

From Broadway to Film: Analyzing Box Office Success of Critically Acclaimed Broadway Musical Adaptations

Broadway and Hollywood are cornerstones of the entertainment industry. Domestically in 2025, Hollywood generated almost \$8 billion in box office revenue (BoxOfficeMojo, 2025), while in the 2024-2025 season on Broadway, an estimated 14.7 million tickets were sold, generating almost \$2 billion in revenue in a major post-covid comeback (Culwell-Block, 2025). The impacts of Broadway and Hollywood on culture are pervasive and far-reaching, but they are also distinctly different mediums with the capacity to reach and interact with audiences in different ways. What they have in common is the ability to reach their audiences with compelling, culturally relevant stories that people can relate to and identify with.

Over the years, there have been many attempts by Hollywood to take highly successful Broadway shows and adapt them into Hollywood movies with varied success. Movie musicals are relatively common, with Disney at the forefront with animated movie musicals. However, this genre does not make up a majority of the movies coming into the market, and Broadway adaptation movie musicals are even less common. Overall, from 1995 to 2025, an estimated total of 243 movie musicals were released, ranked 10th on a list of releases by genre (Statista, 2025b). In terms of average box of revenue relative to the number of releases within the same time frame, movie musicals ranked third (Statista, 2025b), indicating that despite having far fewer releases, on average, they perform well (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The problem is, success on Broadway does not guarantee box office success. As production companies attempt to take beloved and critically acclaimed Broadway musicals and adapt them into Hollywood movies, some questions arise: what factors are at play that impact whether they have the potential to become a box office success? And why do some musicals

work on Broadway, but not in Hollywood? For this analysis, *Rent* (2005), *Mamma Mia!* (2008), *Cats* (2019), and *Wicked* (2024) are examined to explore how the medium itself and socially relevant themes impact cultural relevance and viewing experience, how compelling stories change the way that people identify with these forms of media, and how social media, casting, and nostalgia effect behavior. Out of the factors identified, there is no single one factor that makes or breaks movie performance, but it is the combination of these factors that can propel a movie to success. For this discussion, adaptations released during COVID-19 will not be discussed due to the impacts of the pandemic on box office performance, as less people went to the movies during this time.

About the Original Broadway Productions and Movie Adaptations

Rent is a rock musical, inspired by *La Boheme* by Puccini, that originally ran on Broadway from April, 1996 through September, 2008 at the Nederlander Theatre (Blank, 2019; The Associated Press, 2008). With 5,123 shows grossing an estimated \$274 million across the 12-year period, it won Tony Awards, Obie Awards, and won a Pulitzer Prize for best musical (Blank, 2019; The Associated Press, 2008; BroadwayWorld, n.d.c). When it was adapted into a movie in 2005 by Revolution Studios with a \$40 million dollar budget, it fell short in box office performance, raking in \$31.7 million worldwide (BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.c).

Mamma Mia! opened for the first time in London's West End in March, 1999, at the Prince Edward Theatre and saw massive success, combining an original story with ABBA's music (LittleStar, n.d.a). It made its way to Broadway after touring the US, and opened at the Winter Garden Theatre in 2001. It has since closed and re-opened on Broadway, and is currently open at its original theatre. Overall, with an estimated 5,898 performances it has grossed approximately \$656.4 million (BroadwayWorld, n.d.b). It was adapted into a film by Universal

Pictures in 2008 with a budget of \$52 million, and has grossed an estimated \$706.7 million worldwide (BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.b).

Cats opened for the first time in London's West End in May, 1981 at the New London Theatre, drawing from T.S. Eliot's poetry book, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (LWEntertainment, n.d.). It opened on Broadway in September, 1982 at the Winter Garden Theatre and closed in September, 2000, with a revival on Broadway in June, 2017 at the Neil Simon Theatre that ended soon after. It is also returning to Broadway in 2026. *Cats* on Broadway totaled 7,385 performances and grossed \$432 million in revenue (BroadwayWorld, n.d.a). It was adapted into a movie in 2019 by Universal Pictures with a budget of \$95 million, and grossed an estimated \$78.3 million worldwide (BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.a).

