

**The Sport of Formula One™: A Content Analysis to Address Slowing Audience  
Growth in the United States Through Targeted Digital Media Tactics**

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### **Growth in the United States Through Targeted Digital Media Tactics**

Formula One™ rapidly gained more visibility and a wider global audience thanks to Liberty Media's purchase of the sport's commercial rights (NewsRX LLC, 2016). This lucrative partnership increased Formula One's™ digital visibility exponentially by heavily promoting it in the United States. In the beginning, Liberty Media's strategy was successful in creating hype and gaining new fans. However, as the corporation entered its seventh year at the start of the 2023 Formula One™ season, this same strategy is no longer copesetic with Formula One™ and its future goals, as well as its avid, longtime fans. Using the *framing theory, uncertainty-of-outcome hypothesis*, and data-driven analyses of the increasingly high Grand Prix™ ticket prices, my research will show that Liberty Media's approach is not viable to maintain the legions of Formula One™ fans that were lured to the sport by the company's early initiatives. In addition, I will examine the Netflix Formula One™ Drive to Survive series to compare it with the criteria of a documentary-style program. Without fixing the problems within its current strategy, Formula One's™ star power will quickly burn out.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Formula One™ is the “pinnacle of prestige, glamor, technology – and speed” (Marino et al., 2015). It is a sport steeped in history and innovation with a team of strategic engineers and two highly adaptive drivers whose goal is to outrace their equally talented opponents (and even their teammates) with a superior car design, better aerodynamics, and higher performance. A Formula One™ race car is a single-seat, open-cockpit technologically advanced machine that can reach speeds of up to 230 mph and make pit stops in under 3 seconds (McCarthy, 2023). Formula One™ is an excruciating sport for drivers. In the over 90 minutes of a Grand Prix™ race, drivers can sweat out almost 6.61 pounds of their body weight (Network18, 2011) and lose an average of 40 percent of their brain function by the end of every race (Gilboy, 2019).

Formula One™ is a widely recognized sport in Europe and has continued to dominate the European culture since the prestigious races began in 1950 (FIA, n.d.). British business tycoon and former race car driver, Bernie Ecclestone, controlled Formula One™ and ran it like a business for over 40 years, focusing primarily on selling broadcasting rights “that happens to put on a car race every other Sunday” (Robinson, 2021), all the while intentionally ignoring digital technology, and most of all, fans. Television audiences declined when Ecclestone

took Formula One™ races from a free-to-air format to pay television (*Bye-bye, Bernie; Formula One™ 2017*). Not to mention Formula One™ lacked excitement and a global audience outside Europe. During the races, fans were unlikely to witness much on-track action as drivers became more concerned with managing their tire wear than flying around steep corners at top speeds. From 1998 to 2018, just eight different drivers won the FIA Formula One World Championship™ – and three of them won at least four of those titles each (Robinson, 2021). The global fan surveys in 2010 and 2015 showed significant dissatisfaction within the Formula One's™ fan base (Misra, 2021). The crux of the Ecclestone era was summed up when he said:

“I’m not interested in tweeting, Facebook, and whatever this nonsense is. I’d rather get to the 70-year-old guy who’s got plenty of cash. So, there’s no point trying to reach these kids because they won’t buy any of the products here and if marketers are aiming at this audience, then maybe they should advertise with Disney” (Camber, 2014).

Compared to other international sports and motorsport series, Formula One™ was digitally trailing behind – even in early 2017. “It was ironic that the most technologically advanced sport in the world was stubbornly out of touch with the

digital world. In short, Formula One™ had a big problem with its marketing strategy" (Misra, 2021).

With little to no direct relationship between Formula One™ and its fans, the Colorado-based mass media company Liberty Media bought the commercial rights to Formula One™ in 2016 for \$8 billion (Bocconi Students Investment Club, 2016, p. 1) and immediately went to work to change the brand from a "perceived billionaire's playspace" (Misra, 2021) to a sport that was more accessible to its audience, specifically the United States audience. There were four areas Liberty Media wanted to focus on first – "branding, digital development, a democratic relationship with partners, and the overall race experience" (Errity, 2017). Liberty Media started to analyze facets of Formula One™ that were outdated or no longer aligned with the vision they had for the sport. The first thing to go – was the grid girls who "were tasked with displaying the driver's numbers next to their cars, parading the pit lane, and indulging in other promotional activities" (Biswas, 2022). In 2018, Formula One™ managing director Sean Bratches said, "While the practice of employing grid girls has been a staple of Formula 1™ Grands Prix™ for decades, we feel this custom does not resonate with our brand values and clearly is at odds with modern-day societal norms" (Jakubowska, 2018). The politically correct decision caused a mix of reactions from the teams and fans, and although

concessions were made to include grid girls at some Grand Prix™ races, by 2020, all had virtually disappeared.

