

Assignment 1 - Phase 2

User Research & Problem Prioritization

YouTube

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What I Found

I talked to 7 YouTube users over the past few weeks, conducting 12 interview sessions to test my three hypotheses from Phase 1. The short version: all three problems are real, but one stands out as the most urgent.

The Numbers

- 7 people interviewed, 12 total conversations
- All 3 hypotheses validated (honestly, I was surprised by the consistency)

The Headlines

Recommendation Hijacking (P1): Every single person I talked to (5 out of 5) had experienced their feed getting taken over after watching one random video. Four of them told me they've actually changed how they use YouTube because of it. They hesitate before clicking things now. That's wild.

Shorts in Educational Search (P2): All 3 learners I interviewed see Shorts cluttering their tutorial searches. Every one of them said Shorts are useless for actually learning anything. One person (Neha) told me she sometimes just gives up and goes to Google instead. That really stuck with me.

Subscription Reliability (P3): All 4 subscribers I talked to miss videos from channels they follow. Not one of them trusts that subscribing actually works. They all have workarounds, usually just going to the channel page directly to check.

Step 1: Talking to Users

How I Did This

I reached out to people through WhatsApp, targeting folks who use YouTube at least a few times a week. For each hypothesis, I had specific criteria:

- For P1 (recommendations): Had they noticed their feed changing after watching something random?
- For P2 (Shorts in search): Do they use YouTube for learning or tutorials?
- For P3 (subscriptions): Do they actively follow at least 5 channels?

Who I Talked To

Name	How Often	What They Watch	Problems Discussed
Anurag	Multiple times/day	AI/ML stuff, UPSC prep	All three
Bharti	Once a day	Science channels, educational	P1, P3
Soham	Few times/week	AI/ML tutorials, travel vlogs	All three
Sunil	Few times/week	News	P1, P3
Rohan	Once a day	Entertainment	P1 only
Neha	Multiple times/day	Learning (coding, Excel)	P2 only
Amit	Few times/week	Tech reviewers, news	P3 only

What I Heard About Recommendation Hijacking (P1)

This one was the most consistent. Every person had a story. Anurag watched some videos about PG courses and Master's programs, and his feed was dominated by education ads for days. Bharti clicked on an architecture video once and couldn't escape DIY content afterward. Soham watched a fitness video and got bombarded with workout stuff.

Two people actually tried to fix it using the "Not Interested" button. Both said it kinda worked, but not really. The recommendations would shift a bit but never fully recovered.

Frustration levels ranged from 4/10 (Bharti, who seemed pretty chill about it) to 7/10 (Anurag and Rohan, who were genuinely annoyed).

Rohan said something that stuck with me: **"Now I hesitate before clicking random videos."** That's a user actively self-censoring because of how the algorithm behaves.

What I Heard About Shorts in Educational Search (P2)

I talked to three people who use YouTube primarily for learning: Neha, Anurag, and Soham. All three confirmed that when they search for tutorials, Shorts show up prominently in the results.

Neha was the most frustrated (8/10). She's a marketing analyst trying to learn Python, and she described having to scroll past a bunch of 60-second clips to find an actual 30-40 minute tutorial. *"They're too short to explain anything properly,"* she said.

Anurag and Soham had similar experiences but seemed a bit more tolerant. They just scroll past the Shorts. But Neha actually leaves the platform sometimes.

This quote from Neha is why I think this problem is urgent: **"Sometimes I just leave YouTube and search on Google instead."** That's platform abandonment happening in real-time.

What I Heard About Subscription Reliability (P3)

Four people talked to me about subscriptions: Amit, Bharti, Soham, and Sunil. The pattern was remarkably consistent: they subscribe to channels they care about, but they don't actually see the content in their feed.

Amit follows 10+ tech and news channels. He's basically given up on the home feed and just goes directly to channel pages to check for new uploads. Bharti does the same thing with her science channels (Veritasium, PBS). Sunil told me he often finds out about videos days after they're posted.

Amit's summary was perfect: **"Subscribing doesn't feel reliable."** Zero percent of these users trust that subscribing actually means they'll see the content.

Patterns I Noticed Across All Interviews

The underlying theme: YouTube's algorithm cares more about predicting what will get clicks than about what users explicitly say they want.

Three behaviors kept coming up:

1. **Self-censorship:** People are changing how they browse to avoid "teaching" the algorithm the wrong things
2. **Manual workarounds:** Scrolling past Shorts, visiting channel pages directly, using Google instead
3. **Platform abandonment:** Actually leaving YouTube to accomplish their goal (only saw this with P2)

Step 2: Bigger Picture Assessment

Stepping back from the interviews, here's how I see YouTube's strategic position. This combines what I learned from users with some secondary research.

What YouTube Does Well

- The content library is massive. Over 20 billion videos. No one else comes close.
- It's become the default for learning (83% of students use it for educational content).
- Creator monetization is mature. That 55% revenue share has built real businesses.
- It dominates living room screens. Number one streaming app on U.S. TVs.

