The Experiments That Came Too Early: How Yahoo's 2018–2019 Video Bets Predicted Modern Media

By Rashmi Singh | Q4 2025

I. The Inflection Point We Saw Early

Years before "creator commerce" and TikTok-style short form became mainstream, Yahoo's NowWith and Yahoo Play teams were already testing what would later define modern media: interactive, shoppable, personality-driven video ecosystems.

These initiatives—conceived between 2018–2019—framed a radical question for their time: What if audiences didn't just consume content, but played, voted, and bought inside it?

Looking back now, it's clear we were building the future of video-first media before the infrastructure, consumer behavior, or market mechanics had caught up. We saw where the world was heading—toward video as the primary interface for discovery, engagement, and transaction—and built accordingly.

II. The NowWith Prototype: Shoppable Storytelling Before Its Time

Launched in late 2018, NowWith was Yahoo Lifestyle's ambitious bet on shoppable video content—a format that has since become ubiquitous but was genuinely experimental at the time.

The Model

NowWith paired cultural icons like Nicole Richie (Style NowWith, affiliated with lifestyle brand Wylde Honey) and actress Janel Parrish (Deals NowWith, with millions of Instagram followers) with major retail partners like eBay to create recurring series of short-form lifestyle videos.

Each episode invited viewers to discover and purchase products across fashion, beauty, wellness, and home décor through embedded video hotspots—clickable content within the videos that led directly to products available for purchase. The series lived on Yahoo Lifestyle's owned properties and social channels, creating a unified discovery-to-purchase experience within premium media real estate.

Why It Was Ahead of Its Time

In 2018, the concept of "shoppable video" existed primarily in experimental pilots and conference keynotes. The infrastructure—seamless mobile commerce, low-friction checkout, reliable video streaming on cellular networks—was still maturing. Consumer behavior hadn't yet normalized buying directly from video content.

What NowWith proved:

- Audiences would engage when content felt entertaining and frictionless, not purely transactional
- Celebrity influence could translate to commerce when paired with authentic storytelling
- Video was becoming the natural medium for product discovery, not just entertainment

The model merged editorial storytelling, celebrity influence, and transactional UX years before Instagram Shopping, TikTok Shop, or YouTube Shopping became standard features. In hindsight, NowWith directly prefigured today's creator-led brand collaborations, livestream-commerce ecosystems, and the entire influencer-commerce infrastructure that now drives billions in revenue.

The Authenticity Question

Even then, we understood the tension between celebrity scale and authentic connection. As Yahoo rolled out its influencer strategy, research was already suggesting that consumers gravitated toward more authentic everyday influencer content over traditional celebrity endorsements. A 2018 Perfect365 study found celebrities came in last among factors driving beauty purchases, while companies like Revolve reported nearly 70% of sales coming from micro-influencer initiatives.

eBay's CMO Suzy Deering noted the company worked across the influencer spectrum—from celebrity partnerships for eBay for Charity to micro-influencers for curated drops like the Community Sneaker Drop with Stadium Goods. This hybrid approach, mixing high-reach celebrity with high-trust everyday creators, anticipated the multi-tier influencer strategies that now dominate social commerce.

As ABG’s EVP of Marketing told Glossy in 2019: “Whether you’re a millennial, Gen Z or Gen X, you have an expectation that content will be authentic, and we tend to get more of that from micro-influencers.”

NowWith was experimenting with these dynamics—celebrity reach plus authentic storytelling—years before the market had fully validated the approach.

III. Yahoo Play: The Interactive Media Lab

Where NowWith bridged content and commerce, Yahoo Play explored the gamification and engagement mechanics that would later define social-video platforms.

The Vision

Yahoo Play was designed as an interactive video entertainment platform featuring:

- Original, short-form series produced across Yahoo’s brand portfolio
- Interactivity through trivia, polls, and live features that rewarded participation
- A points-and-rewards system redeemable for real-world value—turning passive viewing into active play
- Early influencer integration via series like *Camp Confessions* and *PopPlay*, blending personality-driven hosts with user engagement
- Strong early traction: rapid adoption with high return usage and engagement that significantly exceeded benchmarks for new video platforms

What It Proved

Yahoo Play was, effectively, an interactive-video platform years before TikTok or Instagram Reels monetized engagement loops at scale. It demonstrated that:

- Video could be participatory, not just passive
- Gamification mechanics (points, rewards, challenges) dramatically increased engagement
- Short-form series could hold attention when paired with interaction

- Community and competition drove repeat usage and extended session time

The platform combined elements that would later become standard across social media: short-form vertical video, interactive features, creator-led content, reward systems, and social-sharing mechanics—all in a single ecosystem.

Today's data validates what we built: over 80% of consumers now want interactive video content, with even higher demand among Gen Z and millennial audiences. The participation-driven engagement model that Yahoo Play pioneered has become the defining characteristic of modern social-video platforms.

IV. Why We Were Early: The Infrastructure Gap

Both NowWith and Yahoo Play faced a fundamental challenge: the world wasn't quite ready yet.