In 2019, Liberty Media partnered with Netflix to create a behind-the-scenes documentary-style series. At the time (and currently), Mercedes, Ferrari, and Red Bull Racing were considered the three top teams in Formula One™, while the remaining seven teams were really just competing during an entire season for seventh place (Bootsma, 2019). And since these three teams did not participate in the first season, *Drive to Survive* focused on the midfield teams.

"Although extremely well produced and high quality, the series tends to focus more on narrative storylines than a true depiction of a Formula 1™ season. Instead of following the season chronologically, the showrunners chose to dedicate episodes to various storylines that came about throughout the season" (Bootsma, 2019).

*Drive to Survive* strayed from the documentary approach it claimed to have and opted to follow a format that was more aligned with reality television. Long-time Formula One™ followers voiced their displeasure with the way *Drive to Survive* edited content in such a way that created unrealistic drama just for the sake of drawing in a wider audience.

To make Formula One™ races more enthralling and help the midfield teams move up and become competitive, Liberty Media changed the 2021 sporting rules and regulations, implemented car design changes, and executed a budget cap for each team. In 2023, the cap is \$137.4 million (Federation Internationale de l'Automobile [FIA], 2023, p. 4). Since its beginning, Formula One™ teams were allowed to spend unlimited resources to develop their cars. Mercedes, Ferrari, and Red Bull have spent as much as \$400 to \$500 million on their cars in one season (Phatak, 2023), putting other teams with less capital at a disadvantage. Introducing a budget cap removed those advantages and leveled the playing field.

“Undoubtedly, the budget cap helped the most to even out the competition” (Majumdar, 2022). Liberty Media also proposed significant V6 engine changes that took effect ahead of the 2021 season (Saward, 2018). The biggest show pony of Formula One™, the Ferrari team, strongly opposed those changes and threatened to leave Formula One™ altogether. But with nowhere else for the Prancing Horse to go, Ferrari begrudgingly stayed. “If one suggests Ferrari might go to NASCAR, it is guaranteed to get a good laugh” (Saward, 2018).

The media company updated existing or created new social media channels and rebranded Formula One™, including a new specially composed orchestral theme song that was as big, bold, and as loud as the sport itself. When Liberty

Media took over in 2017, Formula One's™ YouTube channel had just over 273,000 subscribers (YouTubers.me, 2017), and as of April 18, 2023, had a comfortable 8.847 million subscribers (YouTubers.me, 2023) and counting. Additionally, Formula One™ grew its Twitter audience from 2.45 million followers to over 9 million (Wood, 2022). As Liberty Media strategically engaged the Formula One™ audience over the past six years, it ignored the climate and opinions of the drivers, teams, fans, and the FIA, the governing body of Formula One™, through inflated ticket prices, a sensationalized reality television series, an increase in Grand Prix™ races for a single season, and a clear focus on generating as much money as possible. To determine whether Liberty Media's strategy is continuing to grow the sport, this paper will rely on data to answer three questions:

1. Is Liberty Media's marketing campaign still a viable strategy for retaining the Formula One™ fan base or is the company failing to maintain its audience?
2. How has Netflix's *Drive to Survive* documentary contributed to Formula One's™ audience growth and has it accurately portrayed the sport to viewers?
3. How will hiring me as your Formula One™ United States media liaison benefit the organization and continue growing the audience?

## **Literature Review**

### *Framing Theory*

The media serve as gatekeepers over information audiences have access to that will have a profound effect on the public and the public's perception of politicians, celebrities, ordinary people, athletes, and society. The *framing theory* (Goffman, 1974), first suggested by Erwin Goffman (1974), posits that "how something is presented to the audience (called 'the frame') influences the choices people will make about how to process that information. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning" (Arowolo, 2017, p. 1).

Framing addresses which elements in a story will be presented and the influence it has on audience perceptions. When the media frame a story, whether positively or negatively, it dramatically shapes the way audiences make sense of an issue (Spencer & Limperos, 2020). "Creation of a media frame includes the selection of what will be shown, emphasis by choosing how much is shown, and determining what does not get shown or exclusion" (Spencer & Limperos, 2020, p. 7). In Formula One™, media frames came courtesy of the Netflix Drive to Survive series.

### *Documentary or Reality Television?*

Reality television started in the 1990s and has been an inexpensive marketing tactic for turning passive viewers into active respondents (Johnson &

Graves, 2011). Hall (2007) interviewed a focus group of young adults to uncover their perceptions of the nature, realism, and gratifications of televised reality shows where Hall would characterize reality television as “shows covering a wide range of themes and topic areas count as reality programs provided that the actions of the cast members are not believed to be scripted” (p. 199) and have “attributes such as being unpredictable or competition-oriented or focusing on shocking events or behavior” (p. 199). During interviews with the focus group, Hall learned that most respondents accepted the events that were portrayed in reality shows as real but only in the sense that they were direct representations of specific things that actually happened. The respondents believed reality shows highlighted the most exciting parts of the whole show through creative editing. Further, they indicated that what made these programs seem unreal centered on whether certain scenes were staged or producers had engineered the outcome. When Hall asked the respondents how they interpreted reality programs as being more real, one responded, “They don't have a real script” (p. 201). Hall attributed reality-program watching as fulfilling a social function for respondents and the “approach that is taken to that content” (p. 199). Although the respondents primarily cited dating shows during the interview, Hall’s study into how audiences conceptualized and responded to reality television shows can help the producers

of future *Drive to Survive* episodes inject more real-life scenarios that are specific to Formula One™ and do not stray from the unique culture that remains special to the sport.

