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YouTube: Desktop v Mobile Design

Today YouTube might be synonymous with video hosting. In the same way one says “just Google it” to mean to search for something on the Internet, a person saying “you should YouTube that!” means you have an idea or an activity that others would want to watch. Another thing true these days is users access that content in various ways. To stay relevant, a user must be able to have an experience on their phone that is just as meaningful as the experience they would have on their lap- or desktop. But meaningfulness does not mean sameness.

As a video hosting platform, YouTube ensures that users have access to this content immediately no matter what type of device they are using. The first thing you see on the website are numerous recommended videos. Each one has the same data no matter the device including title, source, number of views, and age of upload. The site also features a search bar at the top as well as a nav bar of sorts that provides quick search options that appear to be based on your search and viewing trends; however, the recommendations appear to differ across devices. This would make sense in some cases. For instance, I watch a lot more GIF recipe videos on my phone than I do on my laptop, so “cooking” shows up on that device and not the other. And while, both the quick search options and the featured videos change on both devices every time you refresh the screen, there are often videos and search recommendations that will be featured across devices and that will be displayed regularly regardless of how many times you refresh. Also in comparing my page that of others, no matter what device, the featured videos is typically a reflection of our viewing and search history, so it is highly personalized regardless of account or device. Another contrast is that on the desktop there is an opportunity to see more recommended videos at one time, as well as a lot more categorization of the videos being featured. The desktop site also provides additional functionality with access to subscriptions, YouTube apps, and even an ability to stream live.

Being able to provide users with access to your website across all their devices is tantamount to success in today’s market. By streamlining services and highlighting the preferences of the user for a given device, YouTube makes their mobile experience unique from their desktop format. It is in this way that meaningfulness is not synonymous with sameness. However, because their core function is as a video hosting platform, they highlight the search and recommendation features in all formats to help guide visitors to the content provided by other users. Consistency in this and in placement of branding elements helps them maintain a unified identity across platforms. So, while YouTube implements small changes in it’s website design depending of the size of a user’s viewport, it does so with an intentionality that recognizes meaningfulness does not always mean sameness.