

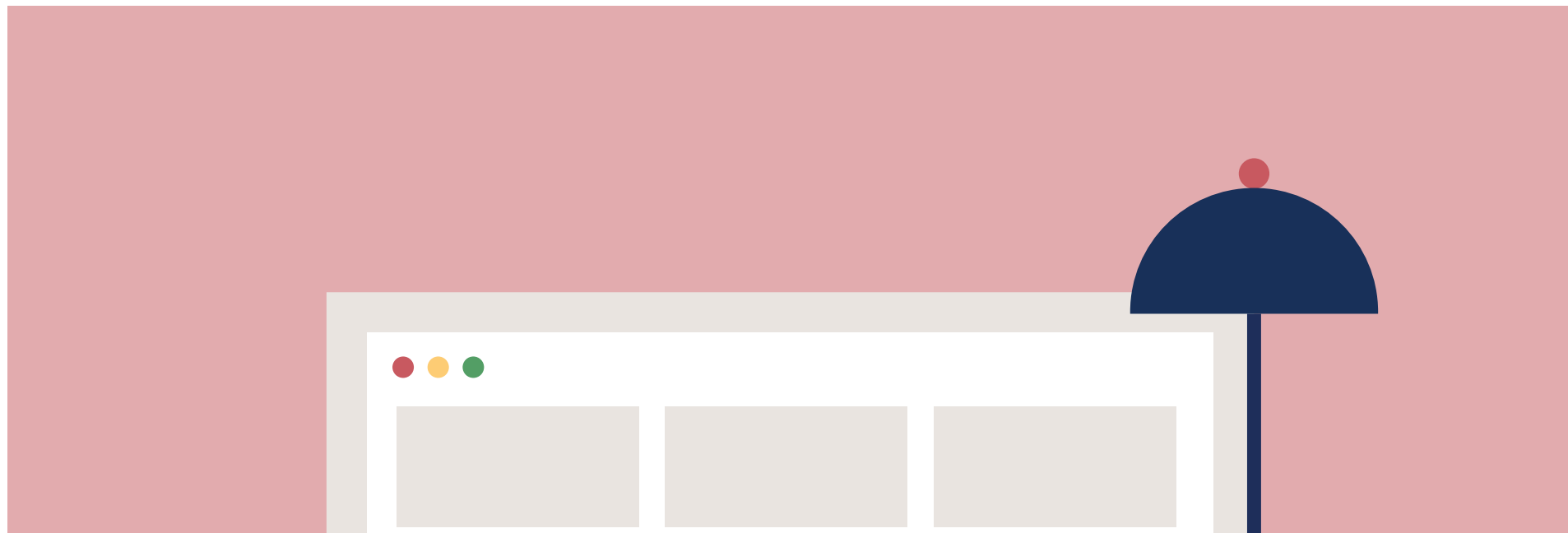
Strategy

How Does the YouTube Algorithm Work in 2021? The Complete Guide

Looking to increase your YouTube video views? Step one: find out what's new with the YouTube algorithm and how it ranks your content.

Paige Cooper

June 21, 2021





People around the world watch over 1 billion hours of YouTube videos every day—everything from cat videos to videos for cats. The YouTube algorithm is the recommendation system that decides which videos YouTube suggests to those [2 billion-plus human users](#) (and untold numbers of feline users).

This begs an important question for marketers, influencers, and creators alike: how do you get the YouTube algorithm to recommend *your* videos and help you [earn more likes](#)?

In this blog post we'll cover what the algorithm is (and isn't), go over the most recent changes for 2021, and show you how the pros work with YouTube's search and discovery systems to get videos in front of eyeballs.

YouTube Algorithm Guide

[A brief history of the YouTube algorithm](#)

[How YouTube determines the algorithm](#)

[How does the YouTube algorithm work in 2021?](#)

[7 tips to improve your organic reach on YouTube](#)

Bonus: Download the free 30-day plan to grow your YouTube

following fast, a daily workbook of challenges that will help you kickstart your Youtube channel growth and track your success. Get real results after one month.

A brief history of the YouTube algorithm

First, let's do a quick overview of how the word “algorithm” became so omni-present in all of our lives.

2005 – 2011: Optimizing for clicks & views

According to founder Jawed Karim (a.k.a. the star of [Me at the zoo](#)), YouTube was created in 2005 in order to [crowdsource video of Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake's notorious Superbowl performance](#). So it should come as no surprise that for many years, the YouTube algorithm recommended the videos that attracted the most views or clicks.