Murray and Ouellette (2009) authored the book *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* where they examined several popular reality shows, including *Big Brother*, *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance*, and *The Real Housewives* franchise that manipulated reality television and claimed to be unscripted. The duo explored how a network's brand positions its programming and content into a generic hybrid that would fall into any one of four categories: the gamedoc, the dating program, the makeover program, and the docusoap described as a "self-display of a performative opportunity" (p. 53) that offered a voyeuristic look into other's lives. The authors defined reality television as "an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real" (p. 3). In contrast, documentaries are primarily informative, educational, and authentic, and serve the public's interest with "self-restrained naturalism of demeanor, speech, and behavior in natural conservatism" (p. 53). Reality show producers rely on a *conditioned audience* that understands the degree to which reality television is actually real, similar to how MTV's *The Real World* "trained a generation of young viewers in the language

of reality TV" (p. 5). Show producers were more concerned with controlling the narratives and characters while editing and manipulating reality into reality television rather than presenting real people doing real-life things in authentic situations.

Echoing Hall (2007) and Murray and Ouellette (2009), Johnson & Graves (2011) explored the challenge of vying for an audience's attention amongst the number of media channels, and how television shows that highlight "fantasy and spectacle (even in news coverage) have the best chances of capturing an audience" (p. 214). They followed the reality television formula that included: real people, uncontrolled situations, immediacy and intimacy, an emphasis on conflict, an observational style, a "confessional space" (p. 214), editing to create an entertaining package, and interactive elements (voting, texting by home viewers). According to Johnson & Graves (2011), since gaining traction, reality television shows have been successful in luring the target audience, particularly young people and those with less formal education. Johnson & Graves asserted that people watch reality television for several reasons: to be social, to get a look into the lives of others, and to be self-aware of how they might react in similar situations. While *Drive to Survive* does not have all the requisites of Johnson & Graves' reality television formula, there is an emphasis on conflict and competition

aimed at engaging television audiences. Johnson & Graves explained that, although this aspect of the reality television formula provides a lucrative option to inform and interact with a larger audience, the media should exercise caution when using this manipulative aspect that “emphasizes drama and conflict over documentary realism and ethical considerations” (p. 214).

#### *Uncertainty of Outcome Hypothesis*

Another issue for Formula One™ is the increasing predictability of race outcomes toward the end of the season. There are two types of championships that can be won within a single season: the individual driver championship and the overall team championship, known as the Constructors Championship which was referred to as the pennant race by Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade (2021) earlier. It is not uncommon that, during a Formula One™ season, a winner of either the driver or team championship is determined well before the last race, leaving the remaining 19 drivers and nine teams vying for second place and so on. Since 1950, only nine Formula One™ races have been decided by 1 point or less (Pryson, 2023). The earliest an FIA Formula One World Championship™ had been decided in a season was in 2002 when Michael Schumacher won the 11th of that season's 17 races (Lynch, 2015). In 2022, the driver's championship was sealed by Max Verstappen with five races left in that season. Hamilton said, “It's not good for

Formula 1™ when drivers win the world championship long before the end of the season" (Collantine, 2022). And Hamilton was not wrong.

