



The character factor: From enduring hits to instant hits

An analysis of 53 top-performing characters over the last 12 years reveals that the lifespan of popular Hindi GEC characters has seen a significant drop

Published on February 26, 2021

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Summary

- The average popularity span of top Hindi GEC characters has dropped from 36 months for characters launched between 2008-11, to only 13 months for those launched between 2016-19
 - While the popularity span of hit characters has reduced, their rise to popularity, from the time of their launch, has expedited
 - The findings suggest channels have to focus on creating characters that can become instant hits, than enduring hits
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For many years now, prime-time fiction on Indian television has thrived by captivating and engaging audience with the lives of relatable or aspirational characters. Audience's affinity towards a character is an important driving force towards building program loyalty, which in turn ensures sustained viewership and longevity for fiction programs.

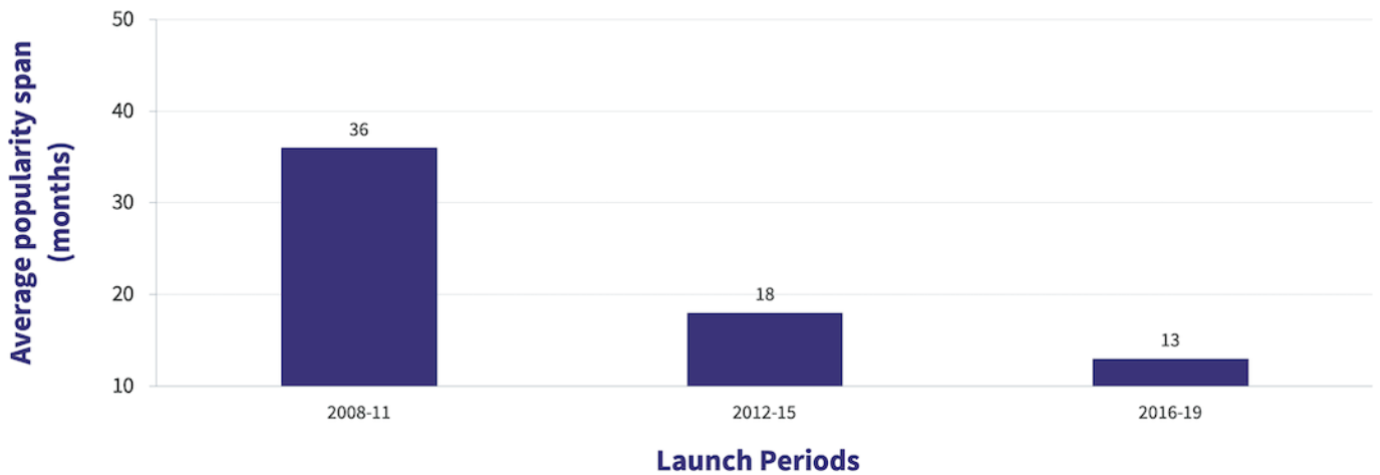
How long can a character remain truly popular? Has there been a change in the lifespan of popular characters in the Hindi GEC category over the last decade? Given the importance of characters, these questions are not just of academic importance but hold high business relevance too.

We analysed the average popularity span of top Hindi GEC characters over time, to answer these questions. To understand changes in the popularity span, **Ormax Characters India Loves (OCIL)**, our monthly character popularity tracking product was used. 53 fiction characters launched between 2008 and 2020 (till May) were shortlisted basis the following criteria:

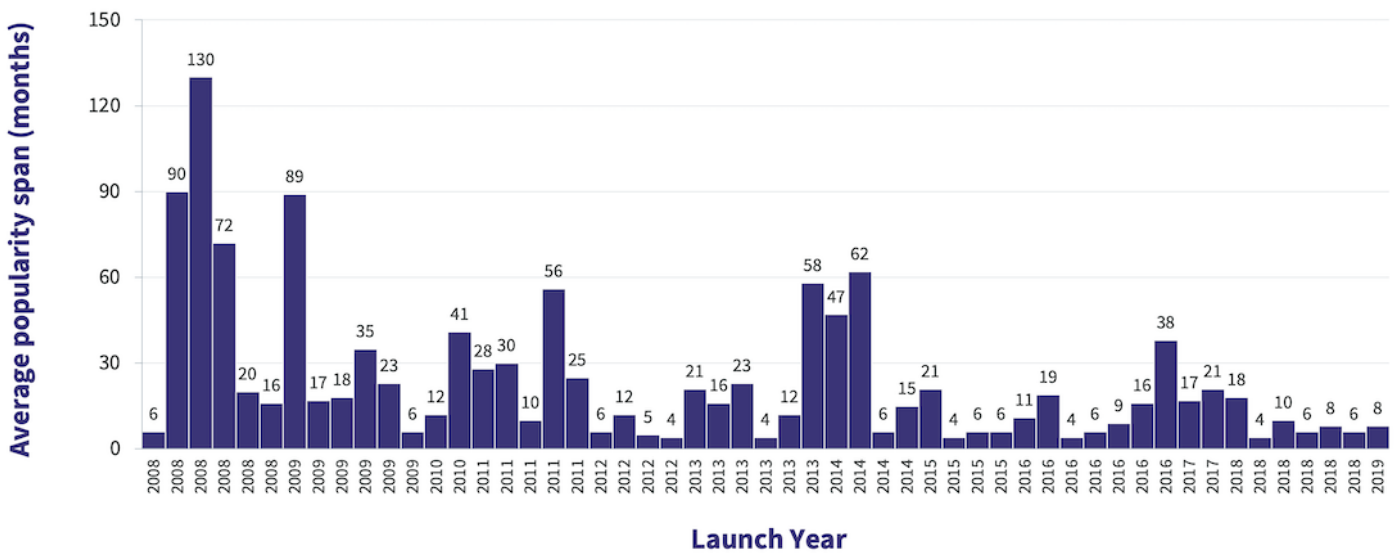
1. Only characters that featured in the Top 10 list for at least four months were considered.
2. The last streak of two continuous months in the Top 10 list was considered as the end of a character's popularity span.

