

# More Than Just A Movie

*How Disney Channel Original Movies (DCOM)  
Success Shapes Stars and Careers?*

*Data Analysis, Visualization, and Communication  
Data Journalism Article & Report*

# More Than Just A Movie

## What determines the Success of a Disney Channel Original Movie?

For decades, Disney Channel was more than just a TV network, it was a cultural phenomenon. From the early 2000s through the 2010s, Disney Channel Original Movies (DCOMs) became must-watch events, **shaping the childhoods and teenage years of an entire generation.**

Hits like *High School Musical*, *Camp Rock* and *The Cheetah Girls*, didn't just entertain, they defined a generation with unforgettable characters, infectious soundtracks and heartwarming stories. These movies not only **broke TV viewership records** but launched their stars into the spotlight, making them household names overnight.

Now, with Disney Channel fading in the era of streaming services and Disney+, it's time to ask: **What factors contribute to the success of a DCOM, and how does this success impact the careers of its lead actors?**

This article explores the key factors that drive a DCOM's lasting popularity, examining viewership data, cultural impact, the career trajectory of their stars, and the continued appeal to new audiences. Do the biggest premieres translate to lasting relevance? And **what does this mean for the future of DCOMs on Disney+?**

Let's find out!

## The Most Watched DCOM Premieres – What Captivated Audiences?

To begin, let's look at the top 10 most-watched DCOM premieres of all time. These are the films that captivated millions on their debut nights, dominating TV ratings and cementing their place in Disney Channel history. But does high viewership at the premiere guarantee long-term cultural impact?

Let's break down the numbers and see what made these movies must-watch events.

