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The effect of Liberty Media and *Drive to Survive* in the Formula 1 industry

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Content table

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Abstract</i> | 3 |
| 1 <i>Introduction</i> | 4 |
| 2 <i>State of the art</i> | 6 |
| 2.1 Why Liberty Media bought F1 | 6 |
| 2.1.1 The decline of an outdated sport..... | 6 |
| 2.1.2 Sports in the 2010s-2020s..... | 7 |
| 2.2 <i>Drive to Survive: an insight into a previously exclusive sport</i> | 10 |
| 3 <i>Theoretical framework</i> | 11 |
| 3.1 The new era of sports media | 11 |
| 3.2 US Media hegemony and sports monetization | 13 |
| 3.3 Women sports fans and parasocial relationships theory | 15 |
| 4 <i>Research goals and questions</i> | 18 |
| 5 <i>Methodology</i> | 19 |
| 6 <i>Analysis and discussion</i> | 20 |
| 6.1 Netflix and <i>Drive to Survive</i> | 20 |
| 6.1.1 Objectives are met..... | 20 |
| 6.1.2 Five successful seasons, so far..... | 21 |
| 6.1.3 Criticism..... | 22 |
| 6.2 A new era of F1 | 24 |
| 6.2.1 Liberty shines a light on the drivers..... | 24 |
| 6.2.2 More races, more countries, more money..... | 26 |
| 6.3 Focusing on the US | 28 |
| 6.3.1 ESPN, America’s favorite..... | 28 |
| 6.3.2 Drivers are celebrities | 29 |
| 6.3.3 American money..... | 30 |
| 6.4 Debates | 31 |
| 6.4.1 Openness versus exclusiveness..... | 31 |
| 6.4.2 Still lacks diversity..... | 32 |
| 7 <i>Conclusions</i> | 35 |
| 8 <i>Bibliography</i> | 36 |
| <i>Annexes: Interviews with Formula 1 insiders</i> | 45 |

Table of acronyms

Table 1 below portrays the different abbreviations and acronyms employed throughout the present dissertation:

Table 1

| | |
|--------|--|
| ATP | Association of Tennis Professionals |
| BLM | Black Lives Matter |
| DTS | <i>Formula 1: Drive to Survive</i> |
| ESPN | Entertainment and Sports Programming Network |
| F1 | Formula 1 |
| F2 | Formula 2 |
| F3 | Formula 3 |
| FIA | <i>Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile</i> |
| FIFA | <i>Fédération Internationale de Football Association</i> |
| GP | Grand Prix |
| LMC | Liberty Media Corporation |
| MLB | Major Baseball League |
| NASCAR | National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing |
| NBA | National Basketball Association |
| NFL | National Football League |
| OTT | Over-the-top |
| UEFA | Union of European Football Associations |
| US | United States |

Abstract

The sport of Formula 1 experienced exponential growth after Liberty Media Corporation acquired its commercial rights in 2016. It opened its doors to a new generation of younger fans and focused on recruiting female and American fans. Besides providing more engaging content for their audience, the biggest reason behind F1's success was the Netflix docuseries *Drive to Survive*. Fans got to know the personality behind the drivers and were captivated by the Formula 1 atmosphere beyond racing. Now that it is at the peak of its growth, it is crucial to understand the reasons behind the "boom" of F1 and why the role of the female fan and the American audience is so important in the sports media industry.

Key words: sports media, Formula 1, fans, Netflix, parasocial relations, digitalization, United States.

Resumen

La Fórmula 1 experimentó un crecimiento exponencial después de que Liberty Media Corporation adquiriera sus derechos comerciales en 2016. Abrió sus puertas a una nueva generación de aficionados más jóvenes y se centró en captar fans femeninos y estadounidenses. Además de ofrecer contenidos más atractivos para su audiencia, la principal razón del éxito de la F1 fue la docuserie de Netflix *Drive to Survive*. Los aficionados conocieron las personalidades de los pilotos y quedaron cautivados por el mundo de la Fórmula 1 más allá de las carreras. Ahora que se encuentra en la cúspide de su crecimiento, es crucial entender las razones del "boom" de la F1 y por qué el papel del fan femenino y la audiencia estadounidense es tan importante en la industria de los medios deportivos.

Palabras clave: medios deportivos, Fórmula 1, Netflix, fans, relaciones parasociales, digitalización, Estados Unidos.

1 Introduction

The sport of Formula 1 (F1) has evolved throughout the years since its appearance in 1950 (Jenkins, 2016), not only in terms of the technological advances of motorsport, but in the way racing fans interact with the sport. The world nowadays is in no way the same world that witnessed the start of Formula 1, and the sport has had to adapt to it. Nonetheless, one of the biggest shifts in the sport considered “the pinnacle of motorsport” has occurred in the past five years.

The sport of Formula 1 is a racing competition consisting of a yearlong season of races that take place across the globe. Currently, the 2023 Formula 1 calendar is made up of 23 races in 20 different countries across the span of nine months. The Formula 1 grid is made up of 10 teams, with two drivers per team: a total of 20 drivers from different backgrounds. Races consist of a three-day event with Friday being devoted to free practice, and Saturday for qualifying which sets the order in which the drivers start the race that takes place on Sunday. (Formula 1, 2023)

All events that occur during a race weekend are broadcasted in several media outlets, depending on the country. Additionally, so-called support series or feeder series also race on the same tracks during F1 race weekends as further entertainment and to provide a pathway for young drivers who want to get into F1. These include Formula 2 (F2), Formula 3 (F3), and Porsche Cup. An extra feeder series called F1 Academy was introduced in 2023 as an attempt to amplify the access of women into the world of motorsport after the W Series, which existed previously with the same purpose, had to be shut down due to lack of funding. (Formula 1, 2023)

The drivers and teams are awarded points depending on their finishing position throughout the races. Whoever has the most points at the end of the season is awarded the Formula 1 World Champion title, with titles being awarded for both the drivers and the teams, also known as constructors. Moreover, to the constructors’ championship, teams are awarded financial prizes according to their finishing position. Money is of great importance as it is the way to fund resources, and therefore the teams who get the most money are more likely to be successful. Every technical aspect of the competition is regulated by the *Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile* (FIA), which drafts the technical regulations each year and overlooks the competition. (Jenkins, 2016)

In 2016, the commercial rights of Formula 1, previously owned by Delta Topco were sold to Liberty Media Corporation (LMC), an American mass media company that also owns the rights to the Atlanta Braves, Drone Racing League and Overtime Sports, amongst others. LMC is currently valued at 20.8 billion dollars, being the world's most valuable sports media company (Forbes, 2023). LMC bought all of Delta Topco, inheriting its debts after three years of consideration (Sylt, 2017). Following the acquisition of Formula 1, Liberty Media also signed a contract with Netflix, one of the world's most popular streaming platforms. Both parties agreed on the creation of a docuseries which would follow the sport of Formula 1 during the full season giving existing and potential fans a never-seen-before insight into the most exclusive racing competition.

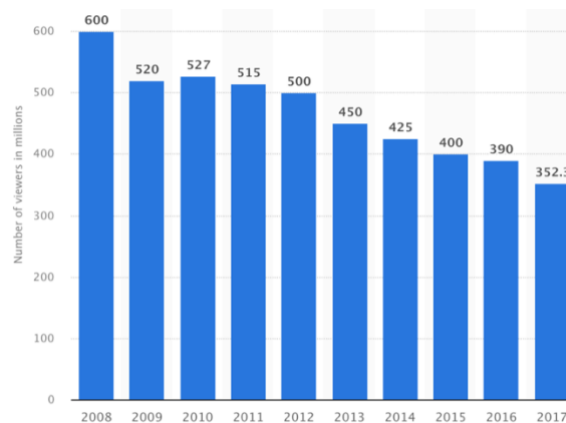
2 State of the art

2.1 Why Liberty Media bought F1

2.1.1 The decline of an outdated sport

By the time Liberty Media started to look into the possibility of buying F1's commercial rights, Formula 1 had for a long time been considered a prestigious and important sport (Evens, 2018). Nonetheless, it was having a hard time adjusting to the way society was evolving in the 2010s. Around this decade, a clear decline in the audience was seen with TV viewers worldwide going from 527 million in 2010, to 352 million in 2017 (see Table 2) (Statista, 2023). There were several reasons for this descent, the main ones being the outdated aspect of the competition, its extreme exclusiveness and a period of Mercedes-led dominance that made fans lose interest.

Table 2 Number of TV viewers of Formula One (F1) racing worldwide from 2008 to 2017



Previously, the most common profile of Formula 1 fans were middle-aged men, mostly European, belonging to the middle or high economic class. The sport accommodated that audience, not putting in any effort to try to attract newer generations. Furthermore, the “old white men” vibe the competition gave threw off younger people, especially females who rejected details such as the complete absence of women in the sport, except models who were showcased during the events known as “grid girls” (Sturm, 2021).

Moreover, although the exclusiveness and elitism in the sport were appealing to some, to most of their potential viewers, Formula 1 seemed unreachable. The complicated guidelines and technical restrictions implemented to ensure fair and controlled

competition made everything seem secretive and way too complex. Younger generations that are moved by an emotional connection to their interests could not establish an emotional link to their favorite team or driver as they were not accessible. Teams were forbidden to show any insights as to how their internal processes were, nor how a Formula 1 team works (FIA, 2008). Even if these restrictions were implemented for technical reasons and to prevent plagiarism amongst teams, they created a wall that separated fans from their passion and interest to learn more about F1. A similar thing happened with the drivers who were pretty unknown in terms of notoriety, even if they were the face of the team. Only the most successful drivers were known outside the sport, while most of them were anonymous average sportsmen.

Lastly, 2014 marked the start of an eight-year period of total dominance of the Mercedes Formula 1 team and Lewis Hamilton. Seven consecutive Driver's Championships and eight consecutive Constructors' Championships showed a clear superiority of the team and driver. Even though this was gratifying for Mercedes and Hamilton fans, many regular F1 fans who support other teams started to lose interest in the competition because of the predictability of the results. By 2020, the main F1 audience was bored of seeing the same driver and team win all races, to the point of Hamilton himself having to address the issue and calling for the FIA to make a big change to the technical regulations for more equality, which was done in 2022 (Pryson, 2020).

The combination of these factors was unappealing to younger generations, and more specifically to younger female fans who have historically been the most interesting demographic when trying to grow an audience. Additionally, the sport was not promoting itself enough in the United States, a country of great importance in the domain of sports media. These phenomena will be analyzed further in the following pages (see 3.2 and 3.3). However, Liberty Media was able to see past the decline of Formula 1 and take a step to purchase the commercial rights of the sport for a value of 4.6 billion dollars (Sylt, 2017). Under Liberty Media's management, F1 adopted a new plan to address its weaknesses and started a new period of prosperity.

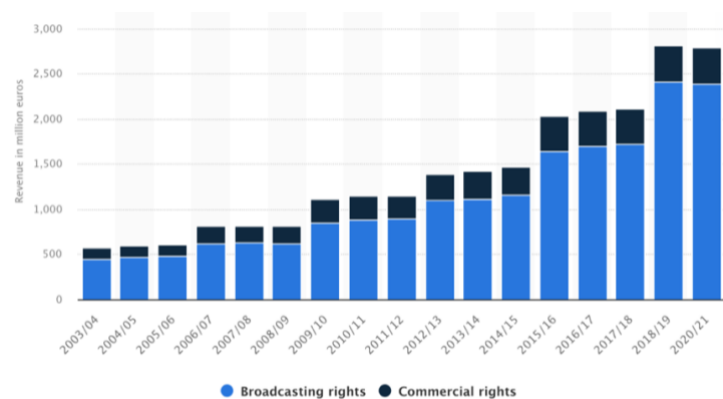
2.1.2 Sports in the 2010s-2020s

It is nothing new that sports are a big part of human culture. There is evidence of the cultural relevance of sports since ancient civilizations with prominent examples such as

the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, in recent years, due mostly to social media and globalization, the world has entered a new era in terms of how sports work and how audiences interact with them. The main changes that have taken place can be summarized in an increase in the importance of the personalities of athletes, the undeniable power of social media, and the appearance of sport-specific streaming platforms replacing traditional television. These changes will be analyzed from a broader perspective, using specific examples when necessary, and later on applied specifically to Formula 1.