Alas, this led to a proliferation of misleading titles and thumbnails—in other words, **clickbait**. User experience plummeted as videos left people feeling tricked, unsatisfied, or plain old annoyed.

2012: Optimizing for watch time

In 2012, YouTube adjusted its recommendation system to support time spent watching each video, as well as time spent on the platform overall. When people find videos valuable and interesting (or so the theory goes) they watch them for longer, perhaps even to the end.

This led some creators to try to make their videos shorter in order to make it more likely viewers would watch to completion, whereas others made their videos longer in order to increase watch time overall. YouTube didn't endorse either of these tactics, and maintained the party line: make videos your audience wants to watch, and the algorithm will reward you.

That said, as anyone who has ever spent any time on the internet knows, *time spent* is not necessarily equivalent to *quality time spent*. YouTube changed tack again.

2015-2016: Optimizing for satisfaction

In 2015, YouTube began measuring viewer satisfaction directly with user surveys as well as prioritizing direct response metrics like Shares, Likes and Dislikes (and, of course, the especially brutal “not interested” button.)

In 2016, YouTube released a whitepaper describing some of the inner workings of its AI: [Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations](#).

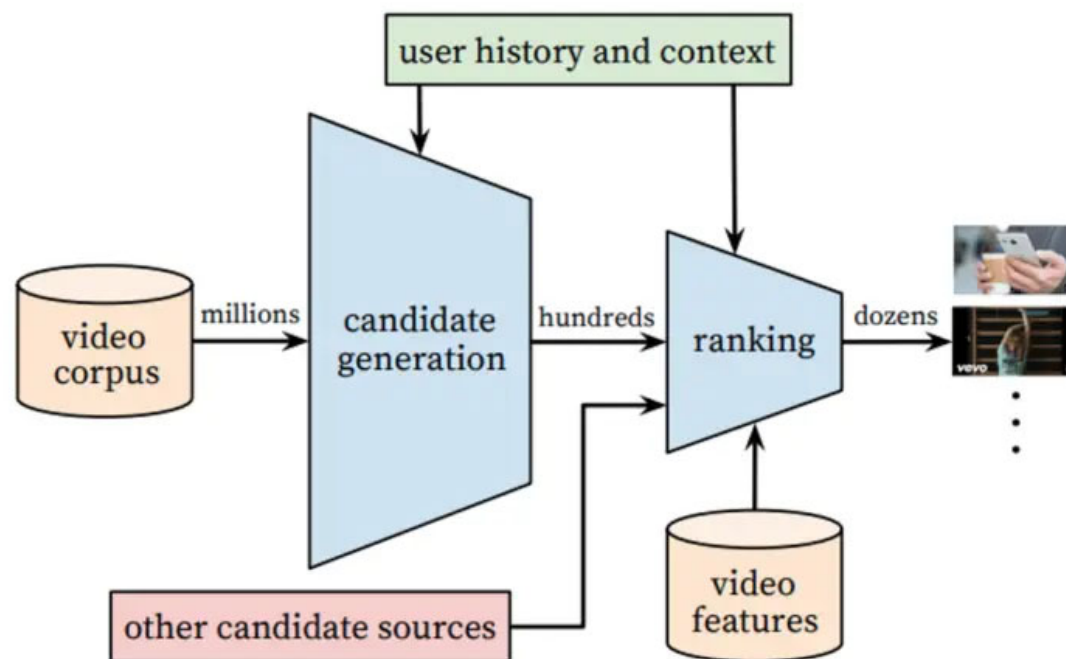


Figure 2: Recommendation system architecture demonstrating the “funnel” where candidate videos are retrieved and ranked before presenting only a few to the user.

Source: [Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations](#)

In short, the algorithm had gotten way more personal. The goal was to find the video **each particular viewer wants to watch**, not just the video that lots of other people have perhaps watched in the past.

As a result, in 2018, YouTube's Chief product officer mentioned on a panel that **70% of watch time on YouTube is spent watching videos the algorithm recommends.**

2016-present: Dangerous content, demonetization, and brand safety

Over the years, YouTube's size and popularity has resulted in an increasing number of content moderation issues, and what the algorithm recommends has become a serious topic not just for creators and advertisers, but in the news and government.