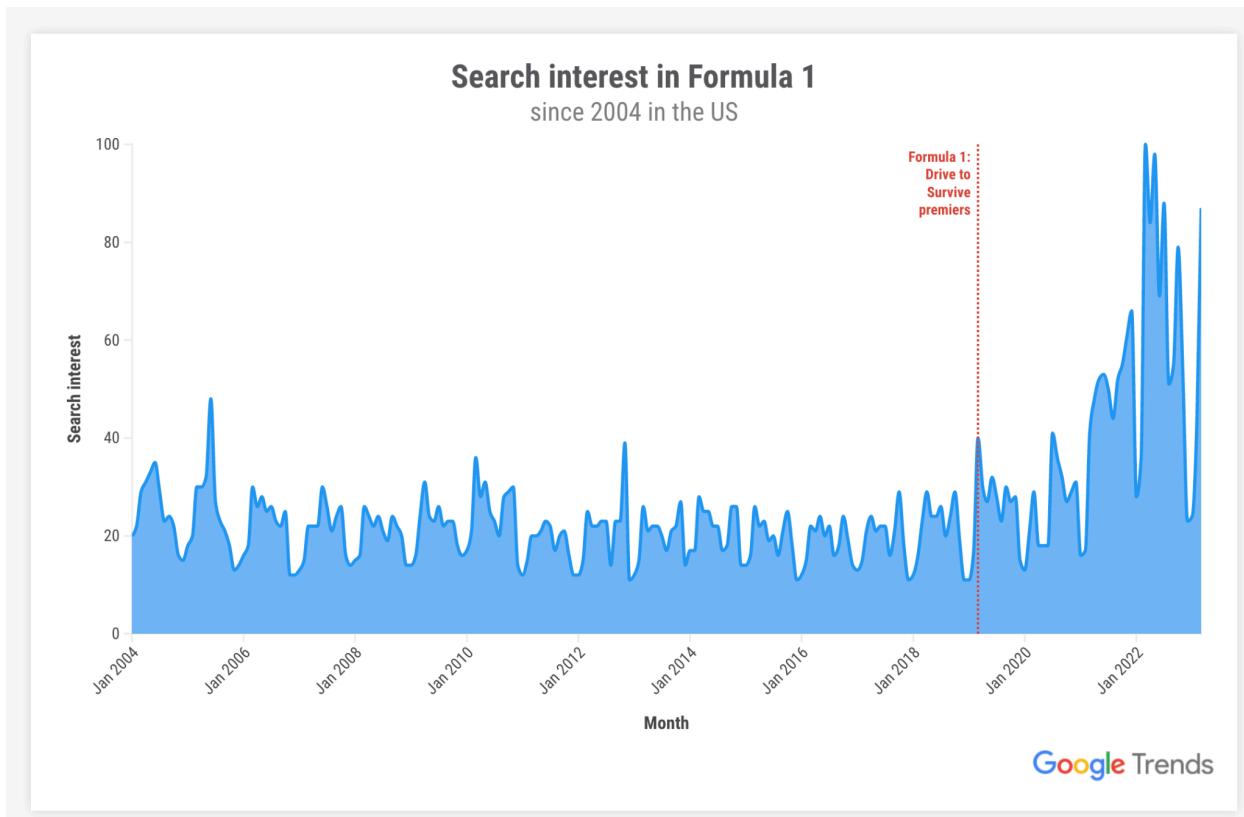
Uncertainty is multi-dimensional and exists in every sport as each carries different levels of winning. Rottenberg's (1956) *uncertainty-of-outcome hypothesis* maintained "that sports fans value contests with uncertain outcomes" and "that fans value close, competitive contests between sports teams, whether individual games or season-long championship competitions" (Eckard, 2016). Sports teams and leagues that provide such competition "gain greater ticket sales, larger TV contracts, and various other possible benefits" (Eckard, 2016). This is something Liberty Media and the FIA offer to Formula One™ with every new season through changes to the rules and regulations, however, those efforts might not be enough. Schreyer and Torgler (2016) explored whether performance during a Formula One™ qualifying event affected television viewership of the Formula 1 Grand Prix™ and examined FIA Formula One World Championship™ broadcasts between 1993 and 2014 in Germany. They found that German television audiences prefer "competition between a group of three to four drivers ... over those races with clear favorites" and that viewership demand is shaped by race outcome uncertainty and the differences between drivers with the best qualifying performances during the race weekend (Schreyer & Torgler, 2016). Schreyer and Torgler (2016) further

found eight additional factors for the demand of television viewership related to the Grand Prix™ circuit and the scheduling that would go beyond the scope of this study (Schreyer & Torgler, 2016).

Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade (2022) studied how removing uncertainty on the outcome of the FIA Formula One World Championship™ reduces interest among Formula One™ followers. Using 10 years of Google Trends News data to capture the intensity with which individuals searched for Formula One™ news and information and 14 years of Google Trends Web data for a wider overview of Internet content, the empirical research concluded that the greater the level of uncertainty, the higher the level of interest. They further found that “once pennant race [known as the Constructors Championship] uncertainty is removed, search interest declines significantly, and by a large amount – about 10 percentage points when average search activity is at a level of approximately 25. That is about a third of search interest is lost” (Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade, 2021). Some interest still remained because each race contained at least some level of uncertainty. “Uncertainty about the championship winner is crucial insofar as financial success depends on the capacity to attract potential consumers of spectacle.” In an ideal world, both FIA Formula One World Championships™ would be decided at the last race of the season, but Formula One™ is an unpredictable sport.