Previously, audiences were less engaged with the personalities of the sportsmen they followed, focusing more on the sport itself than the player. Even though there have always been iconic sports celebrities such as Diego Maradona, Babe Ruth, Michael Jordan, and Muhammad Ali, they were not given as much importance as they are given today. The main cause behind this is the vast monetization of sports nowadays. Before, the sports industry, although very popular, did not have the economic relevance it has today. Taking the example of football, the UEFA Champions League, obtained revenue of 2.7 billion euros in 2021. Only twenty years ago, this number was unthinkable with the revenue of that same competition being 560 million euros in 2003 (see Table 2) (Statista, 2022). With money becoming a relevant factor, if not the most relevant factor in sports, those who wanted to live their dream of pursuing a sports career were met with a new barrier, sponsors.

Table 3: UEFA Champions League rights revenue from 2003/04 to 2020/21



With more and more money being brought into sports, more financial investment is required for being an athlete, and sponsors are the pathway to getting it. In order to attract more sponsor deals, sportsmen have to ensure they have a wide number of followers that can be influenced. Sponsors have become more interested in sportsmen who become mainstream celebrities as they are the ones who provide an audience that will then

translate into financial profits. This has forced athletes to showcase their personalities and ensure they are likable to a wider audience, since sometimes likeability triumphs over talent when sponsors are scouting for an ambassador. This relevance of the personality of an athlete was not as key for success as it is now, and it has caused a conduct change in the public display of the life of athletes (Keshkar, 2019).

The best exemplification of this comes once again when analyzing the domain of professional football leagues and the football players in them. A case study by the International Review for the Sociology of Sport revealed that English male footballers felt the pressure to fit into a certain stereotype of how they should behave. They highlighted the importance that is given to money, luxury, and the presentation of self (Law, 2021). Even though the case study focused primarily on the peer pressure that is experienced amongst the players, this pressure is also translated into the image the players give to the public.

Nowadays, the main tool used by sportsmen to control their reputation is their own social media profiles. It even provides the ideal platform to leverage sponsorships. But beyond the lives of sportsmen, as has happened in society in general, digitalization and social media specifically have shifted the way the sports world works. The main ways in which it has done so include increasing engagement with the fans, amplifying the importance of immediacy of updates and news, and video content. All the mentioned, share the objective of bringing sports fans closer to their favorite sport through accessible platforms and content.

Lastly, the breakthrough of over-the-top (OTT) media streaming services has redirected the way spectators consume sports. OTT refers to streaming services that allow users to consume media directly on their devices. The most well-known examples of OTT streaming services are Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, and Disney +. However, OTT has in recent years taken over the domain of live sports streaming. Previously, sports were consumed via live television and broadcasted indistinctly. Once television companies started to take notice of the opportunity behind monetizing sports content, special channels exclusively dedicated to sports started to irrupt. Furthermore, those channels would sometimes require an additional cost for consumers to have access to them. Eventually, this developed into the creation of OTT sports streaming services, which now dominate the way sports are consumed. Nowadays, there is no need for 24-hour

programming of commercial broadcast television systems, as most people watch sports on demand. OTT sports streaming services also allow the live broadcast of sports competitions, which are a big moment for sports fans as they enjoy watching real-time action. Even so, some have critiqued OTT streaming services for their unaffordable prices that make the content inaccessible; they allow the monetization of spectators while at the same time restricting the number of viewers (Hutchins, Li, & Rowe, 2019).

2.2 *Drive to Survive*: an insight into a previously exclusive sport

On the 20th of February 2019, Netflix and Formula 1 announced the release of *Formula 1: Drive to Survive (DTS)*, a 10-part docuseries that was said to “give fans a real insight into the personal lives of their heroes on and off the track”. The idea behind the series was to provide never-seen-before content from the 2018 Formula 1 season. This prospect was extremely appealing as access to private information in the sport was completely unprecedented. From the moment the series was announced, the F1 team made it clear that it was created with the objective of bringing new fans into the sport. Ian Holmes, Formula 1 Director of Media Rights stated that “Partnering with Netflix to create an original series puts us at the forefront of becoming a media and entertainment brand and attracting new fans to the sport” (Formula 1, 2019).

The partnership of F1 and Netflix, worked to bring onboard the best team possible. They hired Academy-Award winner executive producer James Gay-Rees, expert in documentaries Sophie Todd as showrunner, and Emmy Award-winning sports film production company Box to Box Films (Formula 1, 2019). Reportedly the idea behind creating the docuseries came from F1’s Managing Director of Commercial Operations who got in touch with Box to Box Films at the end of the 2017 season. Conversations started to take place between the production company, F1, and the different team principals at the end of that same year, and by February 2018, the production for the first season had started (Stuart, 2020).

As of March 2023, *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* has released five seasons comprised of a total of fifty episodes. It has also been confirmed for a sixth season which will be released in 2024 (Formula 1, 2022). Its evolution, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as its impact, will be discussed in the analysis section of this dissertation.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 The new era of sports media

As mentioned above, in recent years, there has been an enormous shift in the way sports and sports media work. Three main aspects should be mentioned when looking into the new characteristics of sports media. Firstly, the breakthrough of OTT streaming services was lightly explored above and will be developed further in this section. Secondly, the growing importance of esports as a new increasingly relevant area of sports. And lastly, the new role of women in sports as a result of the rise of female sports fans.

The appearance of OTT streaming services, followed by their success, caused a monopoly in the way sports are consumed. Even if several OTT platforms co-exist, it is now uncommon to be able to watch sports competitions without being subscribed to at least one of them. It is only on the occasion of the most successful sporting events, such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, that games are broadcasted on regular television channels. The most noticeable shift came in the early 2000s with what is known as the ESPN effect. When ESPN became a channel devoted exclusively to the broadcast of sports it made local sports news channels lose their audience and have to drastically change their approach to sports communication (Choi, 2002). Nowadays, while cable TV audiences keep decreasing, the ESPN audience in North America only grows with a 27% increase in ESPN viewers in 2022 via their own OTT streaming service ESPN+ (Nielsen, 2022). The big role of OTT streaming platforms in all televised media has also affected sports, mostly because of the big financial value of their broadcasting rights that have caused most sporting events to only be broadcasted via paid platforms; this increased both the financial worth of sports, as well as piracy to access those events (Meneses, Souto, Sil, Silva, & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2022).

To the shift in the way sports are consumed, the emergence of a new breakthrough type of sports has to be added. With the rapid development of videogame technologies, the arrival of web 3.0 and, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic, the world of esports is on the viewpoint of the whole sports industry. The term esports refers to competitions that are held virtually via videogame platforms (Chan, et al., 2022). With the streaming and gaming industry on the rise, platforms such as YouTube or Twitch have become increasingly popular social media platforms as they are where the public can watch

esports competitions live. This was notably boosted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic when sporting competitions around the world were canceled due to health restrictions. With sports fans being held in their houses during lockdown, esports presented themselves as the ideal alternative for entertainment. By the end of 2020, the esports industry had 495 million spectators worldwide and an income of over a billion dollars with most money coming from sponsors (Newzoo, 2020).

Since then, the esports industry has only grown with the main esports championships attracting millions of viewers each year. The Call of Duty League, a competition around one of the best-selling video games, offers prize money of five million dollars (Call of Duty League, 2022). This proves that there is a clear financial interest in the esports industry and that it keeps growing. It had been thought that because esports require little-to-none physical abilities, gender inequality would be easier to battle. However, the esports industry has also been proven to be male-dominated and a highly masculine environment with only 5% of esports professionals being women (Rogstad, 2022).

Yet the overall presence of women in sports has seen an increase in recent years, both as athletes, journalists, and sports fans. Female athletes have historically been undermined and underrepresented in the sports industry. Gender inequality has always been visible in sports as the most watched sports competitions globally are all-male competitions, leaving female sports to be seen as poorer versions of the male equivalent. This is even more noticeable when looking at sports media coverage. An analysis by the Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal looked into over five thousand sports publications and discovered that only 60% of publications included both men and women; while almost 70% of the participants were males (Cowley, Olenick, McNulty, & Ross, 2021). Similarly, the 2019 Nielsen report showed that only 4% of televised basketball shows in the US were women's basketball, and the other 96% were National Basketball Association (NBA) (Ferguson, 2021). Even the Women's Tennis Association, the most popular female sports league, is overshadowed by its male equivalent, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP). The only time when women's sports are given more or less equal representation to men's is during the Olympic Games.

It is only recently that steps are being taken to reduce gender inequality in sports, especially in terms of representation. In Spain for example, Movistar, one of the most popular paid TV platforms, created M+Ellas #V in 2022. A specific channel devoted

exclusively to broadcasting female sports competitions (Movistar +, 2023). Moreover, many sports teams have created female development programs to nurture young female athletes and help them reach professional leagues. This is the case of Football Club Barcelona who opened *La Masia*, its young talent development program, to female football players (FC Barcelona, 2021). Facilitating the access of younger females to sports is a key step as becoming a professional female athlete has not been easy. As female sports do not get enough recognition, it is only rarely that female athletes gain enough success in their field to have a stable income uniquely from sports. It is that accessibility combined with the representation that will allow for future women generations to be more interested in sports as they will see them as a realistic possibility.

3.2 US Media hegemony and sports monetization

In the post-Cold War era, the influence of the United States (US) has been undeniable. This influence has gone beyond the political and military spheres, especially in the denominated “Western countries” which were US allies in the Cold War. The main advantage of the US is its economic power. Most powerful multinational corporations are American with examples such as Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon. In these Western countries, American influence tends to go unnoticed as it is present via more day-to-day aspects instead of being explicit. Specifically, one of the main pillars of American soft power is its dominance in the domain of popular or pop culture. Pop culture refers to any dance, literature, music, theatre, or other cultural form intended to be received and appreciated by ordinary people in a literate, technologically advanced society dominated by urban culture (Britannica, 2015). In the current era of globalized media, whatever is popular in the US, becomes popular globally. The American media has completely tyrannized the entertainment industries, to a point of hegemony. This is in part because American companies are the owners of much of the infrastructure for global telecommunications (Thussu, 2019).

It is only recently that a wave of what is known as counterflow or contraflow has started to erupt to contest the prevalence of American pop culture. Contraflow refers to the flow of media that counters the mainstream American media (Thussu, 2019). Some of the best recent examples of contraflow success include the growth of reggaeton or Korean pop in the music industry, or the effect of smash cinematic productions such as *Parasite* and Japanese anime films. While it is true that for the first time in decades, non-

American pop culture is having global success, it is also evident that the US remains to be the main producer of successful media productions in all entertainment industries.

In contrast, when analyzing American sports media, the scenario is slightly different since American sports are not as relevant globally (with the exception of the NBA). In addition to this, non-American sports have a hard time becoming popular in the US. The American sports industry is mostly dominated by the NFL (American football), the NBA (basketball), and the MLB (baseball) (Richter, 2022). American sports fans are not usually inclined to consume sports from outside their borders. Even if football (known as soccer in North America) is the most popular sport globally, it has extremely low viewership numbers in the US with the UEFA Champions League final attracting 2.76 million viewers in the US (NBC, 2022); compared to the 101 million viewers of the Super Bowl that same year (Nielsen, 2023). This further proves that reaching the US sports audience is a complicated challenge that no international sport has been able to do yet.

In regard to the world of motorsport, the US has never been a popular audience for racing competitions. Motorsport is considered the tenth most popular sport in the US with only 14,6% of American sports fans claiming to be interested in it (Richter, 2022). Nonetheless, two all-American motorsport competitions have for a long time been fan-favorites amongst US motorsport fans: NASCAR and Indy Car. NASCAR, a stock car racing competition, remains the most-watched racing series in the US. While Indy Car, a single-seater racing series mostly known for its most important race, the Indianapolis 500, comes in second (Paulsen, 2022).

When observing that non-American sports competitions are not appealing to US audiences and that American motorsport competitions already fill the void of US motorsport fans, it makes sense to wonder why Formula 1 since the LMC acquisition has been so keen to break through the US Sports market. To understand F1's eagerness, one main factor must be considered: money. The US has been one of the biggest, if not the biggest economic power in the world throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (World Bank, 2023). This means that throughout a long period of time, the country has been in a period of growth and prosperity which is evidenced by the way it was able to establish its influence across the globe, especially in Western countries, as mentioned above. Sports have become one of the most lucrative areas of television, and the rights for its coverage account for a big part of the money that is involved. This is due to the commercial

sponsorships involved in sports, and specifically American companies' sponsorships; for example Coca-Cola is a sponsor for the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. The big presence of sponsorship in sports has caused the price of broadcasting rights to increase as broadcasters are willing to pay more because they understand that sponsors will also pay more for a strong presence. American sports competitions, even if they are not the most popular globally, are the most valuable in terms of money. An increase in profit causes an increase in interest from all parties (Thussu, 2019).