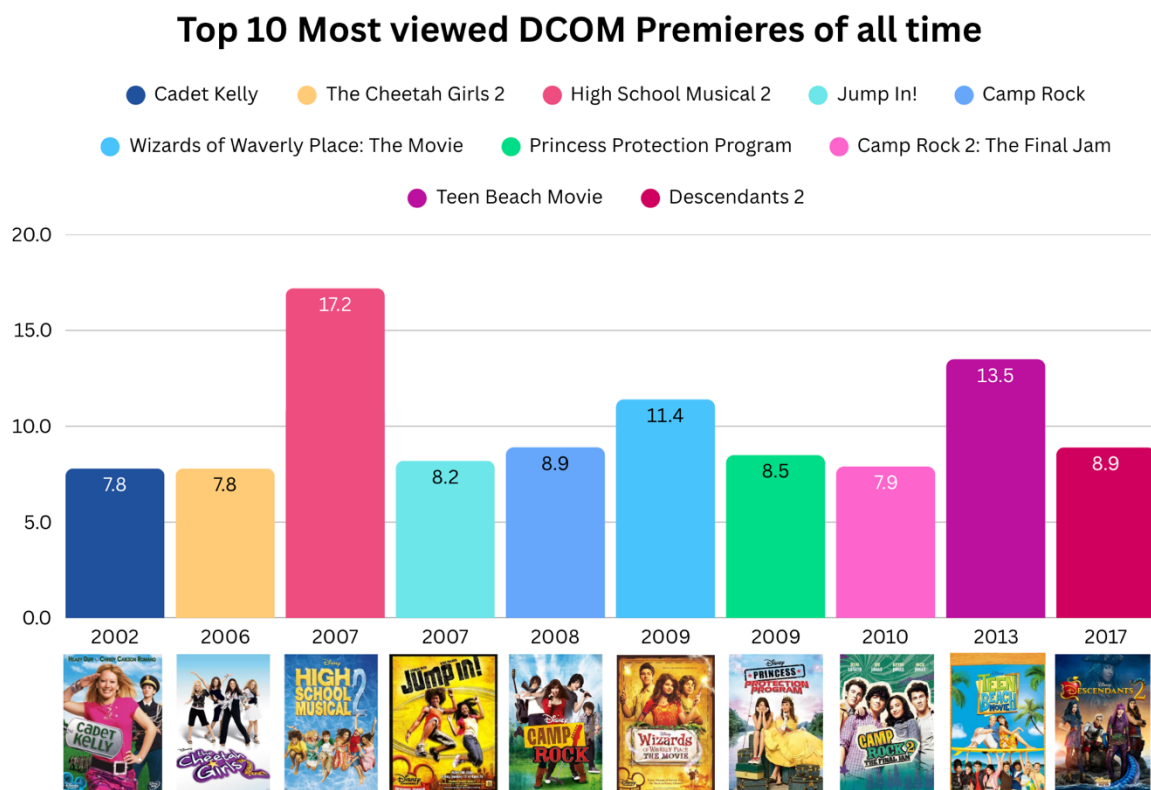


Fig.1

Leading the pack, we have [\*High School Musical 2 \(2007\)\*](#), which set the all-time record with **17.2 million viewers**. This not only made it the **most-watched** DCOM premiere, but the most watched premiere on a

children's TV channel. As a sequel to the smash hit [\*High School Musical\* \(2006\)](#), it kept fans hooked by bringing back the beloved characters played by Zac Efron, Vanessa Hudgens and Ashley Tisdale.

Coming in second we have [\*Teen Beach Movie\* \(2013\)](#), with **13.6 million viewers**. Despite a mostly new cast, it featured Disney Channel favorite Ross Lynch ([\*Austin & Ally\*](#)), and leaned into the channel's "[tried-and-tested formula of catchy kid-friendly musical numbers](#)".(Chan, 2023) Not to forget [\*Camp Rock\* \(2008\)](#) and its sequel [\*Camp Rock 2: The Final Jam\* \(2010\)](#) which drew in **8.9 million** and **7.9 million viewers**, respectively.

Perhaps most surprising is [\*Wizards of Waverly Place: The Movie\* \(2009\)](#), which ranked third with **11.4 million viewers**. Despite not being a musical, its success stemmed from the popularity of the [\*Wizards of Waverly Place\*](#) series, starring Selena Gomez. The franchise remains relevant today with its revival as [\*Wizards Beyond Waverly Place\*](#), with David Henrie and Selena Gomez returning as their original characters.

These record-breaking viewership numbers highlight two key factors behind Disney's Biggest Hits: **familiarity and nostalgia**. Sequels built on the success of their predecessors, while standalone hits like [\*Cadet Kelly\* \(2002\)](#) and [\*Jump In!\* \(2007\)](#) capitalised on star power, featuring Disney icons such as Hilary Duff ([\*Lizzie McGuire: The Movie\*](#)) and Corbin Bleu ([\*High School Musical\*](#)).

Beyond familiar faces and franchise momentum, another key factor that plays a role in a DCOM's success is **Genre**. Let's take a closer look at which genres were the most popular.

