

Broadband isn't just about internet speeds

TV Ramachandran | Updated on September 17, 2020 | Published on September 17, 2020



Research shows it's time for a more customer-centric metric to evaluate quality of user experience for video streaming

Doctor: You have synchronous diaphragmatic flutter.

Patient: Oh, my God! Will I live?

Doctor (confused): Yes, I just told you that you have hiccups.

There is a point in every industry when standard terminology and established ways of doing business distract from the ultimate goal — to place customer experience at the centre of every endeavour. The telecom industry is no exception. Since its heyday, Indian telecom has been focussed on improving network speeds. And rightly so.

A faster network means higher call quality, fewer call drops, higher connectivity, better downloads, and much more. Customers were satisfied, and the industry continued to focus on this metric. However, the market is fiercely competitive, and the rules are changing. How can Telecom Service Providers (TSPs) and the telecom regulator adapt to the changing market needs? It may be time to think beyond the 'DL or Downlink Throughput' (network speed).

According to a 2019 PWC report, the OTT, or Over-The-Top, market in India is expected to reach ₹4,51,405 crore by 2023. Whether on YouTube or WhatsApp, Netflix or other streaming services, OTT video streaming dominates all other types of content online. Gaming and e-sports are a close second.

Low-cost data plans and smartphones enable the majority to enjoy videos, games, and sports on their mobiles. Each of these categories requires a minimum level of network speed or DL throughput for user satisfaction, but individually, users of each category have their performance requirements.

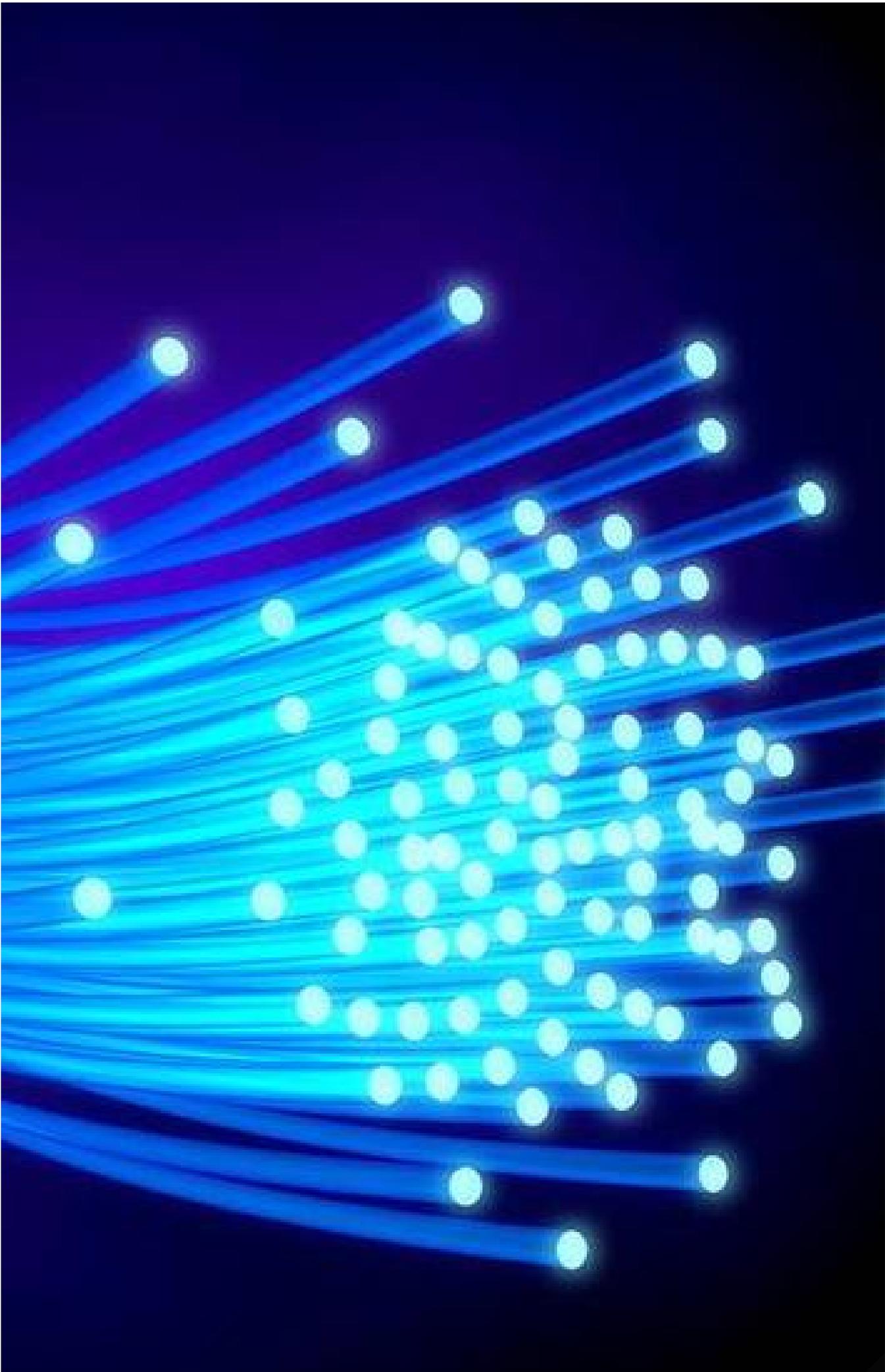
Which is why evaluating customer experience by specific use case may give us a better gauge of the quality of service.