3.3 Women sports fans and parasocial relationships theory

Parasocial relationship refers to the relationship between media users and media figures, a term introduced by psychologist Giles (2002). They are one-sided relationships that are created after repeated encounters, usually via media. This concept is also deeply related to the theory of "wishful identification" which refers to the desire of an individual to act or be like their favorite media character or personality (Soo Lim, Choe, Zhang, & Noh, 2020). When an individual is engaged in a parasocial relationship, they are emotionally attached to the person they are in the relationship with. This causes the fan to be more than just a mere receptor of communication. In the current era of social media and live-time global interconnectivity, even if parasocial relationships are one-sided, they can become two-sided when the personality interacts with the fan via social media. This is especially likely in the world of real-time streaming platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, explained above, where the streamers can talk to their audience benefiting interactivity (Hou, 2019). Previously, parasocial relationships existed long before social media via television, film, or radio. However, the possibility of interacting with so-called influencers and the vast amount of content that is produced by current celebrities, have caused the phenomenon of parasocial relationships to be a key part of the revenue of the entertainment industry.

With the intense use that is given to social media platforms by the younger generations, parasocial relationships started to be of great interest to psychological researchers. Even if most research is fairly new, significant evidence suggests that women, especially younger women, tend to be more engaged in parasocial relationships. This has been attributed to their need for social connections and desires to transfer the image of their idol onto themselves (wishful identification). Furthermore, a big part of researchers' interest in parasocial relationships is the fact that they can be used as a big

marketing tool. This is mainly because young women have been proven to make purchase decisions based on their parasocial relationships. Whether it is merchandise from their favorite singer, or a product from a brand they have endorsed, Gen Z women keep their parasocial relationships in mind, even if unconsciously, when spending money. It is for this reason that celebrities these days feel a certain pressure to use social media to connect with their audience as it is the best way for them to earn money. Big corporations have also seen the opportunity of fostering parasocial relationships when the wave of making celebrities brand ambassadors started (Närvänen, Kirvesmies, & Kahri, 2020).

The power of the female fan has been proven to be an extremely effective tool for organizing big masses toward success. The term “fan” comes from the word “fanatic”, implying that fans tend to be hysteric young girls who society looks down on. Taking the example of the music industry, first came Elvis, then The Beatles, and more recently One Direction and Justin Bieber as examples of fan phenomena that grossed millions of dollars as a result of attracting huge audiences of young girls. It was assumed that while girls fell blindly in love with their favorite pop stars, boys spent their time admiring their favorite sportsmen. For society, men being obsessed with football players was completely acceptable as it meant they were interested in the healthy hobby of sports. However, girls who went to the concert of their favorite band and screamed their lungs out were going through a “crazy phase” where they become obsessed with a boyband because they cannot get a real partner (Bargueño, 2019).

Yet currently, as female representation in sports starts increasing as explained previously, and female fans start being taken more seriously, there has been a clear shift in the role of women in the sports industry as fans. The industry has started catering its content to a female audience (Radmann & Hedenborg, 2022). An example of this is the increase in the display of athletes’ personalities which has allowed for stronger parasocial relationships with female fans. This is once again connected to the monetization of sports, as female fans are more likely to spend money based on who they are fans of. Furthermore, female fans tend to create networks inside so-called fandoms. These networks provide the perfect space for the further creation of more organic content that nourishes parasocial relationships. Platforms such as Twitter, sports fans’ favorite network to comment live sports events, become filled with content from fans who want to connect with other fans. Sports events tend to be trending topics that bring global audiences together via social media. And it is typically the female fan who goes beyond

just the casual interaction with other fans and actually builds stronger friendships with those with the same interests. (Nielsen, 2022)

Lastly, it can be concluded that the increase in female representation abovementioned, has also contributed to the increase in female sports fans. It is only when younger generations of girls see themselves reflected in the athletes they admire, that they will have a genuine interest both in consuming and practicing sports. The impact of female fans and the lack of female representation in Formula 1 will be thoroughly explained in the analysis and discussion section of this dissertation.

4 Research goals and questions

This dissertation aims to exemplify how the new approach taken by Liberty Media and *Drive to Survive* brought new generations into the sport of Formula 1 causing an economic “boom” and a drastic change in the way the sport works. To do this, the specific measures that were taken will be analyzed through the lens of the importance of younger fans and the relevance of the United States in sports media. The main objective behind this research is to analyze the tangible impact the new management of Liberty Media together with the success of DTS have had in the increase of the Formula 1 audience. To do this, three main questions must be answered. Firstly, whether *Drive to Survive* was the main reason behind the arrival of younger generations into the world of Formula 1. Secondly, what steps Liberty Media took to implement a new fan-facing approach aimed at American audiences. Third and lastly, what the consequences of the rise of younger fans, and specifically female fans are because of their propensity to be more engaged in their passions.

In order to provide a throughout and insightful answer to these questions, the analysis and discussion will be organized as follows. Firstly, the growth of the audience of *Drive to Survive* and the reason why it was able to fulfill its objectives will be analyzed, while also exposing some of the main criticism made towards it. It will be followed by a discussion on how Formula 1 works now, after the LMC take over, as well as a deeper analysis of the expansion of F1 in several areas. This will lead to a specific focus on the United States and why it is so key for F1 and its economic growth. Lastly, the main debates surrounding Formula 1 at the moment will be presented, followed by the conclusions of the analysis.

5 Methodology

In order to successfully reach the research's goals, a quantitative methodology must be implemented by analyzing the numerical data of the Formula 1 audience. To do this, the F1 audience in the past fifteen years must be looked into, both in terms of television audience as well as race attendance. Specifically, the focus will be on Formula 1's audience in the US and its evolution since the release of *Drive to Survive* by looking at the growth of the series' viewership. The analysis will provide clear evidence of the growth from 2019 until 2022 since the 2023 data is not yet available.

Additionally, it is of great interest to look into the different profiles in the audience and see how each of those profiles has evolved in the past years, focusing on the rise of younger female and American fans. Data for fan analysis will be retrieved from the *Formula 1 Global Fan Survey* from 2021 carried out by Motorsport Network, Formula 1, and Nielsen Sports. Once the audiences have been interpreted, the reasons behind the growth will be explained. This will be followed by a thorough examination of the causes and consequences of said increase.

To carry out the research, the main sports and Formula 1-related reports will be interpreted. Team and/or driver-specific case studies will be presented as exemplification together with interviews with insiders who work in the Formula 1 environment.

6 Analysis and discussion

6.1 Netflix and *Drive to Survive*

6.1.1 Objectives are met

Before diving into the massive success of *Drive to Survive*, it is of high importance to understand why Formula 1 decided to team up with Netflix for the series. Since the breakthrough of the OTT streaming platforms mentioned above, Netflix has been one of the most successful platforms in the entertainment industry. It was able to drastically change the way television was consumed introducing “binge-watching” (Matrix, 2014), and has been the home to some of the most successful productions, especially for series, including *Stranger Things*, *Wednesday*, or *Bridgerton*. Netflix’s success was a big part of why the collaboration was so appealing, but it was not the only thing that brought them together. After the takeover of LMC, F1 started to look for new audiences, specifically younger American audiences, and therefore it looked for the best platforms to reach those younger fans; Netflix proved to be the best choice. A survey in 2021 revealed that 75% of 18-34 year-olds in the US subscribe to Netflix, being the largest demographic on the platform (Statista, 2022).

Once it had been decided that the show would air on Netflix, the main objectives behind the production had to be agreed upon. With one clear main objective: bring new fans into Formula 1, more specific objectives were set, mainly making the drivers known, and bringing in American fans. As explained in the first sections of this dissertation, F1 drivers had historically been unknown to the audience which did not allow for the fans to connect with them. As parasocial relationships are a big part of the success of sports now, F1 drivers needed to showcase their personalities to engage fans. *DTS* provided the ideal platform for this because of its reality-show format.

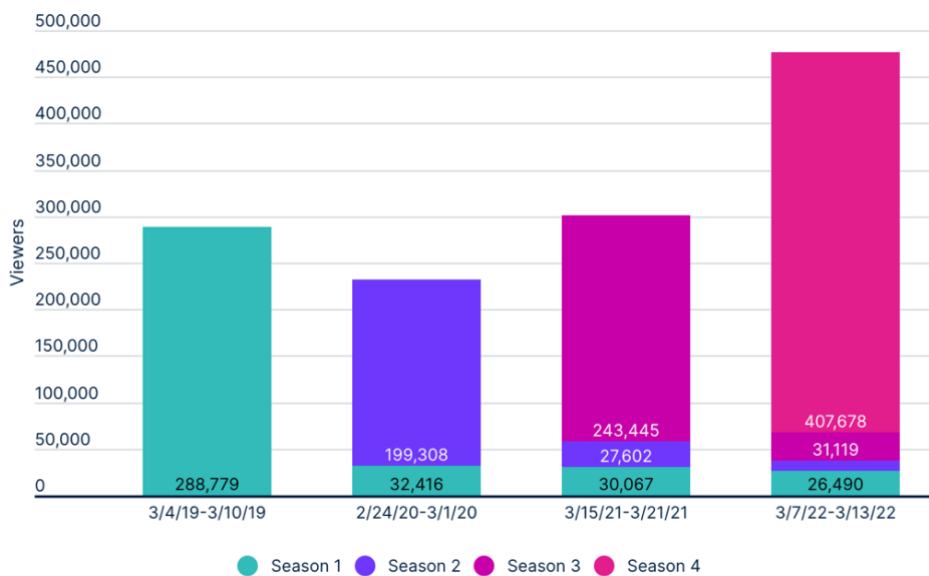
In the first season, Daniel Ricciardo, one of the drivers for the Red Bull team at the time, was followed by the *DTS* crew in his day-to-day life. Fans were able to get access to the more intimate moments of his training, the decision-making process when he decided to switch teams, and the more funny and quirky aspects of his personality. This allowed Ricciardo to be one of the drivers who benefitted the most from the success of the series as he quickly became a fan favorite (Medland, 2023). The increasing popularity

of the drivers was key for getting young American fans engaged with F1 as drivers became celebrities.

6.1.2 Five successful seasons, so far

The main proof of the success of *Drive to Survive* is the evident growth of its audience numbers, as well as Formula 1's. When analyzing the data of *Drive to Survive*'s viewership in the US from the first four seasons, evidence of growth becomes clear (see Table 4); especially after the Covid-19 pandemic and the thrilling 2021 season. The latter caused a 60% increase in viewership in the first week after its release. Moreover, Nielsen's report concluded that 34% percent of viewers became a fan of Formula 1 after watching, generating almost half a million complete newcomers before the start of the season. The same report also estimated a total of 42.9 million US fans in 2022, an increase of 5 million in three years, and more growth is expected due to more races in the US being added to the 2023 F1 calendar. What is even more noteworthy is the profile of those new American fans, as it meets the exact demographic F1 was aiming for. 46% of *DTS* fans are under 34 years old, a big increase compared to only 16% before the series. At the same time, they are also mostly affluent people with 70% earning more than 100,000 dollars per year and being white collar; while only 40% of F1's audience met this profile before *DTS*. (Nielsen, 2022)

Table 4: Formula 1: Drive to Survive Viewership one week after release 2019-2022



Further evidence of the triumph of the series can be seen when looking into how other very popular sports, namely tennis, golf, and football have decided to follow F1's

footsteps and create their own docuseries with Netflix and Box to Box films as the production company. *Break Point*, released in March 2023, follows the journey of the biggest tennis players around the main tennis competitions (Gregory, 2023); golfers took the exact same route by releasing *Full Swing* that same month (Richards, 2023). Lastly, on February 2023, LaLiga, Spain's first division football competition, announced the production of a docuseries to give insights into the players and the season, also in cooperation with Netflix (LaLiga, 2023). The fact that so many of the world's most popular sports decided to replicate *Drive to Survive* is no coincidence, but rather proof that the format works and provides a new way for growth in sports.