## Genre – What Captivated Audiences?

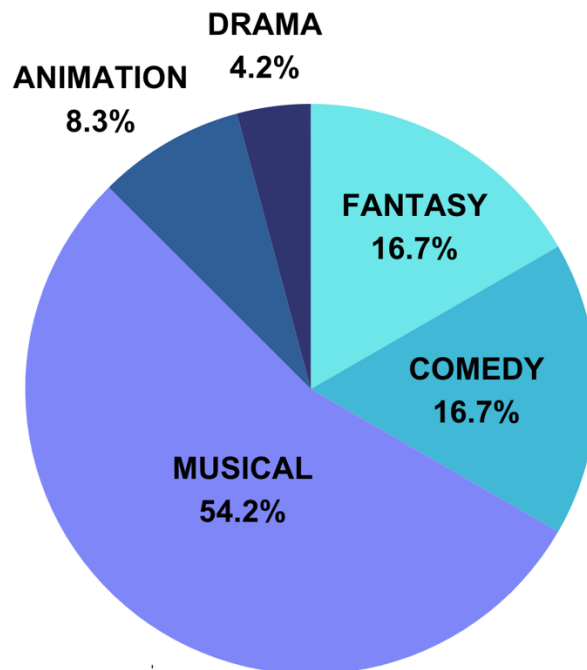


Fig.2

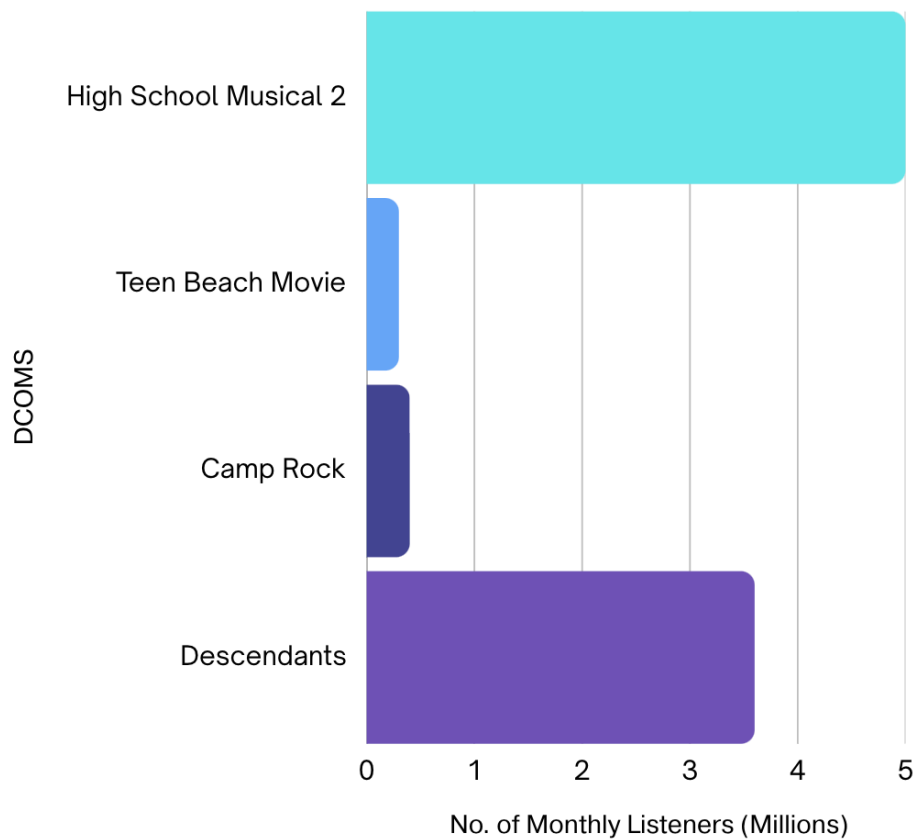
Looking at the most viewed DCOM Premieres per year from 2001-2024, one genre stands out far above the rest: **Musicals**.

**With over 54% of the top DCOM premieres belonging to this genre**, it is clear that catchy songs and high-energy performances have been a winning formula. But why do musicals dominate?

Part of the magic lies in Disney Channels “triple-threat” formula – actors who can **sing, dance, and act**, creating stars whose talent launches them far beyond their DCOM debuts. Just look at Zac Efron ([\*High School Musical\*](#)), Zendaya ([\*Zapped\*](#)), and Dove Cameron ([\*Descendants\*](#)) – all of whom are still pursuing their careers in the acting and music industries.

While the comedy (16.7%) and fantasy (16.7%) genres also make a strong appearance, it’s **the power of a soundtrack** that often cements a movie’s place in pop culture.

A look at Spotify streaming numbers (for the top 4 DCOM musicals) reveals that premiere numbers may not align with cultural impact, rather it is the DCOMs with the most popular soundtracks that really resonate with the Disney Channel Audience.