YouTube has said it is serious about its responsibility to support a diverse range of opinions while reducing the spread of harmful misinformation. Algorithm changes enacted in early 2019, for example, have **reduced consumption of borderline content by 70%**. (YouTube defines borderline content as content that doesn't quite violate **community guidelines** but is harmful or misleading. **Violative content, on the other hand, is immediately removed.**)

This issue affects creators, who fear accidentally running afoul of ever-changing community guidelines and being punished with strikes, demonetization, or worse. (And in fact, according to CEO Susan Wojcicki, one of [YouTube's priorities for 2021 is increasing transparency for community guidelines](#) for creators). It also affects brands and advertisers, who don't want their name and logo running alongside white supremacists.

Meanwhile, American politicians are increasingly concerned with the societal role of social media algorithms like YouTube's. YouTube (and other platforms) have been summoned to account for their algorithms at Senate hearings, and in early 2021 Democrats introduced a ["Protecting Americans from Dangerous Algorithms Act."](#)

Next, let's talk about what we know about how this dangerous beast works.

How does the YouTube algorithm work in 2021?

The YouTube algorithm selects videos for viewers with two goals in mind: **finding the right video for each viewer**, and **enticing them to keep watching**.

When we talk about “the algorithm,” we’re talking about three related but slightly different selection or discovery systems:

- one that selects videos for the **YouTube homepage**;
- one that ranks results for any given **search**; and
- one that selects **suggested videos** for viewers to watch next.

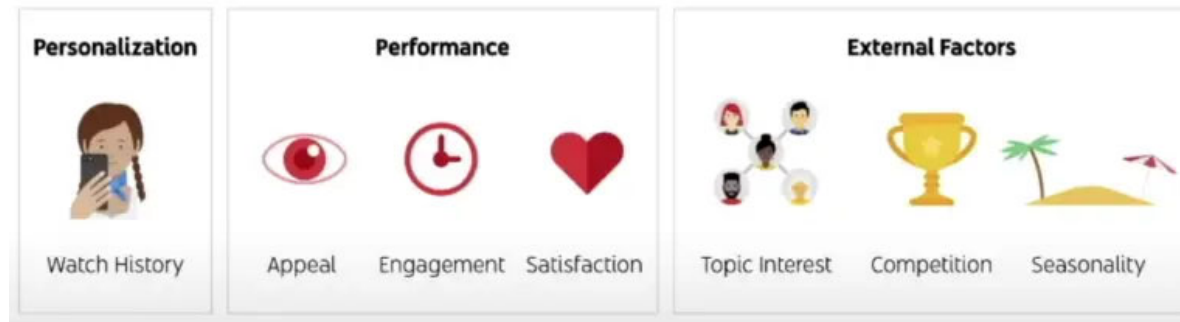
[YouTube says](#) that in 2021, homepage and suggested videos are usually the top sources of traffic for most channels. Except for explainer or instructional videos (i.e., “how to tune up a bicycle”), which often see the most traffic from search, instead.

How YouTube determines the algorithm

Which ranking signals does YouTube use to decide which videos to show to people?

Each traffic source is slightly different. But ultimately, what affects your video’s view count is a mix of:

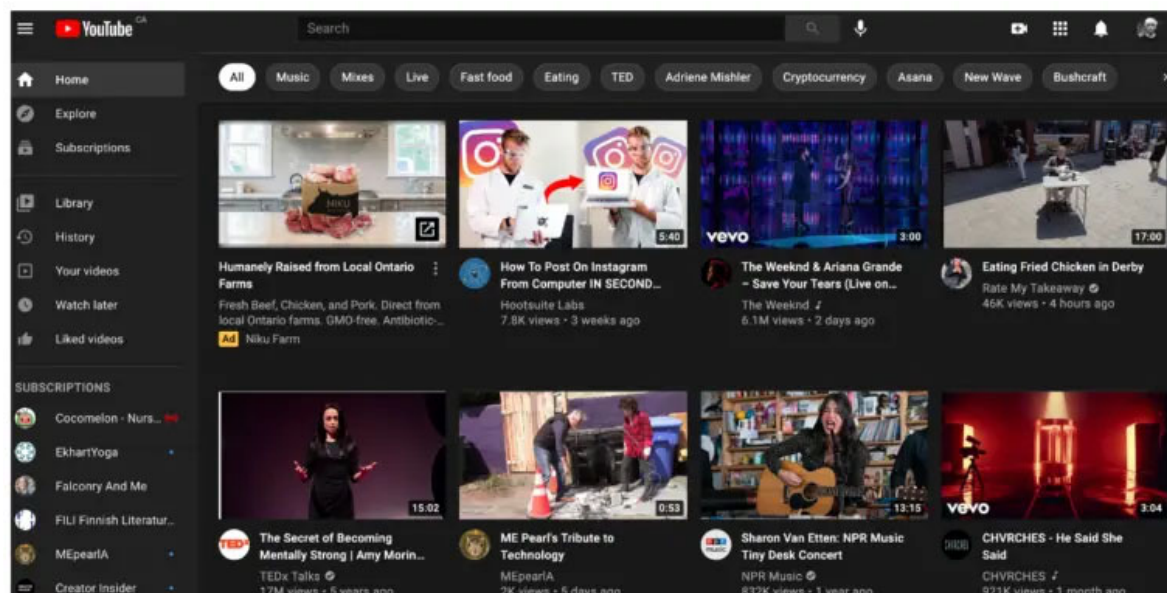
- **personalization** (the viewer’s history and preferences)
- **performance** (the video’s success)
- **external factors** (the overall audience or market)



