

From Motorsport to Entertainment Brand - How Drive to Survive Contributed to Formula 1's Growing Popularity

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Abstract: In recent years, Formula 1 has experienced significant global growth, primarily due to the expansion of digital media platforms and streaming services. One of the best examples of this is Netflix's Drive to Survive series, which has demonstrated how documentary filmmaking and storytelling can function as effective sports marketing tools and reshape the audience's relationship with sport. This study examines the role of Drive to Survive in shaping the consumption habits of Formula 1 fans. The research applies a mixed-methods approach, combining the analysis of a questionnaire survey involving 272 respondents with 14 semi-structured expert interviews. In our study, we therefore examine how the Drive to Survive series influences sport consumption habits, fan attitudes, and digital engagement with Formula 1-related content. The findings suggest that narrative-driven, character-focused storytelling plays a significant role in attracting new audiences, particularly among younger generations. Furthermore, the results also indicate that digital and streaming-based content contributes to deeper fan engagement and supports the transformation of Formula 1 into an "always-on" entertainment media product. In our study, we highlight the growing importance of sports documentary series as strategic tools in contemporary sports marketing and digital fan engagement.

Keywords: Formula 1; sports marketing; documentary series; digital media; sport consumption

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, the global sports industry has undergone significant transformation, primarily driven by the rise of digital media and streaming platforms. Sports consumption has increasingly changed, and digital content has begun to complement and replace traditional television broadcasting. In this environment, sports have evolved into complex digital media products, where storytelling, personal narratives, and fan experience have taken on an increasingly important role in audience engagement [1], [2].

Formula 1 is a particularly illustrative example of this transformation. Since Liberty Media acquired the sport in 2017, Formula 1 has increasingly focused on strengthening its digital presence, expanding its social media activity, and attracting new audiences. One of the most important elements of this strategy was Netflix's *Drive to Survive* series, released in 2019. This documentary series provided behind-the-scenes access to teams, drivers, and the entire world of Formula 1, while emphasizing conflicts, rivalries, and the events unfolding in the background. This narrative-driven and character-focused storytelling offers audiences a more emotionally engaging interpretation of the sport beyond its technical and competitive dimensions [3].

Several industry reports and academic studies suggest that *Drive to Survive* contributed to the expansion and demographic transformation of Formula 1's fan base. Recent data show growing engagement among younger audiences and female fans, while television viewership in key markets such as the United States also increased significantly following the release of the series [4], [5]. Previous studies have argued that narrative storytelling can serve as an effective fan development tool by creating emotional connections between audiences and sports personalities [2], [3].

As a result, *Drive to Survive* functions not only as a media product, but also as an innovative sports marketing tool that contributed to the transformation of Formula 1 from a traditionally elite motorsport into a more accessible and entertainment-oriented global media brand. Through streaming platforms and digital content, Formula 1 has increasingly become an "always-on" media product that maintains fan engagement beyond race weekends [6].

While previous studies have examined the popularity of *Drive to Survive*, fewer studies have combined fan perspectives with expert interpretations to examine how streaming-based storytelling contributes to the broader media transformation of Formula 1.

2 Literature review

The transformation of Formula 1's media environment and fan base is closely connected to the emergence and expansion of digital media, streaming platforms, and narrative-driven sports content. Previous studies emphasize the demographic changes within the fan community, the growing role of digital engagement, and the increasing importance of storytelling in contemporary sports consumption [1], [2].

In recent years, Formula 1 has undergone significant demographic transformation, particularly among younger audiences and female fans. Several industry reports suggest that *Drive to Survive* played an important role in popularizing the sport by attracting audiences who had not previously followed Formula 1 [7]. Through Netflix, the series made the sport even more visible and engaging on a global scale, and contributed to increasing audience engagement in key markets, especially in the United States, where Formula 1 viewership has grown significantly since the release of the series [8], [9]. Research also shows that documentary-style sports content can function as an effective fan development tool. According to previous studies, many viewers only became interested in Formula 1 after watching *Drive to Survive*, which demonstrates the growing importance of streaming platforms in attracting new sports audiences [10].

Under Liberty Media's management, Formula 1 has experienced growing revenues, sponsorship investments, and global commercial visibility [11], [12]. The diversification of the audience, particularly the increase in younger and female fans, has increased the sport's marketing value for international brands and sponsors [6]. At the same time, Formula 1's broader digital strategy - including social media activity, esports initiatives, and continuous content production - has strengthened the sport's visibility within digital media environments [13]. Several studies argue that *Drive to Survive* contributed not only to audience growth, but also to the repositioning of Formula 1 as a broader entertainment-oriented media brand [14].

One of the most important elements behind the success of *Drive to Survive* is its narrative storytelling approach. Rather than focusing exclusively on race results, the series shifts the emphasis toward personal rivalries, emotional conflicts, and the individual experiences of drivers and team principals [15]. Communication and media studies have highlighted that narrative storytelling can significantly strengthen fan engagement and emotional identification [2], [3]. Previous research suggests that personal stories and character-centered narratives are often more accessible to new audiences than the technical aspects of motorsport, making this an important step toward audience expansion and long-term engagement.