The next section will examine the relationship between DCOM premiere viewership numbers and IMDb ratings to determine whether the most-watched DCOMs are also the most highly rated.

## Does Popular Mean Well-Received?

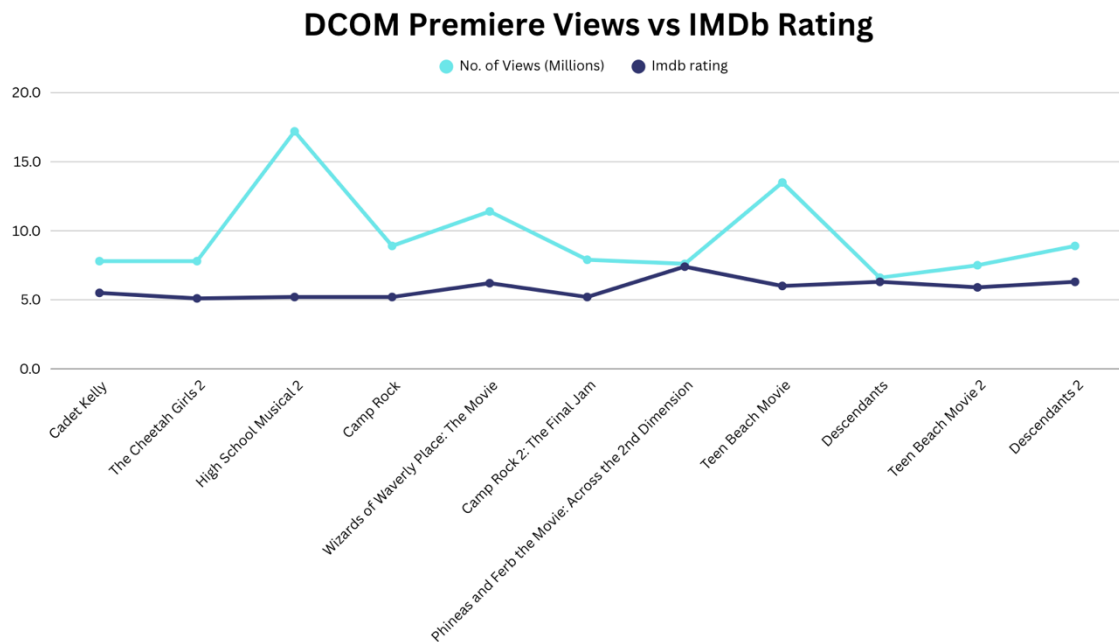


Fig. 4

**SPOILER ALERT!** High viewership doesn't necessarily equate to a high IMDb score. As we can see in fig. 4, these two points do not translate. In fact, *High School Musical 2* (2007) (the most viewed DCOM) has the lowest IMDb rating after *The Cheetah Girls 2* (2006). Notably, the majority of DCOMS on this list are all sequels, or a movie special from a long-running Disney Channel Series with dedicated fanbases. These are the movies that have high IMDb ratings. But why?

***Wizards of Waverly Place: The Movie* (2009)** was a highly anticipated event of the series. It acted as the denouement to the main storyline of the show. Similarly, ***Phineas and Ferb The Movie: Across the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dimension* (2011)** has the highest IMDb rating on the list, likely due to its connection to the beloved animated series.

Additionally, both the *Teen Beach Movie* and *Descendants* franchises also scored high IMDb ratings. The lead actors on these two franchises, Ross Lynch ([Austin & Ally](#)) and Dove Cameron ([Liv &](#)

[Maddie](#)), both starred in popular Disney Channel Shows. They also had prior experience in other DCOMs (e.g Dove Cameron in *Cloud 9*).

This shows that for some DCOMs, **lasting cultural impact is about more than just the viewership numbers**, it's about how well they satisfy the expectations of dedicated fans who've followed a story or actor over time.