Source: [Creator Insider](#)

How YouTube determines its homepage algorithm

Every time a person opens their YouTube app or types in youtube.com, the YouTube algorithm offers up a diverse array of videos that it thinks that person might like to watch.



This selection is often broad because the algorithm hasn't yet figured out what the viewer wants: acoustic covers of pop songs? Inspirational anti-procrastination speeches? To catch up with their favorite possum vlogger?

Videos get selected for the homepage based on two types of ranking signal:

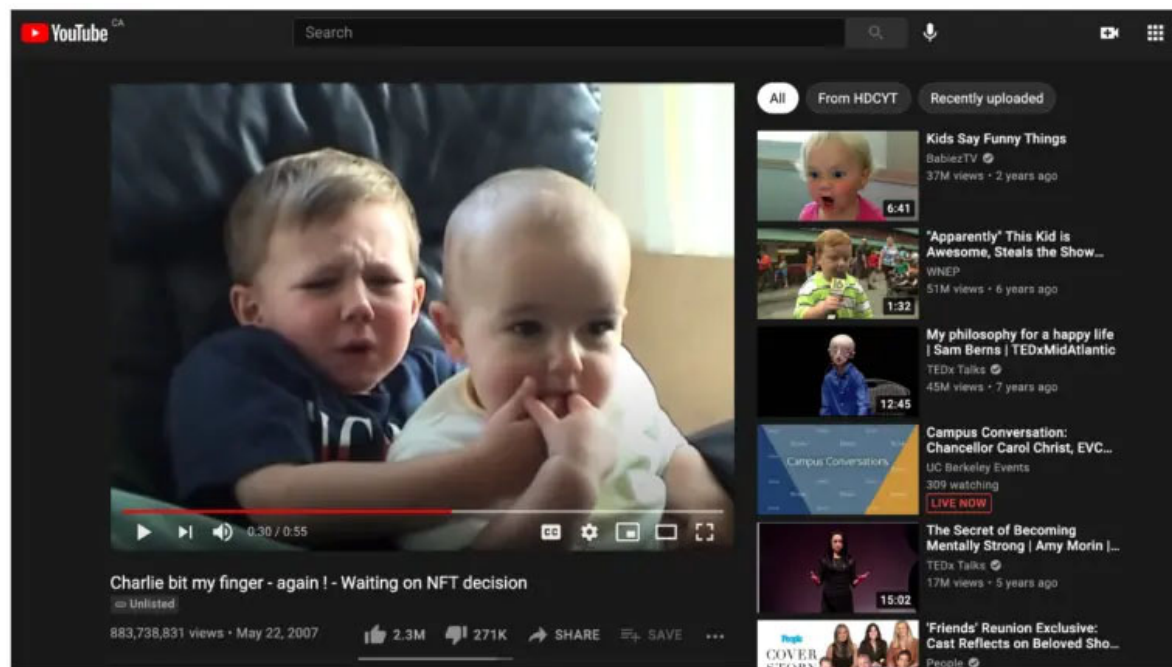
- **Performance:** YouTube measures performance with metrics like **click-through rate, average view duration, average percentage viewed, likes, dislikes, and viewer surveys**. Essentially, after you upload a video the algorithm shows it to a few users on the homepage, and if it appeals to, engages, and satisfies those viewers

(i.e., they click on it, watch it all the way through, like it, share it, etc.) then it gets offered to more and more viewers on their homepages.

- **Personalization:** However, YouTube is not a trending tab. Personalization means that YouTube offers videos to people that it thinks are **relevant to their interests based on their past behaviour**, a.k.a. watch history. If a user likes certain topics or watches a lot of a particular channel, more of the same will be offered up. This factor is also sensitive to changes in behaviour over time as a person's interests and affinities rise and fade.