6.1.3 Criticism

Even if *DTS* was able to bring F1 back to life, it has also received some criticism, mostly from Formula 1 fans themselves, and F1 insiders, including some of the drivers. Most critics complained about the misrepresentation of several areas such as fake rivalries between drivers, misuse of radio messages to overdramatize the plot, and villainization of drivers or teams. For the first season, two of the top teams, Ferrari and Mercedes, refused to give inside access to the Netflix crew as the risk and uncertainty made them afraid of exposing themselves. This, however, allowed for the series to focus on the “underdogs” and less popular drivers who had fascinating narratives to uncover such as driver Daniel Ricciardo or Hass F1 Team. (Smith, 2022)

After the success of the first season, every team decided to open up its doors to Netflix, although different levels of openness were shown. That was until the fourth season, which covered the 2021 championship, where Max Verstappen, World Champion that year and the following, declined to participate as he felt his reputation had been damaged because of *DTS* framing him as the villain. Verstappen accused the show of being overhyped and creating fake rivalries (including one between himself and Ricciardo) (Smith, 2022). Nevertheless, Verstappen returned to the series in the next season after conversations with Netflix about commitment from the series to be truthful, and a desire from Verstappen's side to participate in the series as it continues to be a key asset for success. Lando Norris, driver for McLaren Formula 1 Team, also complained about being involved in a fake rivalry with his ex-teammate Carlos Sainz in season three claiming “They made it out like we were the biggest enemies, it was not true.” (Quadrant, 2023).

Although not as many people have noticed, big criticism towards *DTS* has been rooted in the notorious absence of women in the series. Females in Motorsport, an association created by women who work in Formula 1, calculated the amount of female presence in the series and the results were extremely disappointing. During the first four seasons, women only appeared in 40 minutes, out of more than 25 hours of content; women's presence accounted for just 3% of the speaking time. The main women that appeared were Jennie Gow, an F1 journalist, and Claire Williams, the team boss of Williams Racing until 2020. Other women featured were mostly wives, girlfriends, or mothers of F1 personalities, with little to no speaking time (Roper, 2022). The situation becomes even worse when analyzing the latest season which features the least amount of women yet, with four episodes featuring no women at all. Season five only identifies six women throughout its ten episodes, with female presence accounting for just 1.54% of the time; six minutes out of six and a half hours (Roper, 2023). Even though Formula 1 is a male-dominated sport, in recent years, many women have fought to be able to be part of the motorsport world and deserve recognition in what is now one of the main displays of the sport. Misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women pose a big challenge when trying to get younger girls to become fans of F1 as well as finding female racing drivers. Younger female fans were a target audience that F1 wanted to reach when creating the docuseries, but if women's presence does not increase in the next season, it will continue to give off the impression that there is no place for females in F1.

After the announcement of, at least, a sixth season, it is only normal to wonder how many more seasons of *Drive to Survive* there will be. The future of the series beyond the sixth season remains a mystery. On the one hand, it could be assumed that since the series has already met its initial goals of attracting new fans, there is no need to keep the series going as the repetitiveness of the format might cause oversaturation and bore the audience (Medland, 2023). Nonetheless, on the other hand, as each F1 season provides new storylines and new drivers, there is no need to end the series as it can serve as a kind of recap for the previous season. Furthermore, some argue that because of how profitable it has proven to be, F1 will not want to end it until it no longer provides financial benefits (Bellingham, 2023). The fifth season released in February 2023, stayed in Netflix's Global top 10 for two weeks, and entered the top 10 in 47 countries with over 4 million viewers (Netflix, 2023); therefore it might not be going anywhere just yet.

6.2 A new era of F1

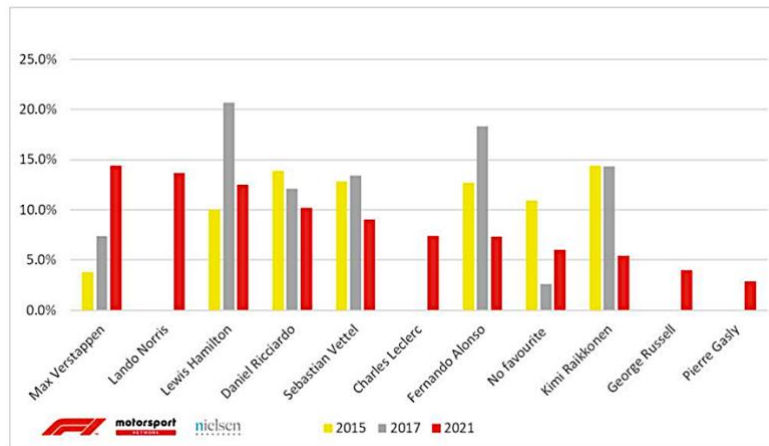
6.2.1 Liberty shines a light on the drivers

After Liberty Media took over Formula 1, they created a special digital department in 2018 with the sole purpose of fan recruitment. Their approach shifted from only supporting initiatives that would provide direct financial profit, to realizing that different kinds of content should be catered to different audiences and generations, as F1 fans are a heterogenic group, and that financial profits are not the only objective to keep in mind when growing a fanbase. In terms of specific actions that were taken, the platform of F1TV was created to offer deeper analysis and exclusive insider content. Also, a new studio was built in London and a stream of catered content flow via their socials was created together with their web F1.com. Moreover, on top of giving more social media freedom, F1 themselves have started several forms of content to supply different audiences. Some examples are the *Beyond the Grid* podcast where drivers and team members give personal interviews, the *F1 Unlocked* column where drivers document their race weekends, or more engineering-related content such as *Tech Tuesday* articles which provide a detailed technical analysis of the sport. Content is catered even to the more casual fans who might not want to watch the races and would rather just watch the *Race Highlights* available for free on F1's YouTube channel. Lastly, this year, the first Formula 1 Exhibition opened its doors to fans in Madrid displaying iconic artifacts and insights from teams and experts to explain how the sport works in an interactive way (Formula 1, 2023). These forms of content serve as a complement to *Drive to Survive* and diversify the F1 audience appealing to a wider public. (Medland, 2023) (Barretto, 2023)

Yet the most interesting audience for F1 remains to be the younger generation of fans, especially females, because of how they nurture strong parasocial relationships with their idols. It is for this reason that openness in social media was so important after the LMC takeover, and the role of the drivers and their captivating personalities have proven to be the key to engaging that specific audience. Most drivers, especially the younger ones, have flourished in terms of growing a fanbase thanks to the freedom F1 now allows them to have in the new era. The most interesting case to analyze is Lando Norris, driver for McLaren Formula 1 Team since 2019, who was elected the favorite driver of female fans and fans aged 16-24 in 2021. He was also the second favorite driver overall (see Table 5), only behind Max Verstappen, Red Bull Racing driver and two-time world

champion (Motorsport Network, 2021). Norris' popularity is shocking as he has not even won a race since his debut, and the most popular drivers tended to be the more successful ones on-track, as was the case with Lewis Hamilton or Verstappen himself.

Table 5 Annex 2: Formula 1 Driver Popularity Ranking (2015-2021)



Lando Norris has placed special focus since he joined Formula 1 on growing a strong fanbase by sharing with his audience the things he was passionate about to recruit fans with common interests. Born in 1999, Norris appealed to the younger fans because of age proximity, but it was his fun and quirky personality that made him become a fan favorite. He has understood the importance of fan interaction and the power good parasocial relationships can have, both in terms of reputation, but also in terms of financial profit. After becoming an F1 driver, Norris continued being active and informal on all his social media. He posted regular video logs he called *Landologs* where he showed fans an insight into his life in F1; and continues to post these regularly. He also created a Twitch channel where he would stream while he played some of his favorite video games or just talk to fans. His popularity was boosted during the lockdown for the Covid 19 pandemic where he would stream for eight hours at times, gaining up to 30,000 Twitch followers in one day (TwitchTracker, 2023). His being down-to-earth and so willing to share his life outside of racing allowed fans to get to know him and become loyal supporters.

In 2021 Lando launched Quadrant, a premium lifestyle and gaming brand where he could combine his four passions: gaming, apparel, racing, and content creation (Quadrant, 2021). He was joined by a group of gamers and content creators to create weekly YouTube videos, participate in gaming competitions, and release exclusive merchandise which sells out almost immediately. Norris' case is the perfect exemplification of the new era of F1 drivers whose personalities are a big reason behind their supporters. Other young

drivers that follow similar trends to Lando's are Charles Leclerc, Pierre Gasly, George Russell, and Max Verstappen, all found in the top 10 of the most-liked drivers (Motorsport Network, 2021). Their Twitch streams during quarantine boosted not only their popularity but the growth of F1 and subsequently all the platforms that create F1 content (Bellingham, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is not only drivers that are able to nourish parasocial relationships with the fans. The teams themselves build a reputation and look for a certain type of fan that matches their brand values and image. It is no coincidence that McLaren Formula 1 Team, Norris' team, is the fan-favorite F1 team, and the one of the teams with the most social media followers (Motorsport Network, 2021). The top spot, previously monopolized by Ferrari, was earned by McLaren in 2021 after fostering a special relationship with their fans, who they refer to as the "Papaya Army". Despite not being the team with the most victories recently (they have not finished above third place in the past ten years), by bringing fans closer to the team and their drivers they have been able to be chosen over the dominant top teams: Mercedes, Red Bull, and Ferrari. Some examples of platforms that McLaren used to reach more fans include the creation of their own mobile app with exclusive access to team radios during race events and extra content, an email newsletter via a loyalty program (*McLaren Plus*), and regular giveaways for the members. McLaren also started *McLaren Unboxed*, a YouTube series where fans can see a summary of the race weekend and special occasions with more intimate, never-seen-before content from the drivers and the team. Since then, many teams have followed their steps creating weekend video summaries, podcasts, or fun challenges with the drivers. Williams Racing even wanted to create *Williams Untold Stories*, a series with a similar objective to *Drive to Survive*, since the team was not getting much attention from the docuseries because of being overshadowed by other narratives (Hodge, 2023). This latest initiative, however, was dismissed by Formula 1 and did not see the light of day.

6.2.2 More races, more countries, more money

F1's expansion is clearly visible simply by looking at the increase in the number of races in the calendar, and the countries visited throughout the season. Races in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the US and the Netherlands were added in the last three years and the F1 calendar keeps hosting more and more races each year. F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali, even stated that the current 23-race calendar could grow to up to 30 or even 32 races because

of the huge demand there is from many countries to host a race (Collantine, 2023). F1 has reacted to this interest from new countries (especially countries outside of its traditional European audience), by proposing a “rotatory calendar”. The idea is to alternate some of the more traditional circuits that are not able to keep up with the demand so they only host races every other year. By doing this, F1 makes room for new countries such as South Africa or South Korea who have shown eagerness to host a race and are also willing to make a bigger financial investment. At the moment, even though there is a maximum of 24 races per year installed (which could go up to 25 if all teams agree unanimously), both LMC and Domenicali keep reiterating their interest on expanding the calendar as well as the territory it covers (Rencken, 2023).

The reason why F1 and LMC are willing to take away some of the fan-favorite iconic tracks to make room for new ones is once again because of economic profitability. Currently, Qatar, Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia are the countries that pay the most to host an F1 race with a hosting fee of 55 million dollars; for comparison, Monaco pays 15 million for its iconic Grand Prix (Statista, 2022). Meanwhile, more historic and iconic tracks, that have been previously voted fan-favorites such as the Monza circuit in Italy, have a hard time keeping up with the economic demands of F1, especially as Italy currently hosts two races with the Imola GP being added after 2020 (Corriere dello Sport, 2023). While Gulf countries or the US are happy to make vast financial investments to host races, the more traditional circuits are faced with uncertainty in terms of their future in F1. Regardless, what remains evident is that records remain to be broken in terms of race attendance. Four races in 2022 hosted over 400,000 attendees with the US GP having the record for the biggest audience in the history of F1 (Statista, 2023), and this is set to cause an increase in hosting fees as response to that demand.