**Figure 2**

*Comparison of Google Trends search interest in Formula One™ after the premiere of the Drive to Survive series*



*Note:* This figure illustrates online searches of Formula One™ starting in January 2004 through the end of 2022. (Raghavan, 2023)

The average Formula One™ television audience per Grand Prix™ race declined from the shortened 2020 season by 17.1 million in 2021 (Formula 1™, 2022). It can be argued that this decline stems from more fans attending Grand Prix™ races in person in 2021 than during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, in 2019,

91.5 million people were watching races on television, which still suggests a substantial decline in 2020 and 2021 (Formula 1™, 2022). The 2021 season was considered one of the best in recent memory for Formula One™ track action as both the drivers' and constructors' championships were decided at the last race, and actually came down to the last few laps. This further highlights that the thrill and excitement of the 2021 season had nothing to do with marketing but everything to do with the sport itself and the competition between the top teams. The 2023 season marks the first time the sport will have a record number of races. With the addition of the FORMULA 1 HEINEKEN SILVER LAS VEGAS GRAND PRIX and the FORMULA 1 SINGAPORE AIRLINES SINGAPORE GRAND PRIX, the total number of races is set at 23. The highly confidential Concorde Agreement, a contract between the FIA, Formula One™ Management, and the Formula One™ Teams, "sets the terms by which the teams compete in races" (Hassett, 2023). The most recent one was signed in 2020 and covers the race seasons up to 2025. Some terms that require a unanimous decision are the \$200 million entry fee split amongst the teams each season (Hassett, 2023) and the maximum number of races set at up to 25 per season. The 2024 season looks to have 24 races and possibly even 25 if it is up to the Formula One race promoter (Wood, 2022). The relentless push by Liberty Media to add more Grand Prix™ events to a season's

calendar is not popular amongst the teams. Red Bull team principal, Christian Horner, described 23 races as right on the limit of what could be asked of teams (Reed, 2022). While Toto Wolff, Mercedes team principal said:

“I will start to skip a few races. The whole team needs to look at it. It is not sustainable for anyone to do 24 races. The drivers have to, but we start on Monday in the office and go through until the end of the week. We need to find a solution, and I think the race team will skip a few races every year in order to survive” (Woodhouse, 2022).

Besides adding an additional two races to the 2023 calendar, Formula One™ also doubled the number of sprint races from three to six (Suttill, 2023), something Verstappen is not happy with:

“We are adding into seasons that will soon have 24 or 25 races and if you start adding even more stuff, it’s not worth it for me, I’m not enjoying that. For me, a sprint race is all about surviving, it’s not about racing. When you have a quick car there’s nothing to risk. I prefer to just keep my car alive and make sure you have a good race car for Sunday. Even if you change the format, I don’t find it’s the DNA of F1 to do these kinds of sprint races” (Suttill, 2023).

Although not every driver agrees with Verstappen, it does bear further investigation into the intent and purpose behind changing a format that has always been successful to Formula One™ and replacing it with one that puts more demand on teams and drivers. Verstappen further added "It's about getting the cars closer, getting more teams able to fight for the win. I think naturally the show will be great" (Suttill, 2023).

## **Methodology**

A mixed-methods survey was used that collected quantitative data and descriptive qualitative data. The survey examined the overall knowledge and perceptions of Formula One™ fans and described their attitudes toward the Drive to Survive series, ticket prices, and attending Grand Prix™ races in the future. Incorporating some open-ended questions allowed for the flexibility to explore in-depth topics that are important to the respondents (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013, p. 135).

### *Qualitative and Quantitative Survey*

The Google Forms survey ('Formula One™ Survey') was posted to a Formula One™ sub-Reddit community for fans of the sport, which had over 3 million members (Reddit, 2023) at the time. The survey was posted for two weeks starting on March 8, 2023, and was closed to responses on March 23, 2023. A link to the

online Formula One™ Survey was embedded within the post (see Appendix A, Figure A1) that would take the respondent to the survey when clicked. All responses were anonymous. The Formula One™ Survey had 26 questions, including nine multiple-choice, 15 yes-no, and two open-ended short-answer responses (see Appendix A). It included visual images of Formula One™, which were coordinated to separate sections of the survey. When a picture was seen on the survey, the respondent could assume a new area with a different set of questions was to follow. Survey topics included the respondents' levels of interest in Formula One™, how engaged they were with Formula One™ social media channels, their analysis of the Drive to Survive series, how they watched Grand Prix™ race weekends on television, and their interest in attending Grand Prix™ races in the future. There were two optional questions that asked for any further thoughts they wanted to share about the Drive to Survive show and the 2022 season. The Formula One™ survey received 197 responses in the two-week period from March 8 to March 23, 2023, but not every question was answered by every respondent.