Wicked opened on Broadway in October, 2003 at the Gershwin Theatre, and is still running to this day, with approximately 8,607 performances and \$1.81 billion in gross revenue (BroadwayWorld, n.d.d). The musical was adapted into two movies by Universal Pictures, with the first movie, released in 2024, covering the first act of the play with an approximate budget of \$145 million and raking in \$758.7 million worldwide (Kinsley, 2024; BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.e). The second movie, covering the second act, released in mid-late November, 2025, with an approximate budget of \$150 million, and has already raked in \$469.2 million worldwide (Chakrabarty, 2025; BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.d). The story is based on the novel *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire, and the Broadway version has won many awards during its run (Wicked, n.d.). Notably, *Wicked* and *Mamma Mia!* are among the highest grossing movie musicals of all time as of February, 2025, and are the top 2 Broadway adaptations (Statista, 2025b) (see Figure 3).

The Production – The Medium, Social Relevance, and Cultural Impact

As seen above, success on Broadway did not translate into success as a film for both *Rent* and *Cats*. The first consideration is the nature of theatre and film as a medium, as they are entirely different in their ability to interact with and reach audiences. Theatre is intimate, live, and thrumming with energy as audiences are in the room with the actors, musicians, dancers and the set environments, allowing audiences to feel like they are a part of the show, the moment, and the culture. Richardson (2019) discusses how theatre has been believed to engross audiences and make them active participants in the show through sensory experience, as opposed to being a passive viewer. This worked for all four of the mentioned Broadway shows, but is particularly notable for *Cats*, which allows audience members to be part of the fun at the Jellicle ball with cats popping up all over the theatre, dancing, singing, and doing acrobatics. Film is different, providing consumers with escape and excitement in well-crafted spectacles, but also at a distance. Benson-Allot (2025) discusses the history of theater-going as being marketed as providing escape from the stresses of real life, with blockbusters teaching audiences that movies provide spectacle. She references AMC's advertisement that played at the beginning of almost every movie at AMC theaters featuring Nicole Kidman, where she says, "... and we go somewhere we've never been before, not just entertained, but somehow reborn..." (AMC Theatres, 2021; Benson-Allot, 2025). The film adaptations of *Wicked*, *Mamma Mia!*, and *Cats* all provide opportunity for escape. In *Wicked*, audience members are transported to the magical world of Oz, in *Mamma Mia!* to a sunny island escape in Greece, and in *Cats*, an almost fantastical London. *Rent*, however, takes place in the East Village in NYC and follows struggling artists and staying closer to reality.

A second consideration is both theatre and film's ability to reflect and shape culture and society. Beard (1994) discusses the way in which movies in particular balance the necessity to

remain sensitive to social issues with the need to reimagine values and trends as new and entertaining for audiences and for profit. In addition to remaining culturally sensitive, these modes of entertainment have the ability to shape culture. From the perspective of McLuhan (2001) in his work “The Medium is the Message,” the message of theatre and film is not the content of any given play or movie, but their respective abilities to shape culture and attitudes (Federman, 2004). Additionally, Federman (2004) describes that, from McLuhan’s perspective, a medium “is anything from which a change emerges,” (p. 2). Each of the four plays on Broadway had major cultural impacts, but they also were socially relevant at the time in which they were released, and became cultural phenomena, both shaping culture and reflecting the times.

When *Rent* was released on Broadway in the 90s it was coming off of the AIDS epidemic that began in the 80s, and featured a story of struggling, queer artists in NYC, with the main character dying from AIDS. The show addressed topics like hardship, loss, love, and enjoying life while able. This was culturally relevant, and something that theatergoers in NYC could relate to. Major fans were called “rentheads,” and the show was so popular, including among younger generations, that it transformed the way the rush ticket system works today (The Associated Press, 2008). Rock music was also big in the 90s, with groups like Nirvana and Green Day massively popular, and older rock music like Queen and Nirvana still relevant to older generations. However, once translated to film, while still a compelling story, it lacked the escapist quality and spectacle that defines a blockbuster.