The influence of *Drive to Survive* can also be observed in Formula 1's global expansion strategy. The series contributed to increasing visibility in new markets, particularly in the United States, where Formula 1 introduced additional race locations such as Miami and Las Vegas [16].

At the same time, Formula 1 has increasingly become an “always-on” media product. Fans now continuously consume Formula 1-related content through social media platforms, streaming services, and digital communities, rather than only sitting in front of the television during race weekends [17]. These transformations initiated by Liberty Media demonstrate how a traditionally elite sport can adapt to the contemporary digital media environment and attract younger global audiences [13].

3 Methodology

This study applies a mixed-methods research approach to examine the impact of the *Drive to Survive* documentary series on Formula 1 fan engagement, sport consumption habits, and digital media consumption. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a broader understanding of the relationship between documentary storytelling and contemporary sports audiences.

The quantitative phase consisted of an online questionnaire survey involving 272 Formula 1 fans who were reached through online communities and social media groups. The survey examined demographic characteristics, fan motivations, identification with teams and drivers, as well as digital media consumption patterns. To measure these dimensions, our study adapted elements from the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) [18], the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) [19], and the Digital Fan Engagement Scale (DFES) [20]. Respondents evaluated their answers on a five-point Likert scale.

The qualitative phase included 14 semi-structured expert interviews with journalists, commentators, photographers, motorsport professionals, and other Formula 1-related experts. The interviews focused on changes in Formula 1’s media strategy, fan culture, digital communication, and audience engagement following the emergence of *Drive to Survive*.

The quantitative data were analysed using statistical methods, while the qualitative interviews were interpreted using the laddering technique to identify recurring themes, deeper motivations, and underlying perceptions related to Formula 1 fandom and digital sport consumption.

The study has several limitations. The online survey does not provide a fully representative sample of the Formula 1 fan population, while the qualitative findings are interpretive in nature. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods approach provides a broader perspective on the transformation of Formula 1’s media environment and fan culture in the streaming era.

4 Results

The results demonstrate the transformation of Formula 1's fan culture and media environment from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The questionnaire survey highlights the motivations behind following Formula 1, the identification patterns that can be observed among fans, and their digital media consumption, while the interviews provide context for the broader media and marketing transformation of the sport.

4.1 Quantitative Results

The survey involved 272 respondents. The sample was predominantly male: 178 respondents were male (65.4%), 91 were female (33.5%), and 3 respondents selected the "other / prefer not to say" option (1.1%). In terms of age groups, the sample mainly consisted of younger and middle-aged fans: 60.7% belonged to the 1981–1999 age group, while 26.8% were born between 2000 and 2010.

The sample also showed strong long-term commitment to Formula 1. A total of 65.4% had followed the sport before 2010, while 17.3% started following it between 2017 and 2021, and 8.5% after 2022. This suggests that although the sample contains many respondents who are considered long-time fans, it also includes newer audiences who entered the world of Formula 1 during or after the rise of *Drive to Survive*. The intensity of race following was high: 82.7% reported watching every race live, while 7.7% only watched the most important races.

The strongest motivations for following Formula 1 were the excitement of racing (88.6%), attachment to drivers and teams (81.3%), and interest in technological development (50.7%). The prominent importance of drivers and teams is particularly significant because *Drive to Survive* is built around character-focused storytelling. Content preferences also support this pattern: 41.5% of respondents preferred behind-the-scenes content and interviews, while 28.7% preferred analytical content. This indicates strong audience interest in narrative and behind-the-scenes content.

The MSSC results showed that entertainment and experience-based motivations dominated. The highest-rated item was "*Formula 1 entertains and relaxes me*" ($M = 4.53$; $SD = 0.74$), followed by "*It is important for me to stay informed about what is happening in the sport*" ($M = 4.48$; $SD = 0.81$). Emotional involvement was also significant ($M = 4.02$; $SD = 1.03$), while the visual and technological aspects of the sport also played an important role ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 0.93$ and $M = 3.53$; $SD = 1.16$).

The SSIS results indicate a high level of fan identification. Respondents strongly agreed that they remain loyal to their favourite team even when it performs poorly ($M = 4.50$; $SD = 0.91$), and that they regularly follow Formula 1 events ($M = 4.57$; $SD = 0.79$). Emotional attachment to a favourite driver or team was also high ($M =$

4.08; SD = 1.11). However, active content sharing was less characteristic (M = 2.78; SD = 1.48), suggesting that many respondents participate as engaged but relatively passive digital consumers.

The DFES results further confirmed the importance of digital engagement. Following official Formula 1 social media channels reached an average of M = 3.74 (SD = 1.27), while the statement that social media content enhances the fan experience reached M = 3.54 (SD = 1.13). Overall, 60.3% of respondents stated that digital and social media content make them more engaged with Formula 1. In addition, 46.3% regularly and 37.5% occasionally follow the personal social media profiles of drivers or teams, suggesting that fan attachment is increasingly built around individual personalities and character-based narratives.