Buffer blues

Take videos. Last year, India became YouTube's fastest-growing market with 265 million subscribers. Research shows that two key factors determine whether a user plays and watches a video, or discards it — the time to load, and how seamlessly it plays without buffering.

Viewers prefer their videos to begin playing in under four seconds. A report from business intelligence firm NPAW found that there is a negative impact on user experience when a video rebuffers at a rate higher than 4 per cent. Using these two indicators as yardsticks will go a long way towards monitoring and sustaining quality of service.

This is evident in the recent findings in a *Mozark.ai* report that compared the performance of the top 10 OTT players in India on three mobile operators. *Mozark.ai's* research demonstrates that while network speeds below 5Mbps greatly impacted how fast a video would start when clicked,



there was a minimal improvement at higher speeds. They discovered that for videos to play in four seconds or less, and for a rebuffering rate lower than 4 per cent, operators needed to deliver a Minimum Operating Threshold or MOT speed of 14 mbps.

Currently, the average downlink mobile data speed in India is 11 mbps (Speedtest.net, 2019). With expanded network reach and by fully transitioning to 4G and eventually 5G, Indian players will be able to achieve and maintain the MOT levels required to retain customers, and the regulator will be better positioned to track quality more accurately.

Right metrics

After all, the Indian telecom market is now more mature and saturated with numerous consolidations. The unserved market is certainly large — over 600 million Indians are expected to come on board by 2025 (Idem Est Research, India Telecoms Report, 2020-2025). However, telcos cannot expect to differentiate themselves and customers solely based on low-cost data plans and service offerings due to the already fierce competition driving prices down.

With prices already low, in the very near future, TSPs that offer superior customer experience will reign and retain more customers. The only way to do that is to ensure industry alignment in monitoring the right parameters for success — like the MOT for video streaming.

It is essential to evaluate speeds based on the use case because gaming needs are slightly different. It is a common misconception that gaming requires a large bandwidth. Online games use an average of 40-150 mb per hour. In contrast, most video streaming takes up about 30 times that amount. So, clearly, the industry must section our evaluations by use case and track accordingly. Similarly, the needs for smooth IoT vary, and all players must be compared based on this use case.

In the words of author and former dotcom honcho Seth Godin, “Measurement is fabulous. Unless you’re busy measuring what’s easy to measure as opposed to what’s important.” It is advisable to proactively evolve how to measure consumer experience for video streaming from now. Once 5G sets in, a technology that is automatically sectioned out by use case, this change will be inevitable, and we will be faced with a fierce urgency to innovate.

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