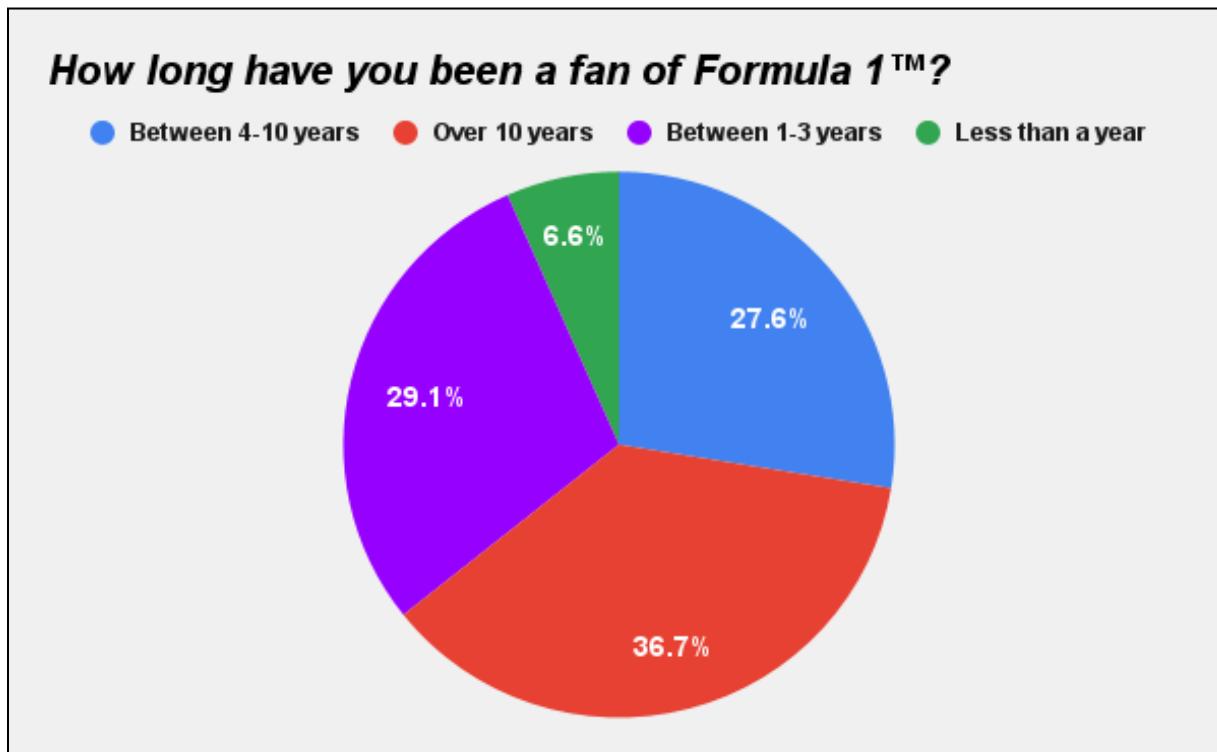
### **Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion**

The survey results provided both qualitative and quantitative data that supported previous assertions made throughout this research, most notably the

uncertainty-of-outcome hypothesis (Rottenberg, 1956) proposed by Schreyer & Torgler (2016) and Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade (2022). The Formula One™ survey data held that 91.1 percent of the 196 respondents (see Appendix B, Figure B1) were in fact still interested in the remainder of the 2022 season even after Verstappen had won the world title well before the end of the season. This aligned with the evidence presented by Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade (2021) that used Google Trends to show that Formula One™ fans had at least *some* level of interest in watching the remaining races despite the conclusions of the championships before the end of the season. "Often towards the end of a season, it is known already which driver has won the driver's championship, and hence, from this point on, only individual race-level uncertainty remains" (Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade, 2021). Their research also found that more "established fans will continue to search for news regardless of whether the outcome is known, whereas casual observers keen to try and learn more about the sport may not do so" (Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade, 2021). To further validate this research, the Formula One™ survey results identified varying lengths of time respondents had been Formula One™ fans. The data provided context into their interest level that can help assess how to market to these different degrees of fandom until the end of the season. The results of the survey are presented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Google Forms Formula One™ Survey*



*Note:* The survey question received 196 anonymous responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

According to Statista, only 30 percent of viewers became Formula One™ fans after watching *Drive to Survive*, while 47 percent said the series did not impact their fandom (Morning Consult, 2022). This data was confirmed in the Formula One™ survey that showed the *Drive to Survive* series did not influence 77.3 percent to become Formula One™ fans. As predicted, however, 80 percent did not feel that

*Drive to Survive* accurately portrayed the drivers and the Formula One™ culture (see Appendix C, Figure C1) but that will not deter them from watching it in the future as 89.3 percent want Netflix to continue making *Drive to Survive* (see Appendix C, Figure C2). This was somewhat of a surprising result because fans were aware that the series had edited the content to fit a certain narrative and failed to show the real-life flaws within the Formula One™ paddock reinforced Pender (2021) that, "The shortcoming in content like *Drive to Survive*, produced in partnership with F1™ is the lack of a critical lens" (Pender, 2021). The survey offered the opportunity for respondents to expand on the *Drive to Survive* series anonymously (see Appendix C). One respondent said that *Drive to Survive* was, "an entertainment product and although mainly portrays F1™, in reality, there is a lot of dramatisation and also a lot of omitted information that would put things in more context than the drama they are portraying". While another pointed out that the series has "fake drama, which is unnecessary when F1 is already so dramatic". The majority, if not all, of the responses, had a recurring theme when it came to *Drive to Survive* – there was too much inflated, unnecessary drama. As a result, the series should not hold itself out as a documentary because it is more akin to Murray and Ouellette's (2009) description of a docusoap with its engineered conflict, clever editing, and Auto-Tune-sounding special effects.

