

Who is the most successful Friends director?

1. Introduction

Friends first hit our screens over 28 years ago! It is undeniably one of the biggest sitcoms and continues to be a favorite of many. As the show follows the real life adventures of six friends living out their 20s in New York City, we get to see the evolution of the show's popularity. This was our starting point.

We merged two datasets that were available: friends_episodes and friends_imdb. Combined, our final table provides us with information about each 236 episodes along with metrics related to how each episode performed (number of views, votes, imdb rating). We also added additional features to count the number of main character lines and the number of words they spoke.

We thought it would be interesting to learn more about the show's popularity through the director's lens. Together, we will explore whether the show's success has anything to do with who was directing the episodes.

2. Number of Episodes by Director

To our surprise, there are 29 directors on the show! That would equate to about 8 episodes per director. We found that the episodes were not distributed equally - some directors directed over 10 times, while others only once. Yeah, that's a pretty big difference!

We dug in to find out exactly how many episodes were directed by each director. Fun fact: David Schwimmer (or Ross from the show) was also the director of some of the episodes throughout the seasons. But what exactly is the role of director and why are there so many of them?

3. Director, Producer, Showrunner 🤔

These terms get easily confused. Let's start with the producer. They are at the top of the hierarchy and have more responsibility than a tv show director because they make all the business and financial decisions.

The showrunner is always the executive producer and the show stays consistent thanks to them. For Friends, the co-creators, Marta Kauffman and David Crane hold this role. Generally speaking, the showrunner is also a writer on the show. Ok, now I see how these roles can get confusing 😊 🤔

The director (unless they are also a producer of the show) are hired by the producer to bring the creative vision of the show to life. You would be right to think that their role includes planning the camera angles and guiding actors on set.

4. The One About The Episodes

One of the reasons for having as many directors is to shift the tv show in a new position if it's not gaining success or to keep it fresh with new ideas. Based on the average viewers per season and views per episode gained during the first three seasons of Friends, this might not be true for the start of the show.

However, this may have been more likely for seasons 6 and 7 where the views per episode were not as high throughout the season. Season 2 has the highest average viewers of ~32 million, compared to season 7 that has the lowest of ~22 million. The highest viewed episodes out of the entire show are 'The One After the Superbowl: Part 1' and 'The One After the Superbowl: Part 2'. Both directed by Michael Lembeck.

Having multiple directors also allows directors to work on other projects at the same time to diversify their work. Ben Weiss, for example, directed the pilot episode for 'Veronica's Closet' in 1997, the same year he directed episodes in season 3 of Friends.

On top of that, in the US, a producer's contract may allot a set number of days for pre-production, production and post-production. Assuming that each episode takes about a week to shoot, it wouldn't be possible for one director to do it all. While a director is shooting, you would find another working on the post-production of the previous episode and another preparing for the next episode.

5. Most and Least Viewed Directors

Highest viewed episode goes to director Michael Lembeck. Kevin Bright is associated with one of the highest viewed episodes as well as with the lowest viewed episode in the entire series. Most of the lowest viewed episodes were directed by guest directors, with Arlene Sanford and Todd Holland having directed their only one Friends episode.

6. Best Average Viewership of the Directors

By viewership numbers, Michael Lembeck directed Friends' episodes draw the highest average viewership numbers. He directed the highest viewed episode in the whole series, and doesn't rank in the lowest viewed episodes.

7. Conclusion

Michael Lembeck takes the top place as the most successful Friends director in terms of episode viewership. He has contributed to directing a significant number of Friends' episodes, 10% or 24 episodes. This puts him in the top 3 for total number of Friends' episodes directed. Michael Lembeck is responsible for the highest viewed episode in the entire series (The One After The Superbowl, Season 2, Episode 12/13), and furthermore his directed episodes have the highest average viewership compared to the other 'core' directors.

Although Michael clearly rises to the top when we only look at viewership numbers, there are other factors that could be explored. For example, how does Michael Lembeck directed episodes correlate to episode ratings and do those episodes tend to rank higher? The writers are also an important factor in the content of the episode, and is there a stronger correlation with the writers of the episodes over the director?