What Netflix’s Top 10 Lists Says About Streaming Viewership

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2 hours ago
Key insights:

- TV shows are more likely than movies to hit No. 1.
- Most hits on the service aren’t repeat offenders.

Netflix is notoriously tight-lipped about the information that it releases on the viewership around the shows and movies on its service. In February, though, the streaming service began showing its users the 10 most popular programs each day in an effort to aid content discovery and help users tap into the Netflix zeitgeist, which has offered up a peek behind the curtain as to which shows are resonating on the platform and for how long.

Adweek has been checking and tracking those three top 10 lists—Top 10 in the U.S., Top 10 TV Shows in the U.S. Today and Top 10 Movies in the U.S. Today—on Netflix daily to better understand what programming does well on the service. We’ve previously written that pandemic-related programming surged in popularity on the service in the weeks following the beginning of Covid-19 and noted just how quickly the Netflix docuseries Tiger King became a runaway quarantine hit.

Here are some of the other things we’ve learned from Netflix’s top 10 lists and what it may mean for how different kinds of programming perform on the service:

Shows, not movies, consistently hit No. 1

Anticipated new film releases like Uncut Gems and The Lovebirds, the rights to which Netflix snatched up in April, have hovered in Netflix's top 10 list since they arrived on the service. But acquired movies are rarely in the No. 1 popularity spot on the service.

It's far more likely that Netflix original films will take the top spot on its top 10 list. Dangerous Lies, a thriller starring Riverdale's Camila Mendes, was No. 1 overall on Netflix in the U.S. from May 2-4, while Netflix original comedy The Wrong Missy was most-watched from May 15-18. Action film Extraction was in the top spot for six days, while Spenser Confidential got seven days at No. 1.

Netflix original films, though, rarely live in the No. 1 spot for longer than a week and often drop out of the top 10 list soon after they are no longer in the top spot. Dangerous Lies, for example, fell out of the overall top 10 list entirely by May 8, four days after it had been No. 1. The same can't be said for Netflix original series, which have more lasting power in the top 10 list overall and more regularly appear in the No. 1 position.

That includes the reality hit Love Is Blind and docuseries The Trials of Gabriel Hernandez, both of which were in the No. 1 spot for six days. Love Is Blind hovered in the top 10 overall titles for more than a month, while Trials lingered for more than three weeks.

The comedy Dead to Me hovered at No. 1 for seven days and is still in the top 10 almost a month later. And Tiger King, of course, was No. 1 on the service from March 23 through April 16, setting the record as the program with the most staying power in the top spot.

This likely happens due to both the sheer amount of time that people can spend watching television series over movies and

the release schedule around certain series titles. Netflix has opted to release some reality programs weekly instead of its usual strategy of dumping shows on the service and encouraging binging, which may help buoy certain programs in the No. 1 spot for longer than usual.

There are some exceptions: the animated children's movie Despicable Me was the only library film to take the No. 1 spot on the service since Netflix began releasing top 10 metrics and was in the top 10 overall list for more than a week.

Animation rules

Despicable Me isn't the only animated film to find a big audience on Netflix. Animated series for kids are regularly among the top 10 films on the service, underscoring the importance of having children's programming on streamers, especially now that children are spending more time at home.

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