Wicked, similarly, is political. It addresses prejudice through Elphaba, and systemic oppression through the animals, and the ways in which those in power use fear and propaganda to maintain control. This is done while blurring the lines between good and evil, and packaged in the beautiful, magical and nostalgic world of Oz through a story about perseverance and female

friendship, with movie posters quoting the lyrics of the song “Defying Gravity” saying, “everyone deserves the chance to fly,” (Wicked, n.d.). The social commentary present in the show was relevant in the 2000s, and still is now. When the movie was released, the cultural impacts of the show were already far reaching, proven through the show’s success. Additionally, the show is meant to be an alternate perspective to *The Wizard of Oz*, which was already culturally significant and reaches audiences across generations. Using the classic story of *The Wizard of Oz* makes it easier for consumers to buy-in to the show and movie, as it removes some of the uncertainty surrounding the media and elicits nostalgia. Hamilton and Wagner (2014) discuss the ways in which nostalgia can be utilized to target past memories by using symbolic representations to evoke positive emotions that results in higher consumer satisfaction and better consumer experiences, to the benefit of businesses and advertisers. Additionally, as people have associations with certain offerings related to the past, nostalgia has the ability to increase purchase intention as people attempt to re-live the past as individuals, and as people who formed those positive memories through membership in social groups (Sierra & McQuitty, 2007).

Instead of leveraging a well-known story, *Mamma Mia!* utilized the already massively popular group ABBA and created an island getaway story about family, friendship, and love. The original producer, Judy Craymer, said that ““The audience... [was] literally out of their seats and singing and dancing in the aisles – and they still are. Every night,”” (LittleStar, n.d.b, p. 1). This, similar to *Wicked*, elicits nostalgia and removes uncertainty about the experience. When translated into film the show remained culturally relevant, escapist, and fun, with its ties to ABBA eliciting nostalgia. Notably, the movie was released in 2008 when the economy was already beginning to worsen, making escapism for the average consumer even more enticing.

Cats, in contrast, has no story. It is a compilation of poetry translated into music and dancing. It is simply fun, experiential theatre that did not translate well into film once it lost the interactive and experiential qualities that are necessary when there is no story.

Themes and Identity – A Compelling Story

In addition to cultural impact and social relevance, compelling stories with which people identify play a large role in driving higher consumption. Fens et al. (2022) argues that when a brand connects with multiple aspects of a consumer's self-concept, including their "...personality, notions of social roles, interests, beliefs, aspirations, and abilities," (p. 1529), it results in brand loyalty and increased attachment, higher perceived value, higher perceived quality of the offering, and stronger brand differentiation. Each of the stories can be thought of as brands that have permeated into culture, each having their own brand identity with stories that people can identify with. When translated into film, an important consideration for filmmakers and production studios are the interests and identities of their target markets (Fens et al., 2022).

This is a piece that *Cats* missed. With no story, and despite the PG rating that allowed them to attempt to bring in even younger audiences, the movie lacked the ability to connect with people's aspirations and identity, providing spectacle with nothing for audiences to connect to. *Rent* had the potential to make it, connecting with people through a compelling and socially relevant story, but still lacked the escapist element and spectacle appeal. It was rated PG-13 for some of its more sensitive content, likely targeting a more adult audience for whom the topics would be more relevant. *Mamma Mia!*, on the other hand, was able to identify a target with those who love the pre-existing group ABBA, want to have fun, and escape, all while connecting with people thematically through the story about love and family. Its PG-13 rating for some sexual content did not limit the movie's success, as at the time of release in 2008, the ABBA fans who

would be enticed through nostalgia and higher involvement likely skewed older anyway. It is not a socially charged movie, but it is a fun and easy watch.