How YouTube determines its suggested video algorithm

When suggesting videos for people to watch *next*, YouTube employs slightly different considerations. After a person has watched a few videos during a visit, the algorithm has more of an idea about what a person is interested in today, so it offers up some options on the right side of the screen:



Here, in addition to performance and personalization, the algorithm is most likely to recommend:

- Videos that are often watched together
- Topically related videos
- Videos the user has watched in the past

Pro Tip: For creators, using YouTube Analytics to check out what other videos your audience has watched can help you zero in on what broader or related topics and interests your audience cares about.

Pro Tip #2: Making a sequel to your most successful video is a tried-and-true technique. Ryan Higa [went viral with a video about singing technique](#)—he didn't drop the sequel until three years later, but timing is up to you, really.

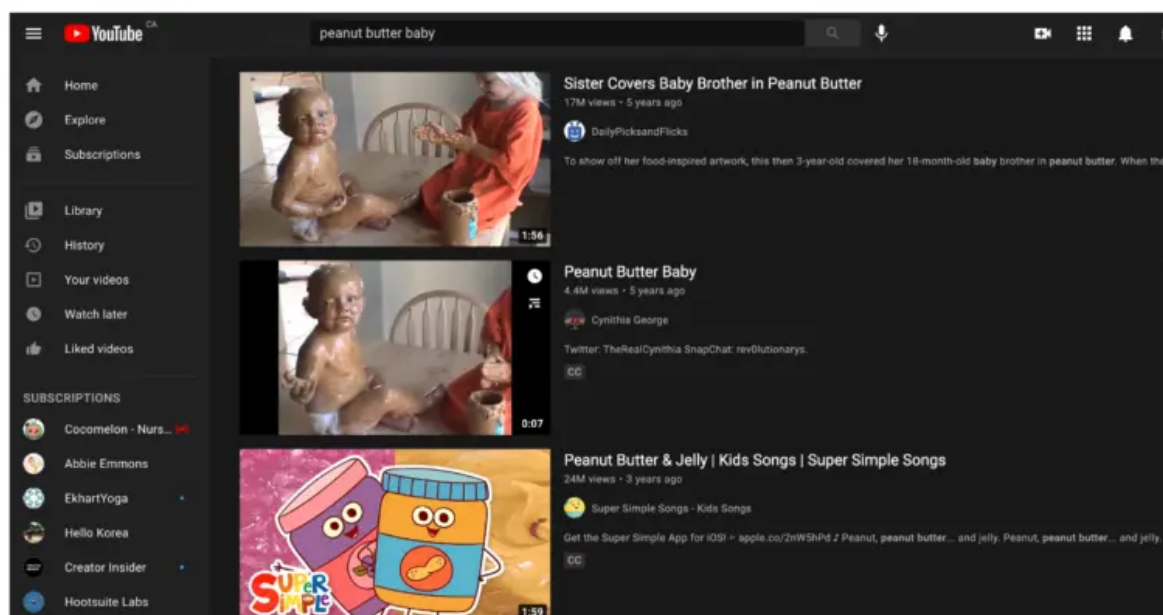
How To Sing Like Your Favorite Artist (pt.2)



How YouTube determines its search algorithm

YouTube is as much a search engine as it is a video platform, meaning that a little bit of SEO know-how is important.

Sure, sometimes people go to YouTube to hunt down a specific video to watch (hello again, [peanut butter baby](#)). But even then, the algorithm decides how to rank the search results when you type in “peanut butter baby”.



How do you get your video to rank near the top of search?

- **Keywords:** Youtube’s search algorithm relies on the keywords you use in your video’s metadata to decide what your video is about. So if you want your video to show up when people search for videos about laparoscopic surgery, you probably want to include those two words. (We have plenty more keyword advice below, so keep reading.)

- **Performance:** After the algorithm has decided what your video is, it will test that hypothesis by showing it to people in search results. That's when performance (click-through rate, watch time, likes, survey feedback, etc.) becomes important. If your video appeals to and satisfies people looking for your keywords, it will be shown to even more people, and climb up the SERPs.

7 tips to improve your organic reach on YouTube

All that said, when it comes to working with the YouTube algorithm, remember that **the algorithm follows the audience**. If you already have a [YouTube marketing plan](#) in place, these tips will help you grow your channel's impact with your viewers.

Do your keyword research

There's no human being sitting at YouTube headquarters watching your video and ranking it.