It is undeniable that Formula One™ saw a considerable boost in its following in the United States since the series was released with “over half of self-identified Formula One™ fans in the United States have claimed they became fans after watching the series” (Killingstad, 2022). The stars of the Drive to Survive series are the 20 drivers with their larger-than-life personalities, lavish lifestyles, and the fearless way they handle a machine weighing at least 1,759 pounds (FIA, 2023, p. 45) around a circuit and driving at ridiculously fast speeds. And therein lies one of the many fallacies of *Drive to Survive*, and what hardcore fans – the ones who have been around since before Formula One™ was a mainstream trend – complain most about. The series fails to focus on the most intricate, most expensive, and by far, the most impressive aspect of Formula One™ – the 20 majestically constructed cars that cost between \$12 and \$15 million (Jessner, 2023) to build. This figure is just for the major car components and is, naturally, purely speculative because these numbers are never released to anyone outside of the FIA. "The modern F1 car is almost like a spaceship in complexity, and it takes special drivers to be able to master them effectively" (McCarthy, 2023).

The Formula One™ culture in Europe, where viewership has always been high, embraces the innovative, cutting-edge technology of Formula One™, while in the United States, audiences of motorsport competitions “like a show in which

rules are very simple and, for example, accidents are an integral part of the spectacle" (Bocconi Students Investment Club, 2016, p. 2). The 2023 FIA technical regulations for a Formula One™ car amass 176 pages and another 112 pages for sporting regulations (FIA, 2023). Every season has a new set of rules and regulations that influence team and driver strategies and the overall competitiveness of each race season. The individual teams interpret the rules by making changes to their setup and testing out the car in simulators months before the real one ever touches its wheels on a track. It is a complex sport in every aspect.

*Drive to Survive* has been described as sensationalized and edited to fit the Netflix and Liberty Media narrative (*Bye-bye, Bernie; Formula One™* 2017) by adding more races in the United States because, after all, western Europe was considered the "foundation of the sport, whose participation guarantees interest from new circuits," according to Chase Carey, chief executive of Liberty Media (*Bye-bye, Bernie; Formula One™* 2017), so there was no immediate need to add more races there. Following the release of *Drive to Survive*'s second season, the 2021 FIA Formula One World Championship™ winner, Max Verstappen said:

"Because the series is all about excitement.....they position you and whatever fits the episode. So for me, that never really works. You're

interviewed, and they use the words also under different circumstances. So it never really fits" (Kelsall, 2022). Further, Verstappen boycotted the fifth season "because he did not like the fact that liberties were taken with the truth" (Nicol & Mitchell, 2023).

*Drive to Survive* received criticism for exploiting built-up tension between teams and drivers, and becoming more notorious for "misinterpreting moments and quotes by drivers and team principals to fit their crafted storylines" (Nicol & Mitchell, 2023). Now, "Season 5 feels like F1™ is trying to rewrite recent history to make itself look better" (Blackstock, 2023). The Netflix show glossed over the real-life drama that played out in the final few races of the season in 2022. Verstappen, who had already secured the world drivers' championship, blatantly snubbed his Red Bull teammate, Sergio Perez in his quest to secure much-needed points for a second-place championship finish, but instead, Verstappen ignored team orders and refused to let Perez pass on the last lap (Rodriguez, 2022). Or, that Verstappen's mother took to Twitter to accuse Perez of cheating on his wife (Gaydos, 2022) shortly after. In the end, Perez came in third and Netflix had a backseat to it all but instead chose to lightly tread over reality and opt to engineer drama rather than letting it play out organically.

Formula One™ is a sport that does not need the inflated drama that *Drive to Survive* stirs up from a minor on-track incident amongst two drivers who, in real life, are highly competitive golf buddies off-track, or the ridiculously enhanced special effects during a crash, or amplified engine sounds, tire screeches, and overlaid race commentary from a completely different race on a completely different day to make the races more interesting (Milburn, 2023). Formula One™ is already interesting and very engaging. The sport has plenty of high drama and edge-of-your-seat excitement built right into it with the star of the whole thing – the cars. A Formula One™ car's sole purpose for existing is to drive on street circuits or purpose-built venues and to navigate tight corners and long straights effortlessly (McCarthy, 2023) in different circumstances, and in new environments where weather and track conditions dictate tire degradations and team strategies. And while those things are happening, drivers will adhere to a strict set of FIA specifications and guidelines to ensure the racing remains competitive and safe and they finish ahead of the 19 other drivers on track.