Wicked was a combination of it all. It allowed viewers to escape to Oz, all while connecting with people through the characters and the story. This was utilized well in the marketing for the *Wicked* movie, with consumers able to choose pink to say they identify with Glinda, the superficial, magic-less, flawed, but well-loved social butterfly, or green for Elphaba, the ostracized but magically powerful girl who tries to be strong and fight for social justice. While the PG rating for the movie allowed for targeting younger, female leaning audiences, the political undertones and nostalgia from a story utilizing *The Wizard of Oz* made the movie relevant for older generations as well. As consumers interact with these forms of media and the promotional merchandise, they are able to express their identity and reinforce their self-concepts (Fens et al., 2022)

In the case of *Wicked*, their social media presence provides an opportunity to see how younger consumers identify with the movie. Research has shown that on Facebook, brands that consumers follow and interact with represent an expression of their self, or identity (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). As of June, 2025, *Wicked* was among the top three followed movie musicals across social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok (Statista, 2025b) (see Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7). This social media presence worked for their marketing strategy that targeted younger audiences, as 47% of GenZ reportedly learns of new movies through social media (Statista, 2025a) (see Figure 8).

The Casting – Involvement and Identity

A final consideration is how casting impacts movie performance for the transition of a Broadway show to Hollywood. Casting well-known celebrities also removes uncertainty and

increases purchase intention. Well-known and liked celebrities have the ability to influence brand perception, improve attitudes, and increase consumption of an offering through attachment (Ilicic & Webster, 2011). Another consideration for production companies who want to entice audiences, and especially younger generations, is that adolescents are prone to forming parasocial relationships with celebrities through social media, which increases involvement and provides opportunities for celebrities to market their films (Bond, 2016). For *Rent*, production brought back some of the original stage cast (Blank, 2019). However, they were not big Hollywood names. *Mamma Mia!* featured big Hollywood names such as Meryl Streep, who is arguably well-loved by the public, which includes older generations, and others who have the ability to connect with pre-existing fans.

Cats and *Wicked* also brought in a star-studded cast, with *Cats* featuring Taylor Swift, Judi Dench, Idris Elba, and many more. However, the positive impacts of casting celebrities did not outweigh the film's shortcomings, and instead resulted in scathing reviews, such as one by the LA Times titled, "'Cats' is a mess, but which actors kept their dignity intact? We rank them," (Carras, 2019). *Wicked*, on the other hand, brought in already well-known actors, singers, and performers such as Ariana Grande, Jonathan Bailey, and Michelle Yeoh, for the added benefit of connecting with their already established, highly involved audiences.

Discussion

Predicting which critically acclaimed Broadway shows will translate well into film is not necessarily easy, and there are many factors to take into consideration. This paper explored the nature of theatre versus going to the movies in terms of the experience and what consumers expect, the impact that each has on culture, the role of the social relevance and effective

storytelling in drawing audiences in, the role of escapism in film, the role of social media as marketing tool and the potential of celebrity casting to benefit a film.

All of the musicals discussed were well suited for the experiential nature of theatre in their own way. *Rent* was reflective of the time in which it was released and capitalized off of rock music's popularity. *Cats* provided a fun, experiential spectacle. *Mamma Mia!* utilized beloved ABBA music for a fun, easy story. *Wicked* re-worked a beloved classic tale into a politically charged yet still magical tale. All of the stories except for *Cats* had relatable characters with whom audiences could identify.