Instead, the algorithm looks at your metadata as it decides what the video is about, which videos or categories it's related to, and who might want to watch it. When it comes to describing your video for the algorithm, you want to use **accurate, concise language that people are already using when they search**.

Because YouTube is a search engine as much as a video platform, you can conduct your keyword research in the same way you would for a blog post or web copy: using free tools like Google Adwords or SEMrush.

Once you've identified your primary keywords, you'll want to use them in four places:

- In the video's file name (i.e., laparoscopic-appendectomy.mov)
- In the video's title (using catchy natural language like “Real life step by step laparoscopic appendectomy”)
- In the [YouTube video description](#) (especially within the first two lines, above the fold)
- In the video's script (and therefore in the video's subtitles and closed captions—which means uploading an SRT file).

But there's one place you *don't* need to put your keywords:

- In the video's tags. According to Youtube, [tags “play a minimal role in video discovery”](#) and are most helpful if your keyword or channel name is often misspelled. (i.e., laporoscopic, lapparoscopic, appendictomy, apendectomy, etc.)

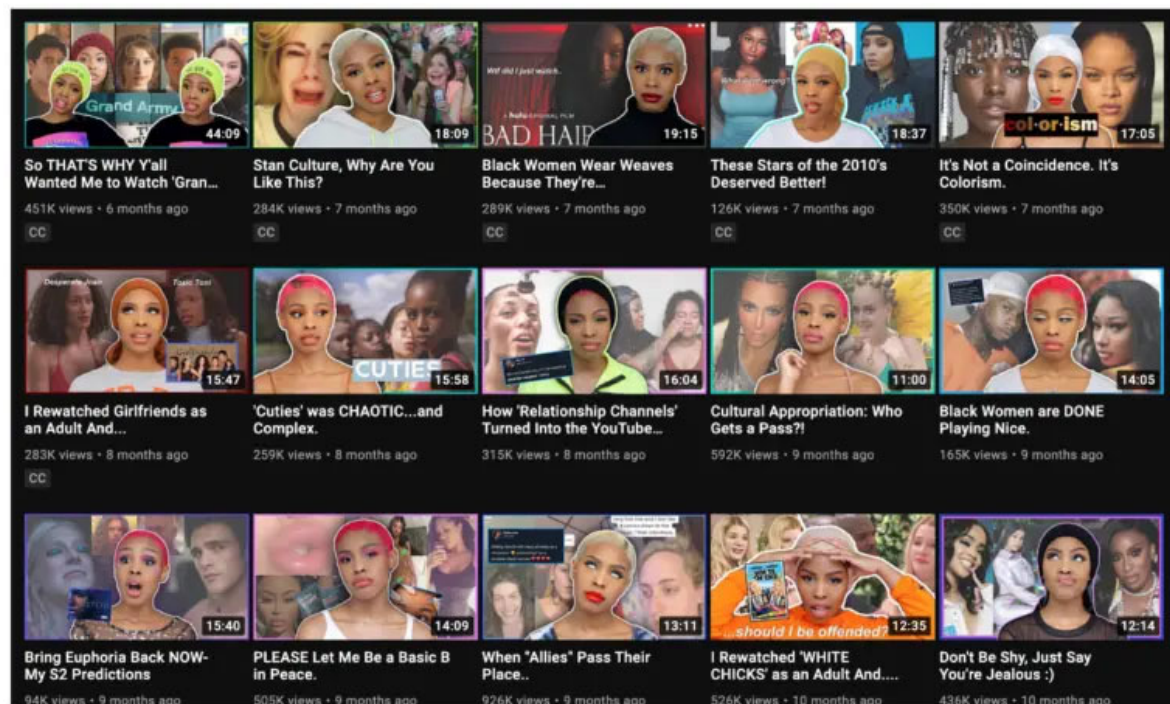
Make it impossible for people to resist clicking on your thumbnail

But without being clickbaity, obviously.

“Appeal” is the word YouTube uses to describe how a video entices a person to take a risk (albeit a minor one) and watch something new. To maximize your video’s appeal:

- Upload a custom thumbnail (and keep the visual style consistent across all your thumbnails)
- Write an intriguing, catchy title—the kind you can’t not click on
- Remember the first sentence or so of the description will show up in search, so make it interesting and relevant.

For example, [Tee Noir’s pop culture commentary channel](#) uses a consistent, energetic template: thumbnails featuring her face (with a clear emotion), and conversational, direct titles. The background image almost always informs the title in some way, creating a compellingly clickable package.