This brings us to the final section of this article! **Do the successful careers of Lead Actors influence the Long-Term impact of a DCOM?**



## Disney's Biggest Stars

One of the most interesting aspects of DCOMs is how they **serve as launching pads for young actors**, making them instant stars. While the films themselves captivate audiences, it's the careers of the lead actors that often play a pivotal role in the lasting appeal and cultural impact of these movies.

As these actors' careers grow, their Instagram presence becomes key to expanding their fanbase. This link between popularity and social media engagement highlights the lasting impact of starring in a DCOM. The following graph explores this connection, by comparing Instagram followers to engagement rates, revealing how online influence aligns with DCOM success.

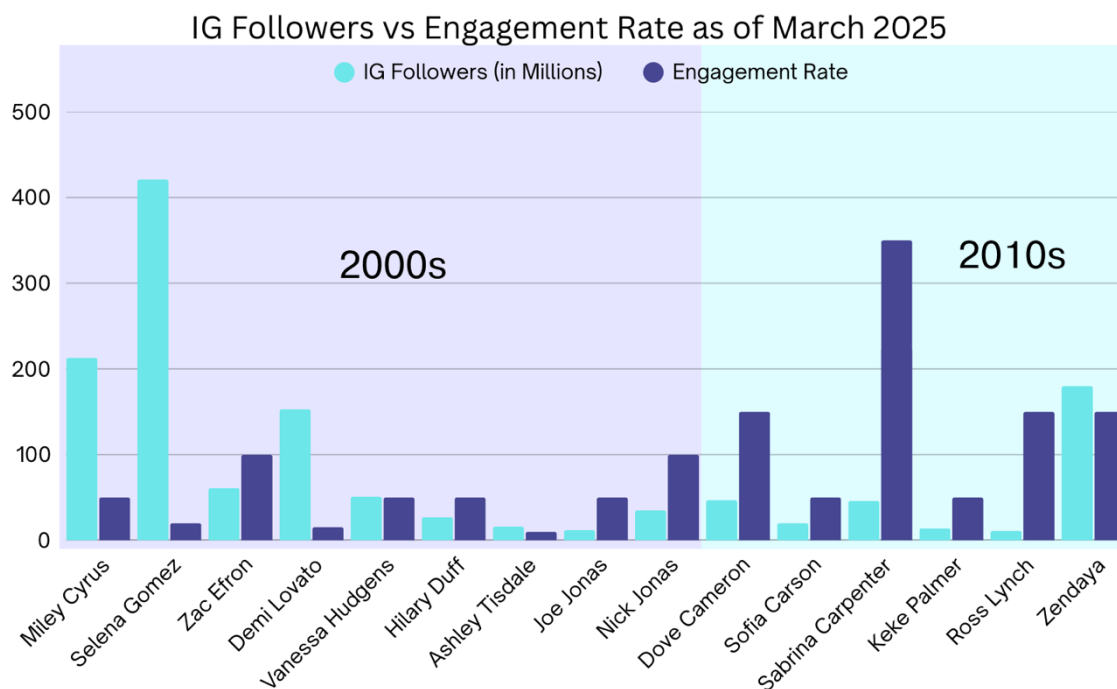


Fig. 5

As we can see the lead actors from DCOMs released in the 2000s (*Wizards of Waverly Place*, *Camp Rock*, *High School Musical*) boast massive Instagram followings, with Selena Gomez leading the pack at 421 million followers, followed by Miley Cyrus and demi Lovato.

However, their engagement rates are quite low, which could hint that their careers already peaked. In contrast, the lead actors from DCOMs released in the 2010s (Teen Beach Movie, Descendants, Zapped) may have smaller followings, but their engagement rates are much higher, indicating a more active and engaged fanbase. **This indicates a shift in how Disney stars interact with their audience.** While the older stars have broader name recognition, newer alumni maintain a more engaged and loyal fanbase. This may be due to their continued involvement and association in Disney-related content or emerging projects.

