signup. It's the measurement method creators trust most, and it catches the visits that analytics files under direct. Report it next to branded search volume and direct traffic, so a low CTR doesn't hide the 93% who saw your post and chose not to click.

The Net-Net

I've been skeptical of vendor research for as long as I've covered this industry, and this report earns some of that skepticism. Every recommendation in it leads to a Bitly feature.

But the consumer data underneath points somewhere SEOs should already feel at home. Send people to the page they were promised, from a source they recognize, and be honest about what your analytics can't see. That's search intent and trust, applied to the link in a TikTok bio instead of a blue link on page one.

We were right to distrust the generic short link. We were

wrong to stop caring where it went.

More Resources:

Featured Image: Viktoriia_M/Shutterstock

https://www.searchenginejournal.com/bitlys-new-data-says-seos-are-half-right-about-short-links/593983/