Source: *Tee Noir*

Keep people watching your video, and all your videos

Once you have a viewer watching one video, make it easy for them to keep watching your content, and stay within your channel's ecosystem. To this end, use:

- Cards: flag relevant other videos in your video
- End screens: end with a CTA to watch another relevant video

- Playlists: of topically similar video
- Subscription watermarks (for more on converting viewers to subscribers, read our guide to [getting more YouTube subscribers](#))

Pro Tip: Making a video series is a great way to capitalize on a recent spike in viewers.

If a video of [your 12-year-old child singing a cover](#) went viral, perhaps more covers are in order. You can publish a series all at once for binge watching, or drop them regularly to keep people coming back, depending on your strategy.

Attract views from other sources

Views that don't come from the YouTube algorithm can still inform your success with the algorithm. For instance: [YouTube ads](#), external sites, [cross-promoting on social media](#), and partnerships with other channels or brands can all help you earn views and subscribers, depending on your strategy.

The algorithm really won't punish your video for having a lot of traffic coming from off-site (a blog post, for example). This is important because click-through-rates and view duration often tank when the bulk of a video's traffic is from ads or an external site.

According to YouTube's product team, **the algorithm only pays attention to how a video performs in context**. So, a video that performs well on the homepage will be surfaced to more people on the homepage, no matter what its metrics from blog views look like.

Pro Tip: Embedding a YouTube video in your blog or website is great for both your blog's Google SEO as well as your video's view counts on YouTube. Just like so:

The REAL way to get free YouTube subscribers (hint: don't buy them



Engage with comments and other channels

In order for your audience to grow, you need to nurture your relationships with your viewers. For many viewers, part of YouTube's appeal is feeling closer to creators than they do to traditional celebrities.

Relationship-building with your viewers and other creators can build bridges that will help you all the way down the line. Hootsuite's community engagement tools are a great way to stay on top of this.

How to Engage Your YouTube Community Using Hootsuite



Give the people what they want

More than anything else, in a time of content saturation, people want quality. The algorithm prioritizes satisfaction for each individual user. So find your niche and lean into it.

To help, [YouTube says](#) it's working on collecting more satisfaction metrics and providing it to creators in their analytics

As Yorkshireman Danny Malin found when his YouTube channel [Rate My Takeaway](#) went viral in 2020, once you find your formula, rinse and repeat.

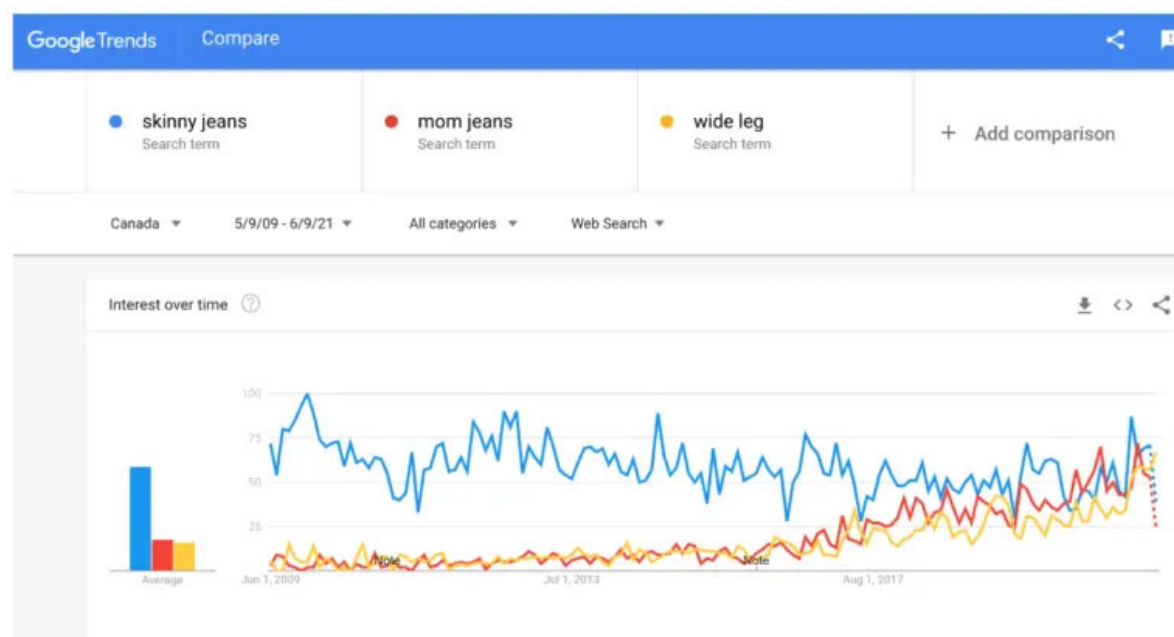
This Grandma in Bolton Cooked & Sold Me Breakfast from her HOU



Pro Tip: While YouTube certainly supports the idea of uploading consistently in order to build and maintain a relationship with your audience, [it's a myth](#) that the algorithm will punish you for publishing too frequently or not frequently enough. Audience growth has no correlation with time between uploads.