What's Broken (Based on My Research)

- Recommendations hijacking after one-off views (every single user I talked to experienced this)
- Shorts clogging up search for people trying to learn (highest frustration: 8/10)
- Subscriptions that don't actually work reliably (zero trust from users)
- User controls that exist but don't really help (the "Not Interested" problem)
- Ad overload (I've read that 47% of users have ad blockers)

What's Concerning (Threats)

- AI tools like ChatGPT are replacing YouTube for learning. This is already happening with Neha.
- TikTok keeps capturing younger audiences
- If user trust keeps eroding, that's hard to rebuild

The Fundamental Problem

YouTube's algorithm optimizes for what will get watched, not what users actually want. Users want feeds that reflect their interests, subscriptions that work, search results that match their intent, and the freedom to explore without consequences. The algorithm delivers watch time maximization instead.

Step 3: Picking a Focus

Connecting Problems to Business Outcomes

Each problem affects YouTube's business differently:

Problem	Who It Affects	What They Do	Impact
Recommendation Hijacking	Entertainment browsers	Self-censor clicks	Engagement
Shorts in Search	Learners	Leave for Google	Retention
Subscription Reliability	Loyal followers	Manual workarounds	Engagement

Why I'm Focusing on Learners

P2 (Shorts in educational search) had the highest frustration score at 8/10. But more importantly, it's the only problem where I saw actual platform abandonment. Neha doesn't just complain and keep using YouTube; she actually leaves and goes to Google.

This matters strategically because YouTube's position as a learning platform is one of its key differentiators. If learners start defaulting to Google or ChatGPT, that's a competitive threat, not just a UX annoyance.

My Goal

"Reduce tutorial search abandonment by 30% within 6 months for Learners searching for educational content on YouTube."

Why these numbers:

- **30% reduction:** About a third of my learner interviews mentioned leaving for Google, so reducing this by 30% seems ambitious but achievable
- **6 months:** Realistic for development (2-3 months), testing (1-2 months), and rollout (1-2 months)

Step 4: Who Are These Users?

Based on my interviews, I've built two personas that represent the key user types I'll be designing for.

Neha Sharma: The Frustrated Learner

"I come to YouTube to learn, not to scroll through Shorts."

Neha is 28 and works as a marketing analyst at a tech startup in Bengaluru. She uses YouTube multiple times a day, mostly for learning. Right now she's trying to pick up Python and get better at Excel for data analysis.

What she's trying to do:

- Find comprehensive tutorials, ideally 30-40 minutes that actually explain things
- Learn practical skills she can actually implement at work
- Not waste time on content that won't help her

How she uses YouTube:

- Goes straight to search (doesn't browse the home feed for learning)
- Checks video length and channel before clicking
- Scrolls past a lot of results to find actual tutorials

What frustrates her:

- "First few results are Shorts" (8/10 frustration)
- "They're too short to explain anything properly"
- "I have to scroll a lot to find a 30-40 minute tutorial"

What she does about it: Sometimes she gives up on YouTube entirely and just searches Google instead.

Amit Verma: The Loyal Follower

"I subscribed because I like the creator, but I still miss their uploads."

Amit is 32, a software developer in Pune. He uses YouTube a few times a week, mainly to keep up with specific tech reviewers and news creators he trusts.

What he's trying to do:

- Never miss content from his favorite creators
- Use his limited time efficiently
- Support creators by watching early (helps their algorithm)

How he uses YouTube:

- Follows 10+ channels actively
- Goes directly to channel pages to check for new videos
- Doesn't trust the home feed to show him subscribed content

What frustrates him:

- "Subscribing doesn't feel reliable" (zero trust)
- His feed shows random recommendations instead of subscriptions
- Often discovers videos days after they were posted

What he does about it: Manually visits channel pages instead of relying on his feed.

Step 5: Which Problem to Solve First

Scoring the Problems

I used a simple framework: Population (how many users affected) × Intensity (how bad it is) × Frequency (how often it happens). Each factor scored 1-5.

Problem	Pop	Intensity	Freq	Total
Recommendation Hijacking	5	4	4	13
Shorts in Educational Search	3	5	5	13
Subscription Reliability	4	4	5	13

All three scored 13. So I had to use strategic factors to break the tie.

Breaking the Tie

P2 (Shorts in educational search) wins because:

- It's the only problem with actual platform abandonment evidence (Neha leaving for Google)
- Highest frustration score across all interviews (8/10)
- Clear competitive threat from Google Search and ChatGPT
- Threatens YouTube's differentiated position as a learning platform
- More solvable than the other two (search is more contained than the whole recommendation system)

My P0 Problem Statement

Learners struggle to find comprehensive tutorials when searching for educational content on YouTube. The search results mix Shorts with long-form content, and there's no effective way to filter them out. YouTube seems to prioritize engagement metrics over learning intent. This leads to excessive scrolling, wasted time, high frustration (8/10), and users leaving for competitors like Google and ChatGPT.

The Evidence

- All learners I interviewed see Shorts in their tutorial searches
- Neha's frustration was the highest I recorded (8/10)
- This is the only hypothesis with platform abandonment evidence
- ChatGPT and Google are real alternatives users are actually using

The quote that sums it up: ***"Sometimes I just leave YouTube and search on Google instead."*** When Neha said that, I knew this was the problem to focus on.

— End of Phase 2 —

Ready for Phase 3: Ideation & Prioritization