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A Comparative UX Study of Short-Form Video Applications

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***Abstract* - The increased number of short-form video contents being created on social media platforms, such as Instagram Reels, has significantly influenced marketing and consumer trends. Many creators now depend on hooks created by them right from the beginning of the video in order to grab the attention of viewers and avoid extremely high drop-off rates. The current research evaluates the impact of vertical vs. horizontal videos on user engagement. Through the assessment of viewer retention and interaction rate among various demographics, it is shown that short-form videos in a vertical orientation provide considerably higher engagement and longer retention times.**

Keywords - User Experience (UX), Short-Form Video, Video Orientation, User Engagement, Viewer Retention, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI)

I. INTRODUCTION

On most social media apps today, the first thing a phone user sees is a full-screen vertical video that can be swiped away in a second. Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts and similar apps are built around this format. The scale in India is large. Kantar reports that 588 million internet users, about 61% of the total, watched short video in 2025 [1].

Two user experience (UX) questions follow from this. One is how a video should begin, because the first few seconds, usually called the hook, decide whether a viewer stays or swipes on. The other is the shape of the frame. A vertical (9:16) video fills a phone screen, while a horizontal (16:9) one leaves black bars above and below, and it is not clear how much that difference matters for engagement and retention.

We approached these questions as a comparative study based on secondary data. The paper compares the main short-form apps using published engagement figures, reviews what has been reported about vertical and horizontal orientation, looks at how hooks relate to retention, and points out where the evidence is thin. We did not collect any new measurements, and every figure below comes from the cited sources.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study relies on secondary data, in the same way as earlier awareness studies of the Indian media sector. We searched for work on short-form video engagement, video orientation, hooks and retention, and short-video use in India, limiting the search to 2021 to 2026. The sources fall into three groups: peer-reviewed or conference papers, industry and platform-commissioned reports, and practitioner write-ups.

For each source we noted who produced it, how large the sample was and how the data were collected. Claims we could not trace to a named study were left out. A typical example is the often-repeated statement that vertical video gets several times the completion rate of horizontal video, which circulates in marketing blogs without a primary source. Figures from different populations and years are placed side by side but never combined. The main limitation is that no primary data were collected, so the paper reports what the literature says and not what we measured ourselves.

III. SHORT-FORM VIDEO APPLICATIONS

A. Short-Form Video Consumption in India

Kantar puts India's internet user base at 958 million in 2025, and 588 million of them (61%) watched short video. Rural users were slightly more numerous than urban ones [1]. A 2021 Bain & Company report had projected 600 to 650 million short-video users by 2025 [2], so the measured number came in a little under the forecast.

More detail on individual apps comes from IPSOS studies commissioned by Meta. The 2025 study surveyed over 3,500 people in 33 centres; 95% of them watched Reels daily and 92% preferred it to other short-form formats [3]. The 2026 round covered more than 4,000 respondents in 23 cities and reported 97% daily video use on Meta platforms and 89% daily Reels use among Generation Z (Gen Z). Daily video engagement was close in urban (98%) and rural (94%) India [4]. Since Meta paid for these studies and surveyed users of its own platforms, the figures show how far Reels reaches but should not be read as neutral market shares. The Indian market also differs from the global one, because YouTube Shorts entered India in September 2020, after the ban on TikTok [5].

B. Comparative Platform Engagement

A Social Insider study, summarized by Search Engine Journal, compared TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts [6]. TikTok had the highest average engagement rate, Reels had the highest watch rate, and Shorts worked mostly as a way for viewers to discover channels (Table I). The study suggests using the three apps together, with separate content for each audience [6].

TABLE I. REPORTED ENGAGEMENT RATES BY APPLICATION

Platform	Average engagement rate	Reported strength
TikTok	5.53%	Highest engagement
Instagram Reels	4.36%	Highest watch rate
YouTube Shorts	3.80%	Discovery tool

Source: Social Insider data as reported in [6]; 2023, worldwide.

These numbers are from 2023, cover accounts worldwide, and measure how people react to posts. They say little about

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Indian viewers or about what a single viewer experiences. Still, they show that the three apps reward different things, and that is enough to justify comparing them.

C. Interface Behaviour and Engagement Signals

Zannettou et al. studied the viewing histories of 347 TikTok users who donated their data, a total of 9.2 million video views [7]. Time spent on the app went up over the users' lifetime, but attention, meaning the share of each video that was watched, stayed at about 45%. Most participants watched between 30% and 50% of the videos they were shown [7]. So time on the app and completion of videos are separate measures in a feed, and a study should report both.

IV. VIDEO ORIENTATION AND ENGAGEMENT

A. Evidence from Controlled Studies

Mulier, Slabbinck and Vermeir compared vertical and horizontal video ads on smartphones in one large field study and two experiments [8]. Vertical ads raised consumer interest and engagement, and people processed them more fluently. The authors explain this through effort: watching a vertical video in full screen does not require turning the phone. The effect was stronger for Generation Z than for Generations X and Y [8]. Because the study is about advertising and not about regular short-video feeds, it supports the orientation argument without settling it.

