

Will v. Denzel

An Investigation on who is Better

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In this article we abstract
Abstract

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1 Introduction

“You’ll never see a U-Haul behind a hearse. . . . Now, I’ve been blessed to make hundreds of millions of dollars in my life. I can’t take it with me, and neither can you. It’s not how much you have but what you do with what you have.” – Denzel Washington

Will Smith and Denzel Washington are two of the most prominent movie stars in the business today, though they have very different stories. Will Smith burst onto the scene as “The Fresh Prince” in the rap duo group “DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince,” winning his first Grammy award when he was just 20. Smith later starred in the TV show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* from 1990-1996. After this period he started to achieve a wide amount of commercial success from movies like *Bad Boys*, *Independence Day*, and *Men in Black*. Denzel began his career as a theater actor in Maryland before he received a regular role as Dr. Chandler on TV show *St. Elsewhere*. Denzel then began to branch out into feature films receiving his first Oscar nomination in the movie *Cry Freedom* (1987) and his first win (Best Supporting Actor) in the movie *Glory* (1990) shortly afterward. It is without question that both actors have achieved a monumental amount of success in their careers, but the question remains: Which one of the two is better?

I will explore the answer to this question by examining the differences between the two. Which types of movies they are successful in, comparing their awards, looking at the money their movies have made, and investigating the impact they have made on the movie scene each year. These are pieces of the puzzle that I will show below in this report.

2 Commercial Impact on Industry

The movie business has enjoyed incredible commercial success growing since the latter half of the 20th century. When controlling for inflation we can see that the movie business has enjoyed a fairly linear growth from the 1950s until the early 2000s where it has since stagnated.

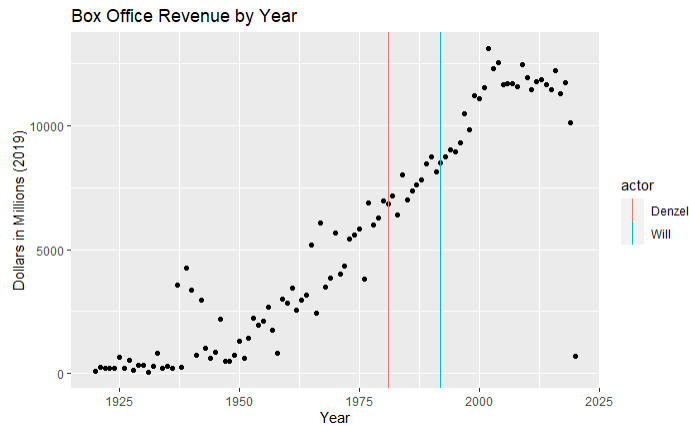
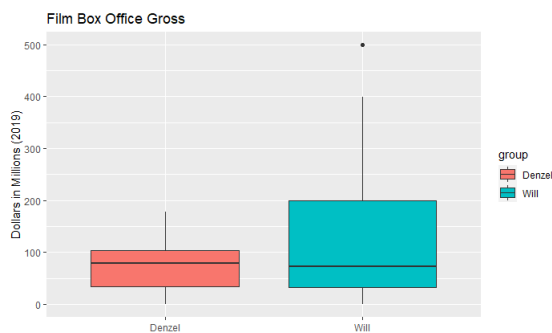
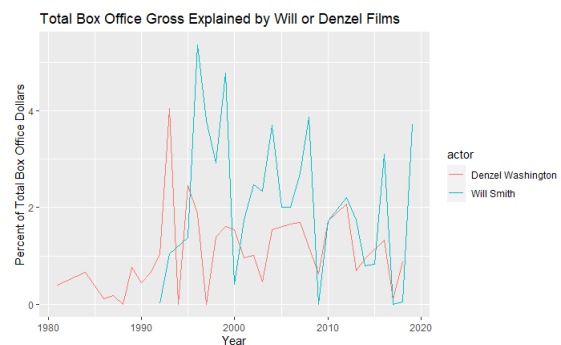


Figure 1: Movie Commercial Growth

As can be seen in figure 1 above, Denzel's career began about ten years before Will's, and in this period he has seen more commercial growth of the industry than his peer. We shall now examine the impact of each actor's movies on the commercial success of each year.



(a) Movie Revenue Distribution



(b) Proportional Movie Revenue

Figure 2: Commercial Impact

Above in figure 2b, is shown the amount of the total box office revenue explained by each actor. For each year, and for each actor, I found the proportion of their movie revenues to total movie revenues for that year. As we can see Will Smith has much higher peaks for his movies. This tells us that in these years more people went to see his movies in the theaters. When researching for this project, I learned that Will Smith was called “Mr. July” around this time, because it seemed like every summer he would release a big movie that people would go see.