Finally, respondents clearly recognized the marketing and entertainment logic behind contemporary Formula 1. A total of 61.4% stated that marketing and entertainment play a decisive role in the development of the sport, while 34.6% considered them important but not dominant. This supports the interpretation that Formula 1 is increasingly perceived not only as a sport, but also as a media and entertainment product.

4.2 Qualitative Results

The 14 semi-structured expert interviews confirmed the patterns identified in the survey. One of the strongest recurring themes was the strategic transformation of Formula 1 following the Liberty Media acquisition. Interviewees emphasized that the sport shifted from a relatively closed and elite model toward a more open, digital, and entertainment-oriented media system. As one expert noted, Liberty Media “*started transforming Formula 1 into a global entertainment product.*”

Experts also highlighted that modern Formula 1 is no longer limited exclusively to race weekends. Instead, it operates as a continuous content ecosystem supported by social media, streaming platforms, F1 TV, behind-the-scenes content, and driver-focused communication. This supports the interpretation of Formula 1 as an “always-on” media product, where fan engagement is maintained throughout the season, not only during individual race weekends.

The interviews also emphasized the central role of *Drive to Survive*. Several experts argued that the series brought new audiences into the sport, particularly viewers who had not previously followed Formula 1. One interviewee stated that without *Drive to Survive*, it would be difficult to imagine three races being held in the United States. The series was repeatedly described as a turning point because it translated the technical and competitive world of Formula 1 into a more accessible format.

The key mechanism behind this effect was storytelling. Experts noted that the series foregrounds personal stories, rivalries, conflicts, and emotional moments instead of simply presenting race results. This approach strengthens the personal brands of

drivers and helps viewers develop emotional connections with individual personalities. This qualitative finding is consistent with the survey results, where 41.5% of respondents preferred behind-the-scenes content and 46.3% regularly followed the personal social media accounts of drivers or teams.

At the same time, the interviews provided a more nuanced interpretation. While most experts evaluated Formula 1's media transformation positively, some also noted that the growing entertainment orientation may create tension with the sport's traditional values.

4.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings clearly reinforce each other. The survey results show that fans are highly engaged with Formula 1, strongly attached to drivers and teams, and increasingly influenced by digital media content. The expert interviews explain this pattern from an industry perspective, linking it to Liberty Media's strategy, the rise of streaming platforms, and the logic of *Drive to Survive*.

The most important connection between the two data sources is the role of character-based storytelling. Quantitatively, this appears in the high importance of attachment to drivers and teams (81.3%), the preference for behind-the-scenes content (41.5%), and the frequent following of drivers' or teams' personal social media profiles (46.3% regularly; 37.5% occasionally). In the qualitative research, experts described the same process as a shift toward personal narratives, emotional identification, and continuous digital content production.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Drive to Survive* acted as a catalyst in Formula 1's transformation into a global entertainment-oriented media brand. The series did not create this transformation on its own, but it made the sport more accessible, emotionally engaging, and visible to new and less specialized audiences. In this sense, Formula 1's recent growth can be interpreted as the result of the integration of sporting performance, digital storytelling, platform-based media consumption, and strategic sports marketing.

Conclusion

This study examined how the digital media environment, and particularly Netflix's *Drive to Survive* documentary series, contributed to the transformation of Formula 1's fan culture, media presence, and consumption habits. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combined survey data from Formula 1 fans with expert interviews to gain a clear understanding of the sport's media and business transformation.

The findings show that Formula 1 has undergone significant changes from a traditional motorsport competition toward a complex media and entertainment product. The expert interviews identified Liberty Media's acquisition as a strategic

turning point, after which the sport's communication and marketing activities increasingly adapted to digital platforms, streaming services, and continuous content production.

The quantitative results support this interpretation. Respondents reported strong interest in digital and social media content, behind-the-scenes material, and driver- or team-centered narratives. This indicates that the Formula 1 fan experience is no longer limited to watching races but increasingly includes the continuous consumption of media content surrounding the sport.

The combination of the qualitative and quantitative findings highlights the specific role of *Drive to Survive*. The series contributed to Formula 1's growing popularity by making the sport more accessible to less specialized audiences and individuals less interested in sport through character-centered storytelling, personal rivalries, and emotional narratives. These elements helped transform Formula 1 from a technically complex motorsport into a more understandable and entertaining media brand, making it far more accessible and understandable for a wider audience.

The study contributes to the understanding of media-driven sports consumption by demonstrating how documentary series, streaming platforms, and digital storytelling can strengthen fan engagement and support audience expansion. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that sports organizations should treat narrative content production and digital platform strategies as central elements of contemporary sports marketing.

However, the research also had limitations. The survey sample was limited in size and mainly drawn from online fan communities, which restricts generalizability. In addition, the qualitative findings are based on expert interviews and therefore provide a more interpretive than fully representative industry perspective. Future research should examine the long-term impact of streaming-based sports content on larger and more international samples and further investigate how character-centered storytelling influences fan identification in other sporting contexts.

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