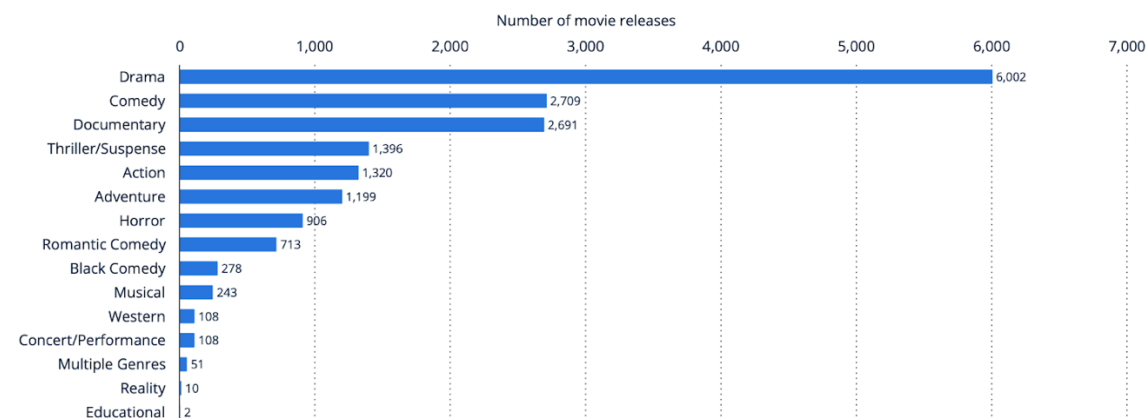
When translated to film, *Rent* lacked the escapist quality and spectacle needed for a blockbuster hit. *Cats'* lack of storyline did not translate, as the charm of experiencing the spectacle that is *Cats* was lost in translation, and the CGI was questionable. *Mamma Mia!* provided escapism in economic uncertainty, and the nostalgia of the music, as well as the celebrity cast made it an easy watch. *Wicked* had it all, providing spectacle, escapism, a socially relevant story with characters that consumers can identify with, nostalgia through *The Wizard of Oz*, and celebrity casting that would draw in highly involved consumers. Interestingly, while both parts of the movie performed well, with the second movie outperforming the first in domestic opening (\$147 million vs. \$112.5 million), the first movie outperformed the second in the long-run (BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.d; BoxOfficeMojo, n.d.e). People were likely excited for the second installment's release following the success of the first film. However, while the first act is lighthearted, the much darker second act is where everything falls apart, making it less of an escapist, easy watch. This could be the reason why it did not perform as well as the first movie. It is not easy to balance everything, but as production companies continue to adapt beloved shows into movies, these are all different aspects that can be kept in consideration.

Appendix

Figure 1

Number of movies released in the United States and Canada between 1995 and 2025, by genre

Number of movie releases in the U.S. & Canada 1995-2025, by genre



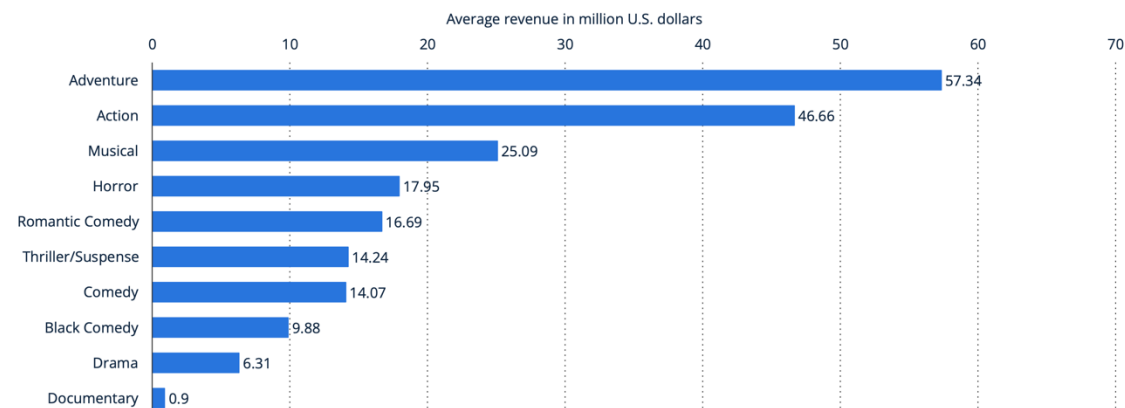
5 Description: Between 1995 and 2025, more than 17 thousand movies were released in Canada and the United States (including the unincorporated territories of Guam and Puerto Rico). Out of that total, almost one third were dramas, Documentaries and comedies followed, each accounting for approximately 2.6 thousand of all films released within that period. [Read more](#)
 Notes: Canada, Puerto Rico, United States; 1995 to 2025; as of January 31, 2025
 Sources: the-numbers.com

statista

Figure 2

Most popular movie genres in the United States and Canada from 1995 to 2024, by average box office revenue (in million U.S. dollars)