This brings us to the next question:

## Who became the most successful? A Heatmap Analysis

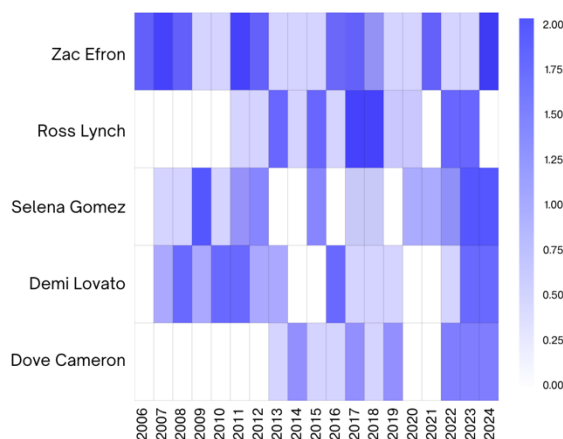


Fig.6

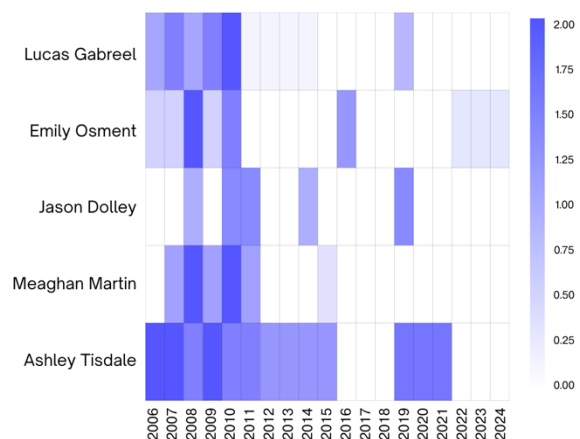


Fig.7

The two heatmaps above represent the career timeline comparison between Lead Actors in a DCOM (fig. 6) and Supporting Actors in a DCOM (fig. 7). The intensity of the colour indicates the volume of projects each actor participated in per year, with darker shades representing more active years.

From fig. 6, it is clear that Lead Actors such as Zac Efron, Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato maintained consistent career activity beyond

their Disney Channel years, often transitioning into mainstream music, television, or film industries. Meanwhile, Fig. 7 shows that supporting actors, while experiencing periods of high activity during their Disney career, often have shorter or more sporadic career trajectories post-DCOM. Ashley Tisdale maintained moderate activity post-DCOM as her Disney Career is still ongoing as the voice of Candice Flynn in Phineas and Ferb, however, she has significantly fewer non-Disney projects than the lead actors in Fig. 7.

These trends support the idea that being a lead in a DCOM can provide momentum for long-term success. However, career longevity depends on factors beyond Disney exposure, such as diversification into other entertainment fields, and an actors ability to maintain relevance in an evolving industry.

## **Beyond the Screen: Understanding DCOM Impact**

This article explore the key factors that drive the cultural impact of a Disney Channel Original Movie (DCOM), from blockbuster premiere viewership to the lasting popularity of their soundtracks. While high debut numbers don't always translate to critical success, these films undeniably leave a mark. Especially when tied to beloved characters and rising stars who go on to shape the entertainment industry. The career trajectories of DCOM stars also influence a movie's long-term impact, with some achieving mainstream success, while others remain closely linked to their Disney roots, fostering nostalgia and continues audience engagement.

This exploration uncovers the magic behind DCOM success, revealing the patters that make these films resonate with audiences. But as Disney+ reshapes the way we watch DCOMs, the game is changing.

Streaming offers greater accessibility, yet it disrupts the traditional premiere experience that once made these movies must-watch events. The question now is whether new releases, such as *Descendants 4* already breaking records, can capture the same cultural influence as their predecessors. One thing is certain: as viewing habits evolve, so will the very definition of a Disney Classic.