The interest in F1 also grows as it provides a great platform to display soft power. What is noticeable is the special interest shown by the Gulf countries, where four races are hosted, including the first and last race of the season. In addition to this, some of the main sponsors now include Aramco, a Saudi Arabian oil company or Qatar Airways, the Qatari flight company. Both deals were criticized for the damage the companies cause to the environment, as well as for the human rights abuses that take place in the two countries (ESPN, 2020). Interest from the Gulf countries, beyond financials, has been considered to be rooted on the way sports competitions are used by countries with poor international reputation to display their resources and distract the international spectators from thinking

about the questionable conducts of such states in terms of human rights. This is comparable to the situation of Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup which was criticized internationally for neglecting systematic human rights abuses (Amnesty International, 2019). Disregard for the cause of human rights can be unappealing to younger generations, but financial profit seems to be the priority for the corporation.

6.3 Focusing on the US

6.3.1 ESPN, America's favorite

As explained above, the rise of ESPN as the dominant platform for sports media in the US caused a shift in American sports TV. It is for this reason that F1 decided to sign an agreement so race weekends in the US would only be accessible via ESPN+ (ESPN's OTT platform). In 2018, a first deal was signed worth 5 million dollars per year, so ESPN could hold the broadcasting rights to F1. This deal was extended in 2022 for at least five more years, yet the value of the new deal is estimated to be around 75 to 90 million dollars annually, 255 million overall. This colossal increase is due to the increase in the audience and demand for F1 in the US. Average viewers per race went up 26% reaching 1.2 million in 2022; and 2.6 million viewers tuned into ESPN to watch the Miami GP, the biggest audience ever for an F1 race on American TV. The American fans are evidently becoming interested in F1, and therefore increasing its value (Wolkin, 2022).

When looking at why ESPN works so well to bring F1 to American fans, there are several reasons why F1 keeps choosing them over other companies that have shown interest such as Amazon or Apple. ESPN has the capacity to reach an enormous audience in the US as it is available on almost every American television. Many races of the season, the fan-favorites, are put on the ESPN or ESPN2 TV channels. Moreover, it further expands its reach for the bigger events of the season such as US races or the Monaco GP by broadcasting those races on, ABC, its Disney affiliate. It also broadcasts races without advertisement interruptions; something that is very rare when consuming sports in the US and appeals to the audience. Lastly, even if ESPN does not have its own coverage and rebroadcasts the British coverage of Sky Sports, pundits being European is something the American fans appreciate as it brings something different to the mix (Saunders, 2023).

When looking at how the LMC takeover affected the relationship between F1 and ESPN, with Liberty, the relationship became much closer. By being able to share more

content and insights on social media, ESPN was able to draw a wider American audience by uncovering the drama inside F1. Close collaboration also translated into more people from ESPN being allowed at the races. Previously, one or two ESPN correspondents were allowed, while nowadays a crew of around forty travels to races. Additionally, in US races, ESPN brings activities of other American sports competitions to the Paddock; for example, at the Miami GP, the drivers played basketball with NBA players in an ESPN-branded court (Saunders, 2023).

6.3.2 Drivers are celebrities

Having understood the relevance of *Drive to Survive* in the US audience, it is necessary to understand the specific role the drivers have had in the growth of F1 in America. Drivers were allowed to be more open towards their fans with the arrival of Liberty Media, and their personalities were showcased on *DTS*, which made many of them become big sports celebrities. As mentioned previously, Daniel Ricciardo, was the driver who benefited the most from the series and became a fan favorite. His popularity was especially noticeable in the US because of his genuine personality which appealed to American fans as he loved being the center of attention and making a big show. He frequented American talk shows giving interviews on important platforms such as *The Ellen Show*, *The Daily Show* or *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. The celebrity lifestyle suited him, so it was easy for him to reach the American audience. (Saunders, 2023)

Other drivers were maybe not as interested in becoming so popular, while others were not as able to because they lacked charisma. Lewis Hamilton nonetheless is another clear example of how F1 drivers have become well-known celebrities. Throughout his years in F1, Hamilton has nourished his popularity becoming one of, if not the most popular driver outside of the sport. This was in part due to his constant success, yet he also befriended or dated relevant American pop culture icons and regularly attended American talk shows. Nowadays, he tries to use his popularity for his activism. More recently, due to his involvement in the fashion industry as well as his notoriety, Hamilton attended the 2021 MET Gala asking host Anna Wintour for a whole table dedicated to black designers to promote racial diversity (Hess, 2021). It is not only via TV appearances, F1 drivers have recently become frequent faces in some of the world's most important magazines. *Vanity Fair* released an issue dedicated to several young F1 drivers

and the success of *DTS* just last year titled “Netflix, *Drive to Survive*, and the New Cult of F1 Fandom” (Adler, 2022). These and many others are clear examples of the way F1 drivers have become popular celebrities that the whole world, but especially the US, now has their eyes on.

The flashiness of F1 drivers has also served to attract American celebrities who now enjoy being spotted at races. Whether it is because drivers befriend celebrities (DJ Martin Garrix, Spiderman actor Tom Holland or singer Niall Horan are a few examples of friends of F1 drivers who frequent more than one race each year), or simply because races are now the place-to-be celebrities crowd American races; after all, it is nothing new that Americans love glamour and a big spectacle. Gaining notoriety and pop-culture relevance has been a key step for growing an audience, and F1 will continue to work towards it, as seen with importance that is being given to the Vegas GP.

6.3.3 American money

Lastly, the American market is key for F1 because it provides huge economic value. As will be explored, the Vegas GP will become one of, if not the most, expensive event on the F1 calendar. But besides ticketing prices, as seen with the price of the ESPN deal, the broadcasting rights and commercial rights of F1 in America have immense value; and the further the fanbase grows, the more the value will increase. Beyond hosting three American races, and the possible perspective of a fourth one, it is of great value to analyze the special qualities the three American GPs hold. The US races, especially Miami and Vegas, aim to become the most spectacular races on the calendar and shock viewers from all around the world; while the 2022 Austin GP broke the record for the most attended race in F1 history (Statista, 2023). The state of the art of this dissertation mentioned how culture and sports can be used as soft power, and the US is the leader at using it as a promotional tool. But it is not just something that is done for external purposes, Americans love big sporting events such as the Super Bowl and gravitate towards a “the bigger, the better” idea. This approach was adopted by F1 under LMC who has made changes to the way race events work to make them flashier. Examples of these include hosting the races at more impactful venues (the Miami GP takes place at the Miami Hard Rock Stadium, and the Vegas GP takes place at the Vegas Strip, the most iconic landmark of the city), ensuring big celebrity appearances at races, and impactful scenery for the

pre-race ceremony where the anthem is played as well as for the post-race podium celebration (Saunders, 2023).

F1 is an extremely expensive sport due to the high technology involved in it, as well as the travel costs amongst others. It is for this reason that the phrase “cash is king” is often used in this sport to refer to how teams with the most money are the ones more likely to succeed as they will have more resources. This money comes mostly from sponsorships, teams assure that without partners, they could not go racing. This is why they play a huge role in F1, and the growth of the sport in the US has brought the interest of some of the biggest American companies to get involved. Oracle partnering with Red Bull, MoneyGram with Haas, or Google and Goldman Sachs with McLaren are just a few examples (Schoenfeld, 2022). Teams themselves recognize how after *Drive to Survive*, North America became a key demographic, and their new American sponsors are just one of the many pieces of evidence (McLaren Partnerships, 2023). Even if this kind of interest has been shown by other countries, such as the Gulf countries stated above, because of the superiority the US holds over the international community for pop culture it is F1’s biggest interest. Even when looking at China, the closest equivalent to the US in terms of global hegemony, due to health restrictions, the Chinese GP has not taken place since 2019 (when it held F1’s 1000th race) (Formula 1, 2022). China’s interest in F1 became more obvious, after the arrival of Zhou Guanyu in 2022 as the first Chinese driver, but not being able to host a race is holding them back from growing a wider Chinese audience. The US hosts three races, and this year also has an American driver in Logan Sargeant, so at the moment it is clear that they remain to be the main objective.

6.4 Debates

6.4.1 Openness versus exclusiveness

As has been explained in the previous sections, the growth of F1 has been very significant in terms of financial profit. Therefore, it is only natural that prices of tickets to F1 races as well as OTT subscriptions, also go up. The ongoing global economic crisis following the pandemic and resulting high inflation levels in 2023 are particularly challenging for F1 fans, especially for newcomers who may not be able to afford attending a race for the first time. Now that F1 has achieved its goal of growing a younger and more diverse audience, it seems paradoxical that the sport is now unreachable to the general

public. As previously stated, the new *DTS* fans are affluent and white-collar profile, which means they could afford the casual F1 weekend once a year if they wanted to. However, it is the newer races that pose the bigger threat to the casual F1 fan. Tickets for the 2023 Vegas GP have an average price of 7,000 dollars, and VIP experience packages go up to 5 million dollars, including tickets to the concert of superstar Adele (Pelit, 2023); it seems unlikely that many F1 fans can afford such prices. Most likely, American celebrities and elites will make up the majority of the audience at the Vegas GP, as it has become one of the most highly anticipated events in terms of luxury.

On the other hand, “expensive” and “prestigious” have always been attributes used by fans to describe F1 (Motorsport Network, 2021), it is perhaps that shiny aura what appeals to many. The world of luxury and millionaires has always been attractive to massive audiences. This is deeply related to the principle of wishful identification explained in the state of the art, as the rich represent what many want to be. The challenge for F1 is finding a stable balance between being a display of prestige and remaining accessible in all fronts to a wider audience. Specifically in America, “bigger is better” prevails, and venues set such high prices because they know because of huge demand, people will pay for them. American fans want to get an insight into that prestigious world and be part of it even if it is just for a weekend (Saunders, 2023).

6.4.2 Still lacks diversity

Throughout this dissertation, it has become clear that F1 has been made aware of the importance of attracting a female audience, yet it has not done enough to do so. Women’s representation in motorsport remains to be a pressing issue because of how little advance has been made in the past years. As per FIA regulations, women are allowed to race in F1 competing at the same level as men, which is not something usual as most sports tend to have separate leagues for each gender. When the FIA created the W Series, it had the intention of facilitating women’s accessibility to F1 as the participants did not have to pay to enter the competition. Sponsor investment has been the main obstacle for getting women into motorsport because in FIA feeder series such as F2 or F3 drivers pay inscriptions of more than 3 million to enter (Rencken, 2021). Yet even if one driver, Jamie Chadwick, dominated the W Series for three consecutive years winning the championship by a big margin, she was nowhere near getting a spot in F2 or F3, which is why she ended up going to Indy Car where she found better opportunities. To fix the flaws behind the W

Series, F1 created F1 Academy in 2023, but it remains to be seen if it will finally provide the woman racing driver necessary to inspire a new generation of female racers. It is nothing new that, once again, because of the principle of wishful identification, when someone that audiences can relate to is successful, it inspires them to follow their steps. In F1, this was seen with Michael Schumacher who inspired a new generation of German drivers, as did Fernando Alonso in Spain or Lewis Hamilton in England. A success story of a woman getting to F1 is crucial to encourage younger girls to take up racing (Bellingham, 2023).

Beyond women racers, there are plenty of other roles in F1 for women to take up, from engineers to stewards, to journalists. As of 2022, women account for 30% of workers; a percentage that has only grown by 2% in the past five years in spite of the many initiatives implemented to bring more women into F1 (Formula 1, 2022). The only women who are well-known for their high-profile engineering jobs are Ruth Buscombe at Alfa Romeo and Hannah Schmitz at Red Bull (Barretto, 2023). And a very similar situation can be perceived when looking at racial diversity in the sport. While the countries visited are for the most part diverse (except for the absence of races in Africa) and diversity within the drivers has increased (25% of the current drivers are people of color), there is still a long way to go, especially in the higher job positions of F1. All team principals are currently white men, and it is rare to see women or people of color amongst any of the mechanics.

Because of the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020, and F1's supposed commitment to diversity, they launched *We Race as One* an initiative to tackle global inequality (Formula 1, 2020). Drivers wore t-shirts with political statements during the pre-race ceremonies and *We Race as One* stickers were added to the cars throughout the 2020 and 2021 seasons. However, in 2022, F1 removed the initiative, which was criticized by Hamilton who stated that "*We Race as One* was all good and well, but it was just words. It didn't actually do anything." (Smith, 2022). To counter this, Lewis Hamilton, the most successful F1 driver of all time, as well as the first black driver, created *The Hamilton Commission* to fight racism in the sport that he had experienced first-hand via diversity reports, and action recommendations (The Hamilton Commission, 2021).