In contrast, Denzel Washington's movies don't explain nearly as much of the total revenue as Will's do. However, whereas Will's movies seem to be less commercially dominant overtime, Denzel's movies releases have shown relative stability for the last two decades. There is one major spike for Denzel, which is in the year 1995 when he released the highly successful *Crimson Tide*, along with *Virtuosity*, and *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

The wide difference in commercial impact from figure 2b may suggest that Denzel Washington's movies are not met with great commercial success. On the contrary, from figure 2a we can see that while Will Smith's movies have a higher revenue ceiling, the average Denzel Washington movie is more commercially successful than the average Will Smith one! It may also surprise one to learn that despite having about a ten year head start on Will, Denzel has only made 61 movies compared to Will's 111. From this high number of movies one can see why there is a much greater variability in the commercial success of the works of Will Smith.

3 Movies Types

In this section, I will delve deeper into the types of movies that Will and Denzel make. Besides being very different personalities, Will and Denzel produce films that differ a lot from each other. These differences come in the case of genre and the target audience.

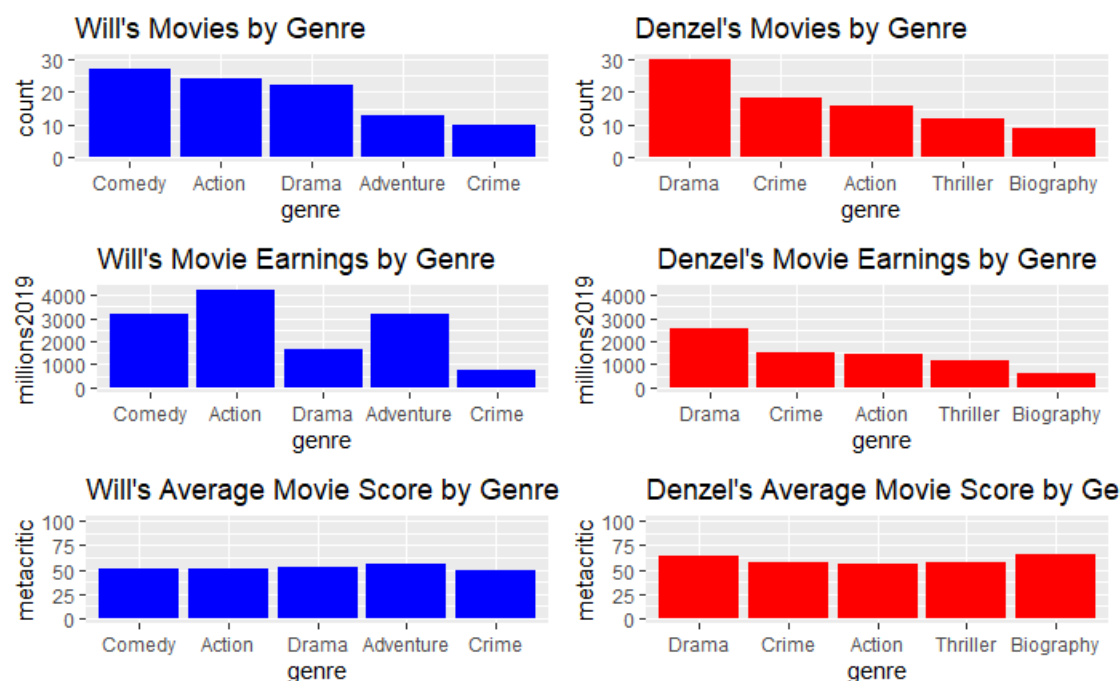


Figure 3: Movie Genres by Actor

By only a cursory glance at the top genres for each actor, we can get a sense of the differences of their movies. Will Smith's movies are much more likely to have a lighter tone. The comedy learned from his time in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* has likely carried over to much of his other movies. On the other side, Denzel Washington's movies have a more serious tone. Drama is clearly his top category, with crime being no more frivolous.

Another interesting point about figure 3 is the movie earnings for each genre. Here it is clear that Will's movies have made much more than Denzel's, but we also can see the variance between the two. If we look at Denzel's movie earnings by genre, we see that the earnings scale very similarly to the amount of movies he produces for each. This could mean that people will consistently see a movie with Denzel in it irrespective to genre. Whereas, with Will we see that despite producing many comedy movies, they pale in comparison to his action movies. Even more significant is that the drama movies he produces -his third most produced movie genre- lack the commercial success of his other movies.

The average movie scores^[1] for each actor are harder to read, but we can see that Denzel's movies score higher than Will's for the most part. Will's scores mainly hover in the low 50s (or mid 50s for adventure) while Denzel are in the high 50s or low 60s. It is impressive to see that the drama movies made by Denzel are his second highest rated genre even though they are his most produced category. I would have thought

that the higher quantity of movies would lead to some flops that bring down the average, but this is not the case. We can also see that Denzel performs very well in biographical films. Despite their relatively low commercial success, they rate as his best genre of the five most that he produces.

ENDNOTES

[1] Average score here is the average metacritic rating

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Commercial Impact on Industry	2
3	Movies Types	3