Infrastructure Limitations (2018–2019)

- Mobile data costs and bandwidth still limited seamless video streaming and commerce
- Payment friction made in-video purchasing cumbersome compared to today's one-tap checkout
- Attribution and measurement for video commerce were immature—tracking purchase intent across video touchpoints was complex
- Platform fragmentation meant content lacked the viral distribution mechanics that TikTok and Instagram later provided

Cultural and Behavioral Gaps

- Authentic micro-influencer storytelling hadn't yet fully eclipsed celebrity endorsements in consumer trust
- Social commerce wasn't normalized—consumers still separated entertainment from shopping
- Platforms hadn't unified creation, engagement, and transaction into seamless loops
- Video-first discovery was emerging but not yet dominant over text and image-based search

Market Context

Yahoo was also navigating significant headwinds during this period, working to compete for attention under evolving ownership. While Yahoo still commanded a billion-user audience globally, the company needed these experimental bets to generate results quickly—a tough ask for formats that required market maturation.

The result? NowWith and Yahoo Play were visionary but premature—experiments that pointed directly toward where audiences and brands were heading, but arrived before the ecosystem could fully support them.

V. Video Is the Future: The Proof Is Everywhere Now

Today, everything we built has become standard:

- TikTok Shop and Instagram Shopping are multi-billion-dollar businesses built on shoppable video
- YouTube Shopping and Pinterest Try On embed commerce directly in video content
- Livestream commerce has exploded globally, with platforms like Amazon Live, Whatnot, and NTWRK normalizing real-time shoppable video
- Creator commerce is now mainstream, with influencers driving more revenue than traditional advertising
- Short-form video dominates engagement across every platform—TikTok, Reels, Shorts, Snap Spotlight

The numbers tell the story: short-form video now delivers the highest ROI of any marketing format, with 91% of businesses using video as a core tool in 2025—up from 61% in 2016. After watching product videos, 87% of viewers are compelled to make a purchase. Digital-video advertising has become the fastest-growing ad format, generating over $62 billion in revenue.

The thesis we tested—video as the primary interface for discovery, engagement, and transaction—is now the organizing principle of modern digital media.

VI. Lessons for the Next Evolution

1. Video Is the New Text

Consumers now expect to watch what they used to read. Users retain 95% of a message watched on video compared with only 10% read in text. Engagement migrates to motion, sound, and interactivity. Static content is becoming a legacy format.

2. Play Is the New Engagement Metric

Points, polls, and shared challenges outperform passive impressions. Participation > consumption. Interactive video formats drive significantly higher engagement rates than passive viewing experiences.

3. Commerce Is Narrative

The line between storytelling and shopping has dissolved. The most effective transactions happen inside stories people love, not banner ads or product pages. Today, 64% of viewers make a purchase after watching branded video content.

4. Creators Are Infrastructure

Talent networks aren't just marketing channels—they're structural distribution layers for culture and commerce. Platforms are built around them, not the other way around.

5. Ecosystems Outperform Channels

The future isn't social vs. video vs. search—it's integrated value loops where discovery, participation, and purchase reinforce one another within unified experiences. Users now spend an average 17 hours per week watching online video, with mobile as the dominant platform.

6. Authenticity Scales

The tension between celebrity reach and authentic connection we navigated in NowWith is now standard strategy. Brands build portfolios of influencer relationships across the spectrum—from mega-celebrities to niche micro-creators—depending on objective.

7. Timing Is Critical

Being early is different from being wrong. We built the right things before the infrastructure, consumer behavior, and business models had converged to support them. The lesson: innovation requires asking not just "Is this a good idea?" or "Does the market desire it?" but "What needs to be true for this to work—and is it true yet?"

VII. Conclusion: From Content to Connection

Looking back, Yahoo's 2018–2019 initiatives weren't isolated experiments—they were the first sketches of the ecosystem era now reshaping digital media.

NowWith and Yahoo Play demonstrated that interactive, shoppable, personality-driven video could:

- Drive measurable engagement through strong session depth and return usage
- Convert attention to commerce through integrated discovery and checkout
- Build community through participation and rewards
- Scale trust through authentic storytelling

We were ahead of our time—but we were right about where the world was going.

Video is no longer a content type. It's the primary interface for how people discover, engage with, and transact within digital culture. With 95% of marketers now identifying video as a core part of their strategy and short-form continuing explosive growth, the vision is fully realized.

As AI, commerce, and community continue to converge, the next wave will extend that same DNA: interactive, trust-based, human-centered video experiences that let audiences participate, not just consume.

The infrastructure has caught up. The behaviors have normalized. The business models have proven out.

What we built early, the world now builds at scale.

VIII. Final Perspective: Video As The Next Investment Frontier

For modern media operators and investors, the takeaway is clear: invest in video infrastructure and creator-commerce capabilities now, not later.

Brands that still treat video as a content format rather than an engagement operating system will miss the next decade's compounding advantage. The opportunity lies in integrating production, data, commerce, and creator networks into unified ecosystems that generate repeat engagement, measurable conversion, and cultural velocity.

The real moat won't be audience size—it will be video-native systems that turn attention into transaction at scale.

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