Quote by Charu Malhotra, Co-Founder and Managing Director, Primus Partners

Who clicked, who watched — OTTs eye real engagement metrics

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Article Content:

On a video platform, every click may seem like a view. But not every view means that the content was really 'watched'. Even as they invest widely in original and acquired content, video streaming platforms in India are operating with disparate measurement models when it comes to whether a viewer is considered as having 'completed' a show or movie that they may have started watching.

Completion rates are a key factor for platforms to understand what to invest in, going forward. As subscriptions plateau and the digital advertising environment remains challenging, all services are trying to figure out what has worked best with audiences to identify patterns and commission similar programming or ask creators to follow relatively safe models.

While some say covering 60-70% of a show is considered as having watched it, others point out even one episode of a long-format series is enough.

Many others are tracking user interaction, including pausing, rewinding or completion of

important story arcs, as a metric to determine to what extent users are completing what they start or whether they are engaging with content they consume in order to make future greenlighting decisions.

"There is no single fixed metric, because the definition of 'watched' depends entirely on the purpose for which the data is being used. If we want to understand how much a user liked a movie or show, we look at higher numbers, usually 60-70% and above. That level of completion indicates genuine engagement," says Ujjwal Mahajan, co-founder of Chaupal, a platform specializing in Punjabi, Haryanvi and Bhojpuri content.

For recommendation algorithms, the threshold is lower, Mahajan says. Even 20 30% viewing is enough to understand a user's preference pattern. And if the goal is simply to avoid recommending something a user has already clicked on, even five minutes of viewing is sufficient for the system to temporarily stop showing that title again.

Rajat Agrawal, chief operating officer and director of Ultra Media & Entertainment Group, said that in order to ensure accuracy with respect to assessing content performance, platforms use a combination of metrics. These include percentage of content viewed, often set at 70-90% completion, total time spent watching a particular content, which is typically 20-30 minutes, and view count.

"In fact, some platforms are shifting towards more nuanced metrics, such as tracking user interaction, like pausing, rewinding, or completing key scenes. Also, measuring completion of key plot points or story arcs, and so on," Agrawal added.

"This provides a more accurate picture of user engagement and helps platforms refine recommendations and content strategies.

"Entertainment industry experts point out that counting a title as 'watched' if the viewer simply clicks on it is not really accurate. It only shows sampling, not genuine viewing.

According to primary market research and media services provider Chrome Data Analytics and Media, from a business-analytics perspective, counting any start as a 'view' can be misleading—it reflects curiosity or sampling, rather than actual engagement.

A far more meaningful metric is the completion rate—the percentage of an episode or film that viewers watch end to end or at least beyond a key threshold, typically 60–70%.Chandrashekar Mantha, partner, media and entertainment sector leader at Deloitte India, said Video Completion Rate (VCR) has emerged as one of the most critical metrics for both content platforms and advertisers, globally as well as in India.

 While nearly every social media platform and OTT service reports VCR, each does so using its own measurement framework, internal policies, and thresholds. As a result, there is no universal benchmark that applies across the industry.

India is a relatively new market for OTT, and platforms are yet to identify which genres or content pieces garner high completion rates. While platforms rarely share such data publicly, industry experts say completion rates are currently likely to be lower in India than the rest of the world.

On OTT platforms, a 'view' usually means an impression—someone may have watched a few seconds of a trailer or part of an episode, not the whole show or film, according to Berjesh Chawla, managing director and lead communications, media and technology, Accenture in India.

Across the industry, only a slice of long-form content gets completed, driven by mobile-first, snackable viewing habits and, on ad-supported tiers, ad pods that break the flow. Platforms are trying to push completion rates up with better recommendations, tighter runtimes, and a stronger shift to connected televisions. Completion rates are likely to be higher for long-form on connected TVs as compared to mobile, given the lean-back, often focused nature of viewing on the former. Short-form programming, on the other hand, does better on mobile though the device frequently comes with distractions.

The challenge is that every change needs to balance user experience, advertisement revenue, and content costs, so progress is real but gradual. That's why, the real story lies in completion, engaged minutes, and device mix —not the headline 'view' count.

"Across the industry, completion rates vary widely. A strong, well-loved series may see 40-60% of viewers finishing the season. Many titles sit much lower; sometimes in the 10-25% range. Movies often perform slightly better because they are a single-sitting experience. But even there, only a fraction of viewers finish the entire runtime," said Charu Malhotra, co-founder and managing director at Primus Partners, a management consultancy firm. For platforms, low completion is a real challenge.

Completion rates affect recommendation systems, renewal decisions for future seasons and ultimately the return on investment of commissioning long-format content. If people e not finishing shows, the case for higher budgets becomes harder, Malhotra added.

Recent OTT shows such as *Panchayat* and *The Bads of Bollywood* are said to have seen high completion rates.