# Report on “*More than Just a Movie*”

“What determines the Success of  
a Disney Channel Original  
Movie?”

Over the course of Data Analysis, Visualization and Communication project, I identified my research topic; Disney Channel Original Movies (DCOMs) and their impact on pop culture. I chose this as my topic because DCOMs have played a major role not only in the pop culture of the late 1990s through the 2010s, but in the career impact of its lead actors. As Disney Channel has come to a close due to a decline in viewership numbers since 2016, and the rise of streaming services such as Disney+ (Pratt, 2024), it is important to understand why these films were so influential, what made them successful and what does this mean for the future DCOMs released and premiered on Disney+. Through the quantitative analysis of the key factors that contribute to the success of a DCOM such as Genre, Soundtrack Popularity, and Star Career Trajectory, my article will answer; “What determines the Success of a Disney Channel Original Movie (DCOM)?” and “How does this success impact the careers of its lead actors?”

The first dataset I collected for this project was the “Most watched Disney Channel premieres in the United States as of October 2019, by number of viewers” by Nielsen on Statista. Following the ‘*Best Practices for Data Journalism*’ handbook by the Media Development Investment Fund, I understood the importance of using reliable data to ensure the accuracy and credibility of my analysis. (Keng and Kuek, 2018) This dataset provided a solid foundation for identifying the most watched DCOMs and determining which actors to focus on in my analysis. I chose it as my foundation because the other datasets – sourced by data scraping from IMDb, Spotify, Instagram

and Socialblade – rely on publicly available, crowdsourced information. Therefore, establishing a reliable starting point was crucial for ensuring accuracy in my analysis.

This dataset immediately identified a trend. Sequels and movies based on existing Disney Channel shows or storylines had the highest premiere viewership numbers. Upon closer inspection I found that a few debut movies such as *Camp Rock* and *Teen Beach Movie* did make this list. This made me question what factors made these two movies stand out despite not being sequels or part of an existing Disney Channel franchise. From this dataset, I created excel spreadsheets for ‘The most watched DCOM premieres in the United States’, ‘list of all DCOMs released from 1997-2022’, ‘Instagram Following and Engagement’ and ‘Actor Data’. My ‘Actor Data’ spreadsheet included a column for the lead actors of the top 10 most viewed DCOMs at debut, followed by columns representing; number of DCOMs starred in, first Disney appearance, last Disney appearance, number of Disney channel shows starred in, Disney career length, and awards won.

Before analysing the data, I began by cleaning it. Since my focus is on Disney Channel Original Movies, I removed the data related to television shows and specials using Excel. However, this introduced a limitation: excluding TV-related data removed important context. For example, after *Wizards of Waverly Place: The Movie*, the next 3 highest-related Disney Channel Premieres were TV specials or crossover events, likely benefiting from the combined star power of multiple shows. While removing these entries helped me maintain the focus on DCOMs, it also meant losing insight into how franchise connections can contribute to premiere success. This therefore is an area that needs further exploration. While data cleaning, it was also essential to consider the timeframe for the project and the length of the article. My initial preference was to reflect on the impact the success of DCOMs had on their lead actors’ careers in the entertainment industry, also comparing with the actors of Nickelodeon Original Movies. However, given the timeframe, this was far beyond the scope of the project.

The next step of my data cleaning process was searching for abnormalities in the data I collected through data scraping. I found that certain data points from IMDb sources were not entirely accurate. These included year of first DCOM and Instagram following. As a result, I manually fact-checked every data point ensuring that

everything was correct and up to date. Furthermore, making sure that the formatting of my datasets were standardized was essential to ensuring the consistency of my analysis. This included correcting date formats and ensuring uniform naming conventions. (Guerrero, 2018) Data inconsistencies or inaccuracies can lead to misleading conclusions, ultimately contributing to misinformation which would negatively impact research within the humanities. Therefore, it is essential to follow the best practice techniques when collecting, analysing and distributing data. (Keng and Kuek, 2018)

To begin my data analysis, I made use of various Excel formulas such as SUM and COUNT. These were used for finding the Disney Channel Career length of each lead actor. I also used colour grading to identify which DCOMs and their lead actors had the highest values, so that it was easier to understand the data I collected.