The 53 shortlisted characters were bracketed into three launch periods based on the year they were launched in, or entered the show in. 19 characters belong to the 2008-11 period, 18 to the 2012-15 period, and 16 to the 2016-19 period.

The chart below highlights the average popularity span of popular characters in these three periods:



Evidently, the average popularity span of Hindi GEC characters has witnessed a sizeable drop over the last decade. Characters launched between 2008-11 enjoyed a significantly higher average popularity span vis-à-vis those launched in the two subsequent periods. The chart below provides a popularity timeline of the 53 characters, arranged chronologically based on their launch.



The two tallest peaks belong to the lead pair of the 2008 launch Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah, i.e., Jethalal (130 months) and Daya (90 months). Despite being off air for a while now, Daya continues to routinely feature in the Top 10 list of characters on the back of reruns. In the same year (2008), Anandi (72 months) from Balika Vadhu marked the

beginning of an alternative narrative in Hindi GEC, as opulence and grandeur of ‘K-serials’ gave way to stories from the heartland.

In 2009, the leading lady of Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai, Akshara (89 months), and the various emotions and challenges she went through post-marriage, made her one of the most popular and enduring female characters in the category. Later in 2011, Sandhya’s (56 months) journey to become an IPS officer captured the audience’s hearts, and pushed the envelope on progressive social change. Many other characters, like Archana (Pavitra Rishta), Gopi (Saath Nibhaana Saathiya), Ram Kapoor (Bade Achhe Lagte Hain) and Mahadev (Devon Ke Dev Mahadev) also enjoyed a successful run in this period.

The 2012-15 period, however, turned out to be a strikingly different, with only three characters standing out. The lead couple from Kumkum Bhagya, Abhi and Pragya (47 & 62 months respectively), and Ishita (58 months) from Ye Hai Mohabbatein were the only enduring successes in this phase.

The most recent period (2016-19) has fared even worse. Only two characters, Naira (Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai) and Preeta (Kundali Bhagya), with popularity spans of 38 months and 21 months respectively, managed to cross the 20-month mark.

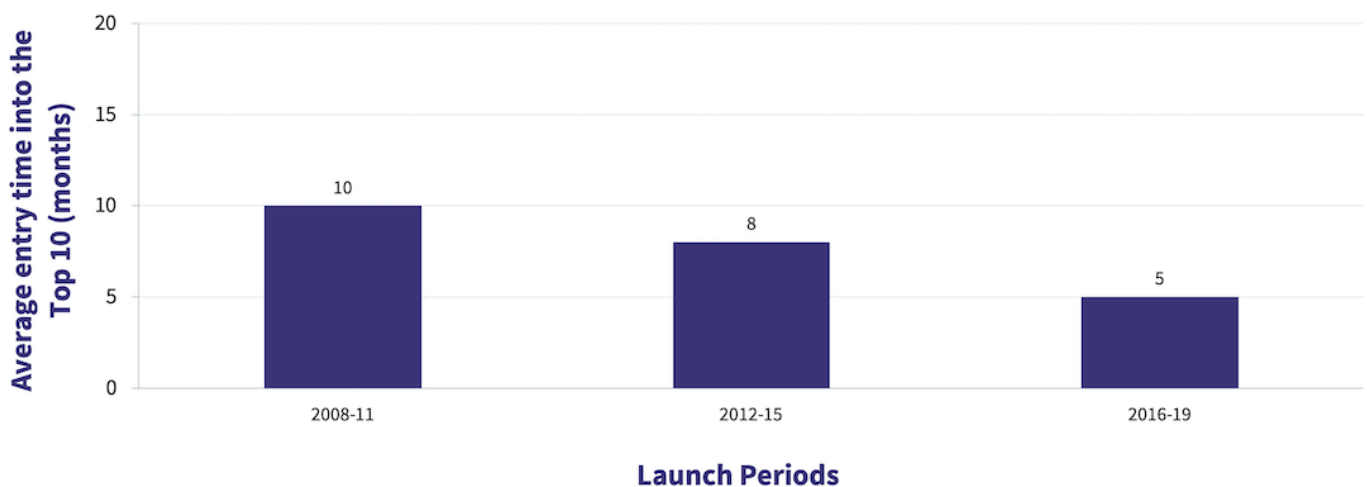


Does this trend vary for female and male characters? The chart below reveals some interesting facets.



Female characters enjoyed a longer popularity tenure vis-a-vis male characters in the first two periods. However, in 2016-19, the gap between the two genders reduced significantly. Lack of differentiation is an important cause here, with many female characters following seen-before ‘templates’, such as a woman on a post-marriage journey.

Interestingly, while both male and female characters saw a dip in their average popularity span, their entry period in the Top 10 list has accelerated over time.



The trend of faster entry into, and exit from, the Top 10 list is reflective of shorter viewer attention spans, because of a manifold increase in alternate content options. The notion of “loyalty” has clearly weakened over time. And this is true for most content categories, not just Hindi GEC content. However, growing viewer dissatisfaction with Hindi GEC fiction shows over the 2014-19 period may have accelerated the trend for this category in particular.

One of the more evident implications of the trend that emerges from this analysis would be for channels to invest in creating a backend to develop strong characters round the year. After all, if characters are going to be instant hits than enduring hits, the approach to character development would need a fundamental rethink too.