Movie genres ranked by average box office revenue in the U.S. & Canada 1995-2024



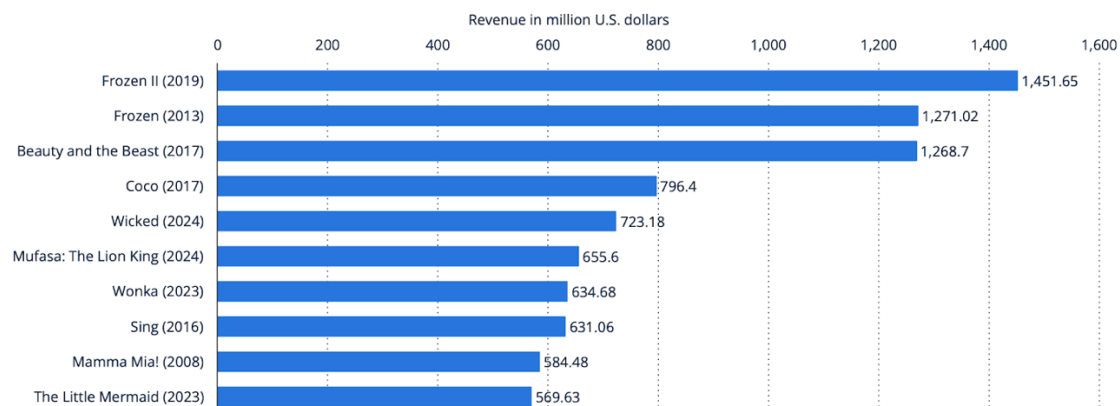
6 Description: Between 1995 and 2024, an adventure movie grossed, on average, 57.34 million U.S. dollars at the North American box office - a term that excludes Mexico and includes Canada and the United States. The box office revenue of a documentary stood at an average of little less than a million dollars. [Read more](#)
 Notes: Canada, United States; 1995 to 2024; as of November 8, 2024
 Sources: the-numbers.com

statista

Figure 3

Highest grossing musical movies worldwide as of February 2025 (in million U.S. dollars)

Highest grossing musical movies worldwide 2025



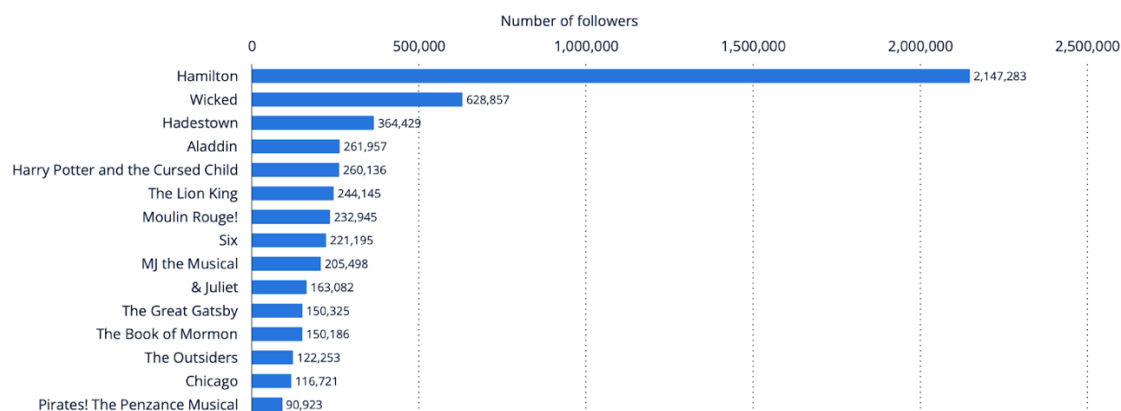
17 Description: As of February 2025, "Frozen II" (2019) was the all-time highest-grossing musical movie, with a worldwide box office revenue of 1.45 billion U.S. dollars. It was followed closely by the first "Frozen", while 2024's "Wicked" grossed more than 720 million U.S. dollars worldwide. [Read more](#)
 Note(s): Worldwide, as of February 20, 2025
 Source(s): the-numbers.com