Evolve by experimenting

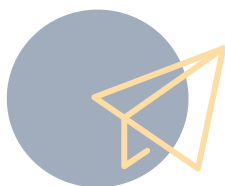
At the same time, keeping an eye on [Google Trends](#) and leaving yourself room for experimentation means you won't get left behind when the zeitgeist turns on a dime. (I'm looking at you, skinny jeans.)



Take courage from the fact that if an experiment really bombs, that low-performing video won't down-rank your channel or future videos in any way. (Unless you have truly alienated your audience to the point where they don't want to watch you anymore.) Your videos all have an equal chance to earn viewers, according to [YouTube's product team](#).

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By Paige Cooper

Paige Cooper is a lapsed librarian turned copywriter turned inbound marketing strategist who spends her days growing the Hootsuite Labs YouTube channel.

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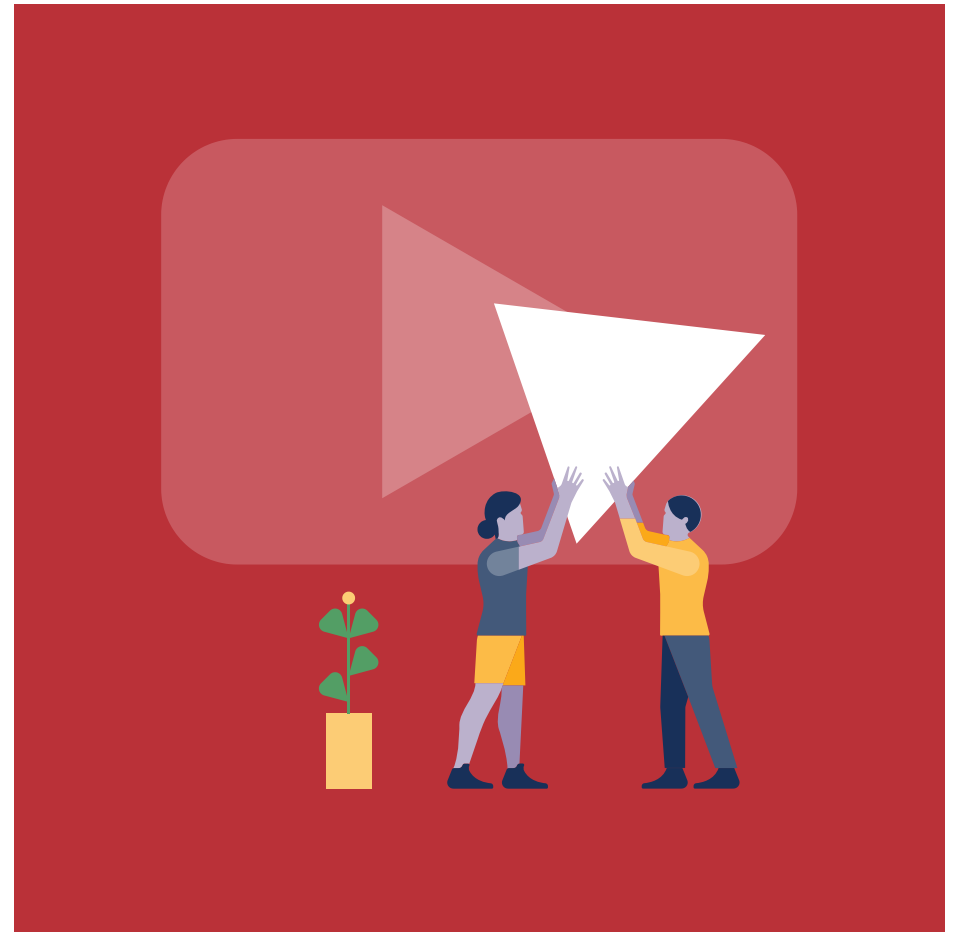


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