F1 2020 drivers kneel during the national anthem to show support for the BLM movement



F1 has been stuck in a vicious cycle of only allowing rich people to be part of the sport because of its exclusiveness, but as mentioned above, lack of gender, racial and economic diversity could easily become the drawback for attracting new fans. While affirmative action has been taken in recent years, a lot of progress remains to be done in terms of diversity in F1. Corporate Social Responsibility is a key aspect of an organization's reputation and a true commitment to diversity is necessary for gaining support from the younger generations who want to fight for a more equal society.

7 Conclusions

Overall, it can be concluded that the world of Formula 1 has drastically changed after Liberty Media acquired its commercial rights and the docuseries *Drive to Survive* was released. A period of clear prosperity in the business of the sport started after a new approach was taken to recruit younger generations of fans. This dissertation analyzed that growth through the lens of the importance of the relationship between fans and their favorite sportsmen, the key role of the United States in the sports industry, and the relevance of female presence in sports.

Regarding the question of whether *DTS* was the main reason behind the growth of F1 when analyzing audience data, it becomes evident that it has been the most important tool for reaching the younger generations as they became instantly attracted by the engaging personalities of the drivers. By taking their eyes away from the dominant teams and drivers and uncovering unknown narratives fans became fascinated by the complex world of F1. It then can be concluded that *DTS*, although not the only one, was the main cause behind the growth of the audience, especially of the American audience. With the arrival of LMC focus shifted towards the US because of its economic relevance, its power over soft power, and most of all its potential for monetization. The main actions that Liberty took towards a fan-facing approach were opening up the sport and providing catered content to all groups of audiences, not only scouting new fans but also maintaining the previous ones. Expansion in the size of the audience caused an increase in the monetary value of F1, which allowed for an expansion in several areas as seen with more races being held and the races becoming massive events. This, combined with the drivers becoming popular celebrities have been the key to attracting American fans.

Lastly, even if female presence in F1 remains to be one of its main weaknesses, strong bonds between the drivers and their audiences have welcomed in younger female fans which are key for success. The younger generation of drivers nurtures strong parasocial relationships with females and therefore increases their value on and off track. The sport of Formula 1 continues to grow each year as a result of this new approach but what goes around, comes around, and declines could come sooner than expected, especially if more work is not done toward, diversity, sustainability, and equality in the sport.

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Annexes: Interviews with Formula 1 insiders

Annex 1: Interview with Lawrence Barretto; F1 correspondent and presenter

What would you say have been the biggest changes in F1's approach towards fans and opening up the sport after Liberty Media Corporation acquired its commercial rights in 2016?

F1 created a digital department in 2018 focused on creating new engaging content across social and digital platforms that targeted an extended audience in a bid to grow the sport's reach. Since then, there's been a real commitment of resources that look to deliver a strong offering of insight and analysis to F1's core fanbase, while developing content that will appeal to not only younger generations and females but also those who love sport or love drama and might be enticed by the spectacle that F1 has to offer. To do this, F1 has grown its team of people working on the new content, invested in resources including a brand-new studio at Biggin Hill, launched F1TV to serve fans across the world and created a series of new content streams, across social platforms and F1.com. In short, since Liberty have taken ownership of F1, they've looked to take the sport to the fans and significantly boost its profile across the globe.

A big part of my research has been understanding the key role of the United States in sports media. F1 has shown a clear interest in expanding to North America and is holding more races than ever there this season, is there a real interest from F1 to host even more races there in the future? If so, could it be a risk to focus too much on American fans and adopt American culture and losing potential fans in other areas of the world?

Adding Las Vegas to the calendar was a big statement of intent for F1, as it showed the commitment of the sport to make a breakthrough in the United States – which as you say is a huge market. That makes three US events on the calendar, with Vegas joining Austin and Miami, and for now. As I understand it, there are no plans to increase the number beyond three, in part because, as you say, there is a risk that there are too many races in the States and that could have a detrimental effect on the rest of the calendar as it would be trickier to reach the range of markets F1 aspires to do. F1 isn't just focused on America. It makes sense in my opinion to target that market and really grow it there before turning

attentions elsewhere. There are plans to take F1 back to Africa, for example. And there are no shortage of countries asking to have a race from elsewhere, too.

As F1 is making more financial profits than ever, more and more money is needed to go into the sport. This makes the sport harder to access for those that have less financial support, especially women and non-European drivers. How do you see the future of F1 in terms of diversity?

I think F1 as a company, as well as the teams and other stakeholders, have made big strides in trying to improve diversity and inclusion with the sport. F1 Academy was launched this year, an all-female category led by the very impressive former driver Susie Wolff, which aims to develop and prepare aspiring female racers to rise through the motorsport ladder. Teams are focusing on improving diversity within their workforces, too, while the likes of Ruth Buscombe and Hannah Schmitz are blazing a trail for females in F1 through their high-profile jobs on pit wall leading the strategy. Improving diversity and inclusion is not the work of a moment, but the more programs that can be created to give females and those from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to learn the right skills for F1 at an early age, and the more support businesses can have from tweaking their stance regarding how they recruit, change will happen. It will just take time. Regarding the cost, motorsport by its very nature is expensive, so it will rely on series like F1 Academy, F1's junior academies and initiatives like Alpine's gender diversity program Rac(H)er to help inspire the next generation.

With initiatives such as the “*Beyond the Grid*” podcast, or the “F1 Unlocked” columns, is F1 trying to take over the role of *Drive to Survive* to give insights to the sport and the drivers via their own content?

I don't think it's trying to take over the role of *Drive to Survive* but rather sit alongside to increase the volume and quality of content available for fans. Different generations and different types of fans want different content and so the key to growing the sport will be identifying those audiences and what they want and then supplying them with content which they want to engage with.

Annex 2: Interview with Chris Medland; F1 correspondent at Racer

What would you say have been the biggest changes in F1's approach towards fans and opening up the sport after Liberty Media Corporation acquired its commercial rights in 2016?

I'd say it's the focus on reaching more people and accepting that both small and big projects can have a positive way of doing that. Previously, everything had to have a clear, direct financial value, and a major one at that. Under Liberty, there was an obvious change in approach where teams, drivers and rights holders (both new and existing) could attempt things that would provide them with value in some way, even if it wasn't immediately felt in the form of money going to F1 itself.

It became very much a 'yes' culture of trying things and seeing how they fared, rather than the previous stance of 'no, not unless you're paying a huge amount for the privilege'.

Far greater social media freedom was one such example, to help spread the word of what was going on in the sport and increase awareness that might eventually lead to someone watching a race and becoming a fan (or even not watching a race at all, but still supporting the sport in another way). Free race highlights on YouTube was another which would help solidify the interest of a more casual fan, while *Drive to Survive* is perhaps the biggest example of telling stories from the sport far beyond the existing fanbase.

Right now, after it succeeded in bringing new fans into the sport, how key is *Drive to Survive* for the success of F1? After 5 seasons (and a confirmed 6th), when will it be the right time to end the show?

In terms of the overall success, I wouldn't say it's crucial. The sport will still be successful - as it was before *Drive to Survive* - but it's just a case of to what extent? Even now, new series will increase the chance of someone who has never held an interest in F1 watching an episode or two and becoming more involved, and the storylines always change year-to-year so there will always be new content to cover.

It's also important not to make it a victim of its own success, as the first season did well but the series really exploded due to the amount of time people had to watch it during the pandemic. Hopefully we never have a repeat situation, but that also means a lesser impact from more recent seasons is to be expected and still better than before it existed.

Some fans who were heavily invested prior to *Drive to Survive* don't like it because it's not focusing on aspects of the sport they like, or due to the focus on entertainment first, but that's because it wasn't aimed at them. Similarly, newer fans who got into F1 through the series might tire of it as the seasons wear on, but again it's because it's designed to be interesting to someone who hasn't followed it before.

The right time to end the show is when viewership of it drops to such a level that it's not viable for the production company to create something high-quality, but until then as long as it provides a potential venue for people who haven't watched F1 before to become fans then it's serving its purpose. It's just a gateway, and then other content caters to those with a deeper interest.

Seeing the trend F1 is following of introducing more street tracks in big iconic cities (such as Vegas, Jeddah, and Miami) and the fact that the traditional circuits are not able to keep up with the demand there is in terms of fan attendance to races; does it seem likely that eventually street tracks will represent the majority of the race calendar replacing the older tracks?

No, I don't think so, because permanent circuits provide stability in terms of long term deals due to their entire existence being to host racing. And it is those circuits that tend to have the greatest potential for the biggest crowds - just look at Circuit of the Americas or Silverstone as proof of that.

The calendar has always evolved and it might be that older circuits drop off if they don't remain viable or suitable for F1, but the majority of older circuits ran on public roads initially or were semi-permanent such as Montreal or Albert Park. Even Jeddah and Miami are interesting examples as they're not public roads and are purpose-built layouts, unlike Vegas or Singapore for example which are 95% city streets.

Ignoring one-offs, of the past six additions to the calendar, only one is a true street circuit (Vegas), while two are semi-permanent (Jeddah, Miami) and three are permanent tracks (Qatar, Zandvoort, Imola), with the latter two both historic venues, so I don't see it changing too much.

In that same line, due to high demand, prices of tickets are skyrocketing making F1 more inaccessible to fans. After the positive response there was from fans when F1

started to open up and make fans feel closer to the sport, could this exclusiveness cause fans to become uninterested because they cannot afford to enjoy the sport?

This is always a tricky subject to approach because it would be great for anyone who wants to be able to go to a race to get a ticket, but the reality is demand is so high that almost every single event is a sell-out - some could be many times over - and the pricing reflects what people will pay. It's basic economics, in the same way that I would love to go and watch NFL but couldn't afford a Super Bowl ticket.

F1 likens itself to 23 Super Bowls and given the fact that it's a global sport where there's generally one race in each country (Italy and the US the exceptions) it's a fair comparison. I also wouldn't say it's a significant departure from the past either. If I use myself as an example, I come from what I'd certainly call a privileged background with parents who earned a good wage, but I attended two races in person (one in 2005 and one in 2010) across a 16-year spell as a fan prior to working in F1 due to the cost.

Expensive tickets are a byproduct of huge demand, but it's also important to remember that the trackside audience is a tiny percentage of the overall viewership as most are watching on television, just like other sports.

Lastly, which teams or drivers would you say have benefitted the most and the least from the success of *Drive to Survive*?

I certainly feel Daniel Ricciardo benefitted the most, as he committed to the concept from the very first season, as did Red Bull while both Mercedes and Ferrari did not take part in the first year. Haas has also benefitted greatly thanks to Guenther Steiner becoming such a cult figure, when the team was largely underperforming for the majority of the time the series has been running.

I'd say Alfa Romeo has benefited the least, probably alongside Williams. Teams need to commit, offer up opportunities for access and be doing something worth covering to be featured, and neither have had particularly major storylines in more recent seasons. But everyone has still received a boost from the success of the series as a whole.

Annex 3: Interview with Tom Bellingham; content creator, WTF1 and P1 founder

When you started WTF1, which was a long time ago, what do you think your main objective was with the project?

So, admittedly, I guess I kind of did it as a hobby. Being a massive fan of Formula 1, I just really enjoyed writing and sharing funny things on the internet about it. And it wasn't ever the intention of it being a full-time job or even anything to do with my career. It was just something to do while I was at university and have a bit of fun with it.

Like you say, I started a very long time ago. And back then, we didn't have what we had today with loads of people on F1 Twitter, loads of websites, loads of content creators. It was still very new and there wasn't really any website or page that kind of looked at a bit more of a fun side of Formula 1. It was all very newspaper kind of vibe, if you like, and people just kind of reporting the news. But I wanted to do something a bit more fun and light-hearted and just fun for basically F1 fans like myself.

And obviously, it blew up so much, could you pinpoint the exact moment when you realized how big the project was?

I'd probably say so there were two. So obviously, I started in 2010. And it got taken over by Car Throttle at the end of 2016, and started the YouTube channel with Matt in 2017. When we started that YouTube channel, you know, it was a goodish season, maybe not an amazing season. But we had that kind of full season behind us when we started this YouTube channel. Because before that it was a part-time hobby. And then it became a full-time job; it was very much putting all that effort into it. And we noticed that a lot of Formula 1 fans came over and were really liking the YouTube channel. The first initial spike, I'd say, was the start of 2018 when *Drive to Survive* came out. So almost by pure luck, and coincidence, we'd started our YouTube channel which had been going a year, we decided to launch the podcast the year after, and then *Drive to Survive* came out. And then suddenly it was just like everyone was big-time into F1. And we found a huge following from there.