statista

Figure 4

Most popular Broadway shows on Instagram as of June 2025, by number of followers

Most popular Broadway shows on Instagram 2025, by number of followers



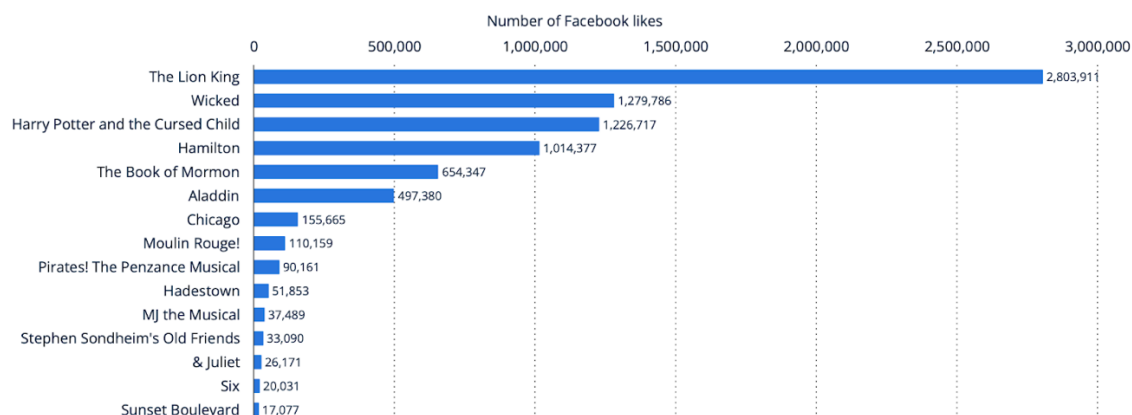
10 Description: As of June 2025, Hamilton was the most popular Broadway show on Instagram based on the number of followers. The musical recorded around 2.1 million followers on the social media platform. As of that month, Wicked ranked second, with roughly 629,000 followers. [Read more](#)
 Note(s): Worldwide, as of June 22, 2025
 Source(s): Broadway World

statista

Figure 5

Most popular Broadway shows on Facebook as of June 2025, by number of likes

Most popular Broadway shows on Facebook 2025, by number of likes



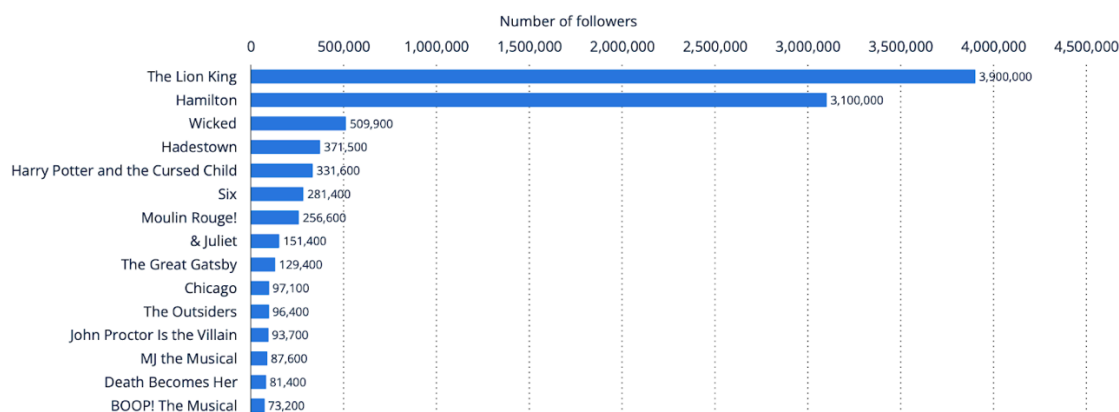
¹² Description: As of June 2025, The Lion King was the most popular Broadway show on Facebook based on the number of likes. As of that month, The Lion King recorded over 2.8 million likes on the social media platform. Meanwhile, Wicked reported the second-highest figure, with almost 1.3 million likes on Facebook. [Read more](#)
 Note(s): Worldwide, as of June 22, 2025
 Source(s): Broadway World