When creating and designing my visualizations, I prioritized audience engagement by ensuring clarity and readability. Making my graphs easy to interpret was crucial for effectively communicating my findings. To achieve this, I made my graphs using Canva, which provided greater creative flexibility in my designs, allowing me to present data in a visually appealing and accessible way. (Canva, 2025) Within the article itself, I also made sure to provide alternative text to each image to improve accessibility and ensure that all readers, including those using screen readers, could understand the visual information.

The first most essential visualization in my analysis was the bar graph displaying the most-viewed DCOM premieres of all time. This graph established the foundation for my study highlighting which movies attracted the largest audiences and setting the stage for deeper analysis of their success factors. To enhance engagement, I also incorporated movie posters alongside each bar. This allows readers familiar with DCOMs to instantly recognize films. This visual element not only makes the graph more appealing but can draw in audiences by triggering nostalgia, one of the key factors identified in my article. The following visualizations include; a pie chart to represent genre commonality, horizontal and double bar graphs to represent monthly spotify listeners and Instagram following versus engagement, and a line graph to show the comparison between DCOM premiere numbers and IMDb rating.

Finally, the last visualization in my article was a Heatmap illustrating the career timelines of my selected actors. I experimented with various formats, including Gantt charts and other timeline-based visuals, but ultimately found that a heatmap provided the clearest and most effective representation of the data. The gradient of colours allowed for an intuitive comparison of career longevity, making it easier for readers to identify trends in how long each actor has remained active in the entertainment industry. This approach also highlighted key moments in their careers such as career activity pre and post Disney career, offering a visual narrative of their success.

When writing the article, I aimed to make the writing style as engaging as possible. I focused on a clear, conversational tone that would appeal to both casual readers and those interested in data-driven insights. To maintain reader interest, I balanced analytical discussion with storytelling (e.g Spoiler Alert!) to illustrate key points. Additionally, I made sure the structure the article logically (with signposting), to ensure that each section flowed seamlessly into the next, therefore guiding the audience through my findings in an accessible and compelling way. I also included hyperlinks throughout the article for quick access to more information should the reader require it.

Throughout this project, I have gained a deeper understanding of how data analysis can transform the way information is interpreted and used in the humanities. By applying data analysis techniques, I was able to explore, analyze, manipulate, and visualize data in a way that has revealed meaningful patterns and insights. Regularly referring back to the '*Best Practices for Data Journalism*' handbook (Kuan and Keng, 2018) I was able to learn and implement the best practices of data analysis in my article, emphasizing data accuracy and readability.

One of the most surprising revelations was how strongly franchise connections influenced premiere viewership. While I expected sequels and spin-offs to perform well, I did not anticipate just how dominant they would be in the rankings. Especially in comparison to their predecessors. At the same time, a few original movies, such as *Camp Rock* and *Teen Beach Movie* managed to break through, leading me to explore factors beyond franchise and star popularity (e.g soundtrack recognition).



Looking ahead, there are still areas that warrant further exploration. The shift from traditional television premieres to streaming releases introduces new challenges in measuring success. For example, *Descendants 4* has already broken viewership records with 6.7million views in its first three days of streaming. (Campione, 2024) This raises new questions: How will streaming-first DCOMs compare to past TV premieres in long-term cultural influence? Will actors from these newer releases see the same career impact as those from the peak of Disney Channels TV era? Further research could analyze streaming engagement metrics, social media trends, and career trajectories of newer DCOM actors to better understand how the landscape of Disney Channel Original Movies will continue to evolve.

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