And then I'd say the second big change was the Covid break. When we had Lando [Norris], George [Russell], Alex [Albon] and Charles [Leclerc] doing live streaming and things like that. And WTF1 was always that fun, lighthearted, didn't really need races,

because it was all about the drivers and the fun side of Formula 1. And we actually found that as doing content from home, being quite reactive, and just jumping on podcasts and things, that's when it really grew even more. So I'd say the 2020 season was another massive spike, our followers shot up massively. I started using Twitter a lot more noticing that, previously when I started in 2010, I remember having a couple of 1000 followers and thinking, "Oh my God, I've got 2000 followers" and just being able to find any F1 fan was a stretch because it was such a niche sport. And then now there are thousands and thousands of people that love F1 and it's always trending on Twitter. In 2020, it really took off again and then equally just *Drive to Survive* being more and more popular. Every season after that it just grew and grew, and more people got into it.

And now you have started with P1 with Matt also. Were you worried when starting this new project about the amount of similar content? In the sense that now so many people have started to do F1 content, F1 podcasts, and some of them are successful, but there are, a lot of options for everyone to choose from. Were you worried at all that that was going to be a problem?

Yes, definitely, leaving WTF1 was obviously an extremely difficult decision because 1, I had been there from the start. And 2, even though a lot of people were saying that the audience was there for me, watching my podcast, I was worried that, maybe when we move to something new it wouldn't be as popular. It was a worry. When I started WTF1, like I said, it was very, very unique; no one else was doing anything like it. And then to launch this year, it seems like everyone has an F1 podcast, there are so many content creators, so many. And it's great, because, you know, there's so much to choose from, and it's great that everyone can do it now. But there was a little bit of concern in that we thought it was oversaturated. But it's nice that people kind of just like what we do. And I guess because people used to just listen to us all the time as part of their commutes and listen to our podcasts; and when we left, they realized I do want to listen to these again. And now just because they're on a different project doesn't really mean that it's completely different.

A big part of my thesis is investigating the role of parasocial relationships between the fans and the drivers. How they are a part of the fan phenomenon and how that leads people especially younger women to spend money and time and so much interest. I've seen a lot of critics, especially with *Drive to Survive* being released, of

people saying that new fans focus too much on the drivers' personal lives, and they don't know anything about the sport. I wanted to get your opinion; do you see it as a negative thing? Or are you one of those people that thinks “any fan is a good fan, if you like the sport, you are welcome”.

One thing I think we're really good at, and Matt is the same, we've always kind of done this at WTF1 and we're doing it now P1, is that I don't care if you've watched Formula 1 for one race or 15 years. If you enjoy Formula 1, I like talking to people that like Formula 1; and also I find it really fascinating to speak to new Formula 1 fans. And you can actually learn from them because I've been watching it for so long, now I watch a race and I know what happens. I think this is what other publications and pages don't do as well, is that they just talk to you, like you know everything. But you might have watched one race and gone, what is this DRS thing that they keep using, and they're just talking about. And there will be new fans that of course, come and go with it with the popularity. But at the end of the day, everyone likes Formula 1 for different reasons. And I don't personally see that there's any difference in someone liking Formula 1, because they've watched one of Lando Norris' streams and think he's really funny, he seems like a nice person, and they're like, oh, I'll watch this guy drive. For me, there's absolutely no difference. And there shouldn't be any difference. There are obviously very different paths to getting into Formula 1. But I think it's a good thing.

I think one thing that has helped the way we've grown is those driver personalities. I mentioned before about one of the biggest spikes being those Twitch streams. Because people were like, wow, F1 drivers actually have personalities. And it's the same with *Drive to Survive*. When I was watching Formula 1, these drivers once they've got their helmet on, they were just robots slightly, you don't even know anything about them. And then they go into an interview and some boring journalist just asks, “So how'd you feel about finishing third?” “Yeah, I feel great.” And then they wonder why the sport is not growing. And then now you've got these drivers where Max Verstappen is a very different personality to Lewis Hamilton, they are a different personality to Charles Leclerc, and it is good that you've got all these different personalities. People find that interesting, because it is a fun side of the sport as well. And I'm one of those people that just is obsessed with Formula 1 all the time. And I think that's what makes the content good is that once the race has finished, I still just want to talk about Formula 1, and there's loads of things to talk about. It might just be something silly, like Lando has done this or

whatever. But yeah, I think it's good and people should accept everyone in Formula 1. I think there's definitely very sexist undertones to it, of people calling people *Drive to Survive* fans when, who cares? I've watched F1 for nearly 25 years and who cares if I got into it because I watched a Twitch stream, everyone has to start somewhere. So just because you're not old enough, or you haven't watched loads of races before, it doesn't matter to me.

It's so silly, the funny thing is that there is this whole sexist undertone. When a male fan is obsessed with a driver, they don't get half the hate that a woman gets for supporting a driver. And there's so many men and young guys out there as well that will have Max Verstappen as their profile picture, or they buy all his merchandise. And for some bizarre reason, it's just obviously just a society thing, that some people think, you're a big fan of Formula 1. But then as soon as you see a woman head to toe in McLaren gear and a big fan of Lando, suddenly, it's just because you fancy them, or you don't know anything about the sport. And that's a really bad thing and something that needs to change in F1. Because there's no difference; there's plenty of men that don't know anything about Formula 1, and there's plenty of women that know loads about Formula 1, it doesn't matter how you get into it.

In terms of *Drive to Survive*, I found that after the fifth season, there was this generalized opinion of the more avid F1 fans who were a bit tired of the format, in the sense that they already know what's coming and there's not that much new content from it. It's becoming a long show and now there is going to be a sixth season confirmed. What do you think the future is for *DTS*? Do you think they should keep going as long as it works? Or do you think six seasons is enough?

Yeah, so it's difficult with *Drive to Survive* because the latest season, I personally found that they did away with a lot of the cringeworthy fake radios, and trying to make drivers seem like their enemies when they're not. But at the same time, it just lacked something a little bit. And I think it is like you say, just the fact that we've seen the format. So many times, whereas the first season of *DTS*, I think the reason it did so well, was because there were so many people that had no idea that these drivers had these personalities. Even like Steiner, no one knew who he was before *DTS*, he never did any interviews with the media. And then suddenly, there's this TV show where Gunther Steiner is there calling everyone wankers and swearing and stuff. And you're like, "who the hell is this guy? This is

hilarious". But when you've seen it for six seasons, it doesn't have the same impact. It is one of those things where I'll always watch it, and I think a lot of Formula 1 fans will because it is something to do in that kind of break before the season starts. But I do worry that it's not going to have the same impact that it had. I think there'll be a lot of people that realistically, if they've watched *DTS*, they'll already be into Formula 1, you're naturally not going to get as many people into F1. I don't know if they need to mix the format up a little bit, just because it does feel quite the same now; you know exactly what's going to happen. Maybe Netflix should do a documentary where they just focus on one team and there's loads of behind-the-scenes things. This [last] one is a good season, it's watchable; it just feels like it's missing something. I think it's just natural that as soon as something happens again and again, you just kind of get a bit like okay, I've seen this now. Part of me thinks, realistically, they still want to do season after season. And with the way it's growing in America probably, they probably will.

Another big part of my thesis is how dominant the US is in terms of media, and of course, sports media, and why F1 is so focused on them. How do you feel about the way F1 is focusing on the US? It is obvious as there are three races there now, but US races are very different from others: especially Vegas. And with the way the prices are going up, it feels like all the openness that Formula One created when getting new fans is kind of counterproductive. Now prices are so high, people are not going to be able to afford to go to races such as Vegas, making the sport more exclusive.

I've got absolutely no problem with them having more races in America, because America is absolutely massive, it's basically like an entire continent. So just because someone lives in LA, it doesn't matter that there's a race in Texas, because it's miles away; that race for them is about as close as Italy for me. We are very lucky in Europe that we've got all these races quite close. In America, races are so spread out, that it's hard for people to get to races. But I totally agree, in the sense that what concerns me a lot is that with Formula 1 growing in America, big time, the circuits that they're bringing on are special. I mean, for me, Miami came in and it was very expensive, trying to be the new Monaco, but in America. And then doing Vegas this year, it sounds exactly the same. And it makes me think that it's all right, growing in America, but you want to bring in American fans, and they deserve to have a race that they can actually afford to go to, not just that celebrities can go to. For me, Miami and Vegas, while they're far apart and different places, it feels

like they're going after the same thing. And I just think that is an absurd idea, even if F1 is making an absolute fortune and it is basic supply and demand. I do feel sorry for American fans. And then you wonder if they do a fourth race in New York, it will not be for every person; there's not going to be general admission tickets that are affordable. It would be this fancy glamorous race again and we don't have to have every race in these glamorous locations, people should be allowed to go and see Formula 1 cars. Silverstone is not a glamorous place, for example, but people can go, and it is just about affordable. It's kind of getting to the point where it's absolutely ridiculous and you can't get a ticket. But if suddenly, they got rid of Silverstone and replaced it with London, and it was on the Thames and the only people there are celebrities that have paid like 6000 pounds a ticket and drinking champagne, you'd be like: well, this is not right. I feel sorry for America, because in the end it feels like Circuit of the Americas [Austin, Texas] is the race for the average American fans that can go and enjoy themselves. Whereas Miami and Vegas are very much these celebrities that just want to be seen in Formula 1 for their image, which I think is a big shame if it goes that way.

Are you afraid that the same trend might start to happen in Europe? As you were saying, with the example of London.

Yeah, it's concerning. Because if you look at every track that is now added to the calendar, except Imola which is unique because it is kind of a comeback, but you don't really see circuits anymore. They build a circuit in the middle of nowhere. The next US Grand Prix, they're not going to suddenly go have it a Laguna Seca or something, it's just going to be in New York. I'm trying to think of an example, say Monza gets off the calendar, they're not going to go have the race in Mugello, the way Formula 1 is going they'll have a race in Rome, and it will be really fancy, and it'll go past the Colosseum. It's just getting quite predictable, you can kind of see why because I think F1 is set up very well, I do like the idea that you bring it to a city, then you don't have all the car parking problems; Silverstone is a nightmare to get in and you have to pay a fortune [for parking], because old circuits can't keep up with the demand of Formula 1 now because they're not used to selling out. But the sad reality is these old circuits that have been around for ages, you're hearing like absolute horror stories from fans that have gone to Monza last year or Spa, Austria, Silverstone. They need to be able to keep up with the demand of Formula 1 and how many tickets are being sold. Monza was an awful example of the fact that it seemed like F1 had outgrown it as so many people wanted to go. People couldn't get water,

couldn't see, they were selling more tickets than people could even see the race. You just worry that sadly, this fits Formula 1's agenda, and it fits why they are going to Vegas or Miami because these old circuits can't keep up with the demand. And it's a sad thing to say, but I can't see circuits being a thing anymore. I think it will just be like street tracks built in cities for governments that want to pay a big splash of money and have a race because F1 is having this big boom period and it's really exciting. In Spain, I can totally imagine that Madrid would want to have a race around the streets instead of Barcelona, it is a worrying, worrying trend.

How do you feel about the approach that they're taking in terms of the drivers not being able to make political statements? F1 is becoming more corporate, in a sense, they're more and more business focused. But do you think there's a risk that if they become too business-focused together with the chance that we enter a period of Red Bull dominance, it all might be a bit boring? Do you think there's a risk that, then, Formula 1 might start declining again?

Yeah, definitely. We've just done our predictions podcasts and we have this thought that Formula 1 has found itself in such an exciting period where loads of people are absolutely loving the sport, loving the drivers. But if we're going to get Max Verstappen winning every single race, people aren't going to keep watching. And it's a worrying time for Formula 1 because they need to have this excitement growing, and they need good racing to back it up. I think the fact that the 2021 season was so good, brought a lot of new fans in. And naturally, probably some of the fans have come in and realized it's not like this every year, this was a one-off, we hadn't even seen it for years and years. And in part, that's what made it so good. But then you get into the next year and Verstappen winning most of the races, dread to think how many he will win this year, if that car is as good. They're in a worrying time where if Max starts to dominate the sport for Red Bull, people will switch off, because they don't want to see it anymore. And then too, what we mentioned about all these races that are set up for celebrities to be seen on. If suddenly, Formula 1 is not cool anymore, there will be, obviously that hardcores that stay and will probably love it because they can actually buy a ticket and go again, but it could start declining again, because none of these celebrities would want to go. I do worry that the bubble will burst at some point.