statista

Figure 6

Most popular Broadway shows on TikTok as of June 2025, by number of followers

Most popular Broadway shows on TikTok 2025, by number of followers



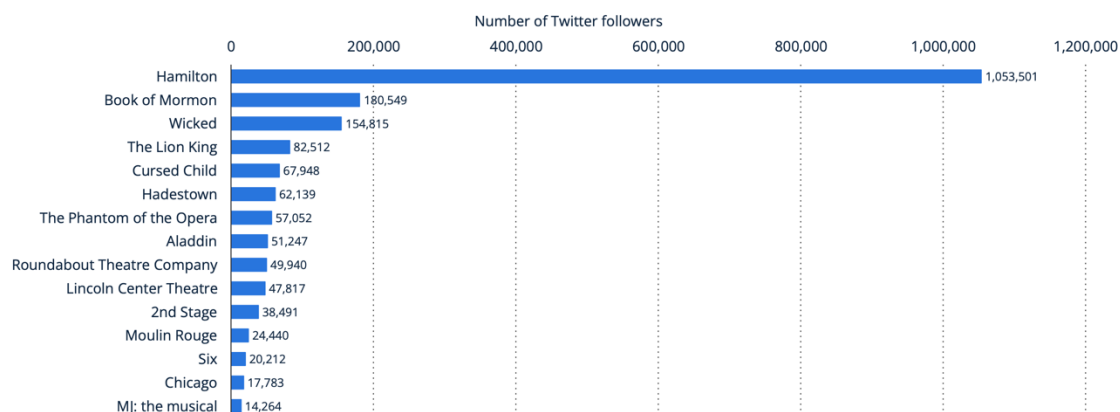
⁹ Description: As of June 2025, The Lion King was the most popular Broadway show on TikTok based on the number of followers. The musical recorded roughly 3.9 million followers on the social media platform. As of that month, Hamilton ranked second, with around 3.1 million followers. [Read more](#)
 Note(s): Worldwide, as of June 22, 2025
 Source(s): Broadway World

statista

Figure 7

Most popular Broadway shows on Twitter as of January 2023, by number of followers

Most popular Broadway shows on Twitter 2023, by number of followers



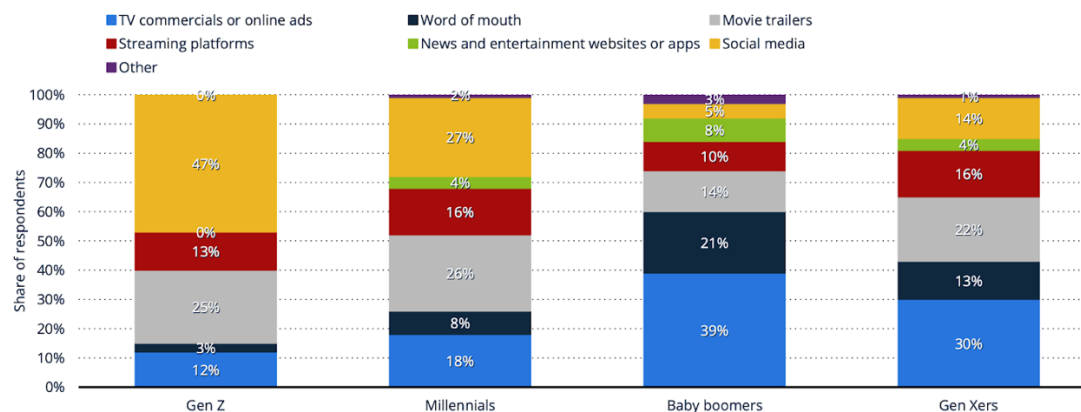
11 | Description: As of January 2023, Hamilton was the most followed Broadway show on Twitter, with over one million followers on the social media platform. The Book of Mormon was the second most popular show on Twitter, with about 180 thousand followers in total.
 Read more
 Note(s): Worldwide, as of January 22, 2023
 Source(s): Broadway World

statista

Figure 8

Leading ways of learning about new movies coming out in the United States in 2025, by age group

Ways of learning about new theatrical releases in the U.S. 2025, by age group



39 | Description: According to a survey fielded in the United States in 2025, the way viewers learn about new theatrical releases differs by generation. While 39 percent of baby boomers found out about new movies coming out via TV commercials or online ads, almost half of Gen Z viewers did so through social media. Read more
 Note(s): United States; 2025; 1,000 respondents
 Source(s): Octane Seating

statista

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