B. Evidence from Instagram Metrics

Anbazhagan compared three portrait and three landscape videos posted on one college Instagram account in Oman and added a student survey [9]. Portrait videos averaged 16,289 views against 7,351 for landscape. Average watch time was 15.6 seconds against 12 seconds, and interactions were 622 against 295 (Fig. 1) [9]. Portrait videos also drew 63.3% of their engagement from non-followers, while 72.6% of the engagement on landscape videos came from existing followers [9]. That suggests vertical videos travel further beyond the account's own audience.

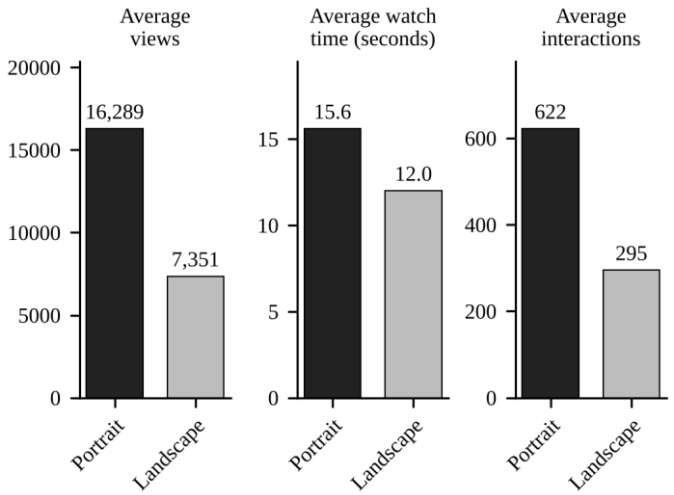

Fig. 1. Average views, watch time and interactions of portrait and landscape Instagram videos in the Bayan College study. Redrawn from data in [9].

Six videos from one account are a very small sample, and the content of the two groups was not controlled. The result agrees with [8], but it is best read as a case study.

C. Preferences by Content Type and Length

The survey in the same study shows that viewers are not all on one side [9]. Asked directly, 46.5% agreed that vertical videos are more engaging, while 44.6% were neutral. Overall preference was split: 35.7% favoured landscape, 24.1% portrait, and 40.2% had no preference. Length mattered. For short videos, 42.5% preferred portrait, but for longer ones 53.5% preferred landscape. In addition, 51.3% found the black bars of a landscape video on a vertical screen distracting, and 69.6% wanted more content made for mobile viewing [9]. Orientation therefore seems to depend on content type and length, and the claim in our abstract is clearest for short content watched on a phone.

V. HOOKS, ATTENTION AND VIEWER RETENTION

A Clutch survey of 483 consumers in the United States, run in October 2025, found that only 9% fully pay attention while watching short-form video [10]. In the same survey, 88% said a video has to grab their attention within 30 seconds, and 55% said they stop scrolling when a video starts with humour or an intriguing hook [10]. YouTube Shorts was watched regularly by 61% of respondents, Reels by 53% and TikTok by 43%, and 66% spent 45 minutes a day or less on short-form video [10]. Because the sample is American, these numbers cannot be applied directly to India.

This fits the pattern in [7], where viewers finished only part of most videos. It also explains why creators put so much work into the opening seconds: if the start is weak, the viewer is gone before the content arrives. Practitioner sources disagree about how quickly the decision is made. One puts it at about 1.3 seconds [11], another at 1.4 to 2.3 seconds depending on the app [12], and neither describes a method that can be checked. We therefore treat these timings as rough working assumptions. We did not find a peer-reviewed study that sets a standard hook length or retention benchmark for short-form video.

VI. DISCUSSION

Across the sources, vertical video comes out ahead for short content on mobile. The controlled study points to lower viewing effort and smoother processing [8], and the Instagram case shows more views, longer watch time, more interactions and wider reach beyond followers for portrait videos [9]. Landscape still has a place for longer educational or documentary material [9]. So, orientation looks like a design choice that depends on the platform and the length of the content, not a rule that applies everywhere.

A few practical points follow for designers. Short-form videos should be shot and framed for 9:16 from the start, because cropping a landscape video loses visual information [9]. The first seconds should carry the hook, since most viewers say a video must win their attention within 30 seconds [10]. Each app should also be tested separately, because Table I shows that they reward different behaviour [6].

The sources differ in population, year and method, so none of this proves that orientation causes higher engagement. Orientation is mixed up with platform design, since these feeds are built for vertical video, and with content and audience as well. Our comparisons are descriptive. What we can say is that the reported evidence points the same way as the claim in the abstract; we cannot say how large the effect is.

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VII. CONCLUSION

The studies we reviewed link vertical short-form video with higher engagement and longer viewing on phones, most clearly for short content and younger viewers [8], [9]. Hooks matter because most viewers sample a video instead of finishing it [7], [10]. Several gaps remain. We found no controlled comparison of the same content in both orientations on Indian short-video apps, no retention-curve data broken down by demographic group, and no verified standard for hook timing.

A primary study is the obvious next step. It would show identical content in both orientations to Indian users of Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, record retention and interaction by age group, and test different hook designs. That would let the pattern reported here be tested directly.

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