I think Formula 1 needs to ensure that teams can stay close and catch up, they've tried to make sure of it with the budget cap. I think American sports do it quite well with this whole draft thing where, the bad team gets the good stuff so it's always trying to be a close competition. Whereas in football in Europe, the same teams always do well, Real Madrid are always going to be the best team. So they kind of learned from that, and hopefully we get to the stage where all 10 teams can win and challenge because that would be super exciting. But that won't be the case this year. And I think some people will start to switch off because they've changed all these rules to make it more exciting, and Max is just winning every single race. I think it will take time for the field to close up before that happens. It's a worrying time for Formula 1 when that does happen, because they kind of need a plan for when that bubble bursts. They've got all these amazing street tracks everywhere and suddenly, when it doesn't become popular anymore, and all these circuits don't want to pay a fortune to host a race, that not as many people are watching could be a bit worrying.

With the fact that there is so much money involved in F1, it probably means more money is required to get in. Even if a lot of money was already needed, it's obviously going to be even more difficult because you're going to need bigger sponsors and bigger financial support in general. What do you think is the future then for women in motorsport?

It's a difficult one, because it's such a shame when you look at someone like Jamie Chadwick. With the W Series, it's all about inspiring the next level. And this comes back to the whole sexism thing. For some reason, some guys are triggered just because there's this female series, because they see it as desperate way to include women. I've got a young daughter, for example, and when she grows up, I want to be able to watch Formula 1 with her. And before, when I watched Formula 1, you had grid girls, trophy wives and things like that. And that's not a good look because if you're a young woman growing up, and you look at Formula 1, you wonder if that is your place. If she can grow up and be inspired by drivers' mechanics that's good. And it's not even about getting them in now. It's just them being inspired. It might take time, because realistically, if there's young kids watching the W Series, and they're inspired by it, it's going to be like 10 years before there's more women. It's all about just getting more women into karting and then naturally it will evolve. There's no surprise that if you go to a local kart track, and there's 60 kids racing only one of them is a woman, it is not like the funnel, when everything gets whittled

down to the 20 best drivers in the world, there's not going to be a female driver. Whereas if more people take it up from the start, they're going to be more, it is more likely for it to happen, it's just about inspiring those people.

I think the W Series was controversial because motorsport is one of those series where women can compete with men; it's not like football where you have men's football and women's football. Realistically, Jamie Chadwick could enter Formula 3, there's no rules against that. But it's a shame that she essentially was dominating and winning the championship and she was going nowhere. I think there needs to be some kind of responsibility to make that happen, because from that side, the W Series maybe wasn't working to this point. But there's no surprise that Formula 1 decided they were going to have their own thing now and branded for them to make all the money from it [with F! Academy]. Hopefully, it works, and it can inspire people because it's a shame, I wouldn't say it's gone backwards, but I remember when I first got into IndyCar, there were four or five women doing IndyCar like Danica Patrick, who was actually at the front of the field doing well. And now there's all these campaigns, but where are these female racing drivers now? It doesn't seem to be happening. I feel like once there's someone, it's just going to take that one person to inspire a bunch of young kids and then you'll just find so many more young women karting; even if it was Jamie Chadwick just doing one race or something. You've seen that in other countries where it's no coincidence that when Michael Schumacher was dominating Formula 1 in 10-15 years' time, there suddenly were loads of German Formula 1 drivers because he inspired them. I wouldn't be surprised if in 10-15 years' time, we're going to have a load of Dutch racing drivers because Max is hugely popular. Hopefully we see Jamie Chadwick, or someone, do a free practice session and change something, because now they're trying really hard, but I just feel like something maybe is missing; it's not quite going the way everyone wants it to. Because that was that was a real shame for me that Jamie Chadwick was just absolutely dominating this series and no F2 or F3 team was hiring her.

Annex 4: Interview with Nate Saunders; F1 correspondent at ESPN

With F1 hosting 3 races in the US, American races feel very much like the more “glamorous” events where celebrities love to be seen. This has meant that prices have quickly become unaffordable to the average American F1 fan, especially with Vegas and Miami as they do not take place in traditional circuits. Do you think F1 when making everything more spectacular and flashy can lose authenticity and the closeness to the American fans it has worked towards? Or do American audiences feel attracted by that prestigious aura that surrounds races like Vegas?

I think that flashiness actually appeals to American audiences in a way which doesn't translate the same way in Europe. The idea of the local national anthem before a race is still jarring to some fans, for example, but in America the Star-Spangled Banner is part of basically any sporting event, rodeo, political conference, whatever you can think of. So right from the get-go the way American audiences consume live sports is hugely different.

Then you have to look at how American sports do their big moments - the Super Bowl, the World Series, the NBA Championships, the Stanley Cup, even Wrestlemania, bigger is better in America. Everything is about the showpiece spectacle and that's what F1 wants the three U.S. races to feel like on the schedule. I can actually see Vegas becoming *the* U.S. race in a few years, ahead of the other two, just because of what a big build up that is going to have.

In terms of whether this prices out American fans, that's possible, but people still seem willing to pay the money to go to these races. The prices are only as high as they are because these venues know they can get away with charging them, the demand is there.

Did you notice a shift in the relationship between ESPN and Formula 1 after the Liberty Media takeover? How do you see that relationship evolving in the long run? Are there any chances of F1 wanting to switch platforms for broadcasting in the US once the current deal expires?

We've noticed much closer collaboration across the board. ESPN has a huge reach in terms of its TV audience, which is easily the biggest selling point, but this also translates across into its social media and marketing footprint too. F1 has realized the amount of

people it can reach through ESPN, also in Latin America and European markets. Since getting the rights, ESPN has been allowed into the paddock in a way it wasn't previously, setting up different 'activations' in Austin in the years we've been there - in 2021, the drivers played basketball at an ESPN branded court in the paddock, last year they hit balls in an ESPN branded golf simulator. This was a huge shift to when I started covering F1 for ESPN in 2014 - there would be a lot of races when the only people who worked for the company in the paddock would be me or my colleague Laurence Edmondson. Now we can bring upwards of 40 people to a race, including TV production. In Miami last year the hugely popular Marty and McGee show broadcast live from the Miami Grand Prix, while Nicole Briscoe has done live Sportscenter segments from the paddock over the past two years.

In terms of the future, there were other broadcasters interested when ESPN got the new deal for 2022 but right now, F1 is very happy with what ESPN offers and how it delivers the coverage. There will clearly be big interest from the likes of Amazon and Apple for the rights in future so things could well change in the future so you can never rule out a switch to a different broadcaster down the line.

What would you say are the main strengths of the way ESPN provides F1 content to American fans?

On top of the huge reach, the most obvious thing has been qualifying and race broadcasts without adverts. This has allowed fans to sit and watch races uninterrupted - something that is a huge rarity when it comes to consuming live sports in America. ESPN is available in most homes with a TV in America and the company has made sure, where possible, it has put races on either ESPN or ESPN2. Big events such as the U.S. races or the Monaco Grand Prix have even been put on ABC, ESPN's Disney affiliate, which has an even larger reach in terms of audience numbers. This is the key thing - everything else in terms of marketing, sponsorship, editorial coverage, that all follows the TV coverage, I think.

What is the aspect of F1 that appeals the most to American fans?

One big appealing factor to American audiences has been how un-American a lot of F1 seems - for one thing it's a lot of good looking, young European drivers, all sporting different accents. It feels very different to what a lot of American sports are, which predominantly are made up of American athletes competing against each other. A lot of

Americans I've spoken to are amazed this sport they never knew existed was out there and featured so much drama on and off the racetrack.

It's interesting that a lot of American F1 fans will tell you they want their pundits to be English or European, rather than American, in a similar way to how I as an English fan of the NFL find it jarring if the pundit I'm listening to about a game I'm watching isn't American. So there's definitely a sense of it being something new and different. Take that aspect and then add in the incredible drama and the strength of personalities, and how accessible a lot of these young drivers are now on social media, and it's a perfect storm.

Now that Ricciardo is off the grid, which driver do you think will become America's favorite? Do you think to win over American's hearts drivers need to be more celebrity-like (go to talk shows, be active on social media, befriend other celebrities, go to events...)?

Interestingly, the creator of *Drive to Survive* recently said he wants the 'new Ricciardo' to be Pierre Gasly but it's hard to find a like-for-like replacement. One reason Ricciardo's appearances on talk shows and all of that works is because it is genuinely something he wants to do, and his genuine personality comes across in them.

It's hard to measure popularity and who America's biggest star. Charles Leclerc seems to be popular with American audiences but probably is much less "out there" in terms of the celebrities he hangs around with or the American TV shows he appears on. Driving for Ferrari, in his case, is probably a big plus point. I think there's always different things people look for. At the very least, American fans want the combination of personality and talent in who they pick as their favorite. The celebrity and pop culture aspect of it is always going to be important. It's why Lando Norris has connected in such a way with Gen Z fans, for example.

For some reason, Gasly hasn't quite had the same impact on fans as Ricciardo yet, despite being a race winner and spending time with Michael Jordan in Miami - it hasn't replicated the same results yet from what I can tell. So, it seems different things work for different drivers. I think Netflix's presence in the paddock has maybe made other drivers act up for the cameras in a way which is a bit easier to spot. With Ricciardo, the personality he showed on camera is really him, and I think people gravitated to him for that reason.

Annex 5: Interview with McLaren Formula 1 Team spokesperson; partnerships

How has the growth of F1, as well as the change of the demographic in the fans (with the increase of younger female fans) affected F1 teams in terms of partnerships?

The growth and diversification of F1's fanbase has been positive. We can only speak for McLaren Racing, but a more diverse audience means more opportunity for our partners to leverage our platform and reach wider demographics. From holistic fan engagement campaigns to cause-led initiatives, our partners have always been collaborative with us. But now, with the exponential growth of F1's audience, we are better placed to help them access a broad and diverse audience. An example of this is our *Returnship* scheme with Entain, launched in early 2023. This collaborative initiative targets women exclusively, providing real-life opportunities for women looking to return to work at both organizations. This type of focused partnership activity would've been less impactful before our sport's recent evolution.

After the takeover of Liberty Media Corporation, was there a shift in the amount of insights to the team you could give your partners? If so, how open would you say teams are allowed to be now?

We have a great relationship with the insights team at Formula 1. They are very open with the insights they share all teams in the sport and whilst we do not have the contractual right to share this data externally, we ensure key learnings, on top of those learnt via our own proprietary research, guide the way we help our partners to better activate and achieve cut-through, supporting their own business goals.

How important are partners for the team financially? And how does this relate to on-track performance?

Our partners are critically important, we could not go racing without them. Our partnerships have never solely centered around on-car branding and we have always tried to create 360 brand campaigns for our partners. We strive to form partnerships with companies with shared interests and the desire to deliver meaningful change in our respective industries. We can offer our technical experience and expertise to help accelerate this. We look to share best practice, innovation, know-how and mutual experience through all our partnerships. Many of our technical partners drive our on-track

performance – Arrow Electronics integrate throughout our race car, Dell Technologies contribute to our CFD program, Splunk provide a data platform, Alteryx provide us with data automation, Cisco Webex keep us connected to the MTC everywhere we race, and Darktrace provide our cyber security to keep all of our performance systems safe and operational.

What main changes have you seen in partnerships in the F1 industry after the success of *Drive to Survive* in terms of what partners are looking for when investing in F1?

There has been a shift in key markets, and an exponential increase in interest to be involved in the sport. This has increased value, as the visibility provided by our sport has come under high demand from multiple sectors. For McLaren in particular, North America has become a key territory. In the last two years we have welcomed leading US-based brands such as Google and Goldman Sachs to our partner family, while our long-standing partners such as Coca-Cola and Dell Technologies are mainstays of the US. Now with three race events in the US for the first time, we have a fantastic opportunity to maximize value for our US-based partners, and for our partners who, like us, prioritize the US market.