With *Drive to Survive*, Netflix failed to understand that the most exciting aspect of Formula One™ drivers is not what designer brand they wear or who they date, but rather “what goes through their head when they are chasing another one down in a race, or squeezing out every millisecond of lap time from their car”

(Milburn, 2023). Formula One™ cannot simply be portrayed within the same reality television formula as Johnson & Graves (2011) defined. Formula One™ is a sport that commands respect – and it is owed respect. It is filled with an elite list of talented drivers who developed their skills at a very early age through cart racing, then only some would move onto the junior racing circuits of Formula 3 and Formula 2. And then, a very select few who had demonstrated their superior skills with race victories would ever actually drive a Formula One car (Rockerbie, 2022).

That is what Netflix should focus on to bring authenticity to *Drive to Survive* (Milburn, 2023). What other sport has athletes that contend with g-forces that are

so extreme "their organs are constantly being squished" (Gilboy, 2019)?

Seven-time FIA Formula One World Championship™ winner Lewis Hamilton said that at times, g-forces have been so great that it has pulled the tears from his tear ducts as he watched them splash onto his visor (Gilboy, 2019).

Grand Prix™ ticket prices remained a consistent point of contention amongst fans and were cited as the primary reason they are not attending races in person, according to the survey. A surprising 74 percent of the respondents have not attended a live Grand Prix™ in the last five years (see Appendix D, Figure C1) and 33 percent said they planned to attend a race in the next three years (see Appendix D, Figure D2). The reason that 103 respondents (70 percent) cited was

that tickets are just too expensive followed by 12 (8 percent) who preferred to watch the races on television (see Appendix D, Figure D3), which is not uncommon since the televised races include expert commentary on the technical aspects of the cars.

### **Limitations**

Although the Formula One™ survey provided a larger sample of responses than expected, some responses posed new questions that are beneficial to explore in future research. There are limitations to this research that include the method by which Reddit posts are seen within the Formula One™ community. The moderators of the Formula One™ sub-Reddit group had strict rules for posting within their community, including a specific number of *Karma points* that are gained through participation with the group. While the survey was approved and posted to a Reddit thread within the group, it was ultimately pushed further down as new posts were created. If my Karma points were higher, the survey likely could have been re-shared multiple times, bumping it closer to the top amongst newer posts and potentially being seen by community members who missed it when it was initially available. Further, of the 197 responses the survey received, not every question received the same number of responses which hindered the overall data. Additionally, the Formula One™ Reddit survey was posted in a digital online

platform community of Formula One™ fans, but I did not learn their level of fandom, which is a question that should have been addressed in the survey. Although the results coincided with the finding of Garcia-del-Barrio & Reade (2021), further research should address the dedication fans have to Formula One™ and more closely monitor their levels of engagement as a season progresses. The data concerning *Drive to Survive* offered insight into the idea of potentially moving away from a reality-type format that concocts drama in favor of one that lets the drama unfold. However, data from the fifth season of *Drive to Survive* would be more helpful in deciding a definitive course of action going forward.

## **Conclusion**

A concerted effort should be made to address the uncertainty of outcome on Formula One™ fans and create targeted strategies that will continue engaging newer fans through the end of each race season, regardless of when championships are decided. Social media is an effective relationship-building tool because it enhances two-way communication with fans who are already seeking to connect with a team, driver, or celebrity when they decide to “follow” them on any social media channel. An analysis of professional sports teams’ Facebook and Twitter pages suggested “both networks were used most often for player and personnel promotion, and fans interacted most often with this content” (Achen et

al., 2020) during the off-season. Allowing Formula One™ drivers to post to their individual social media accounts helps create or continue fan engagement regardless of on-track trajectories. The popularity of professional sports has steadily increased, “leaving fans begging for more news and entertainment after each season ends,” (Kovar, 2013). Although Kavar (2013) was referring to football, this can be applied to Formula One™ as well.

With 70 percent of survey respondents not planning to attend a Grand Prix™ race in the next three years due to the cost of tickets, perhaps a more robust viewing experience should be considered for the audience, including more interactivity if offering more affordable ticket prices is not a viable option. For example, F1™ TV is an app that offers viewers comprehensive Formula One™ coverage and exclusive content with two types of subscription tiers in the United States: F1™ TV Pro costs \$79 a year and F1™ TV Access is \$26.99 a year (Lynch, 2023). But the more expensive option gives the audience a chance to hop on board with their favorite driver using a live camera as they go through practices, qualifyings, and races. For some, F1™ TV Pro is not a feasible option when they can watch the race for free on ESPN or other affiliate channels.

Looking at Liberty Media’s efforts with Formula One™ as a whole, the company’s strategy is beginning to falter. One of the most important ways to maintain fan

interest in the sport is to make access to Formula One™ more affordable, or at the minimum, not pricing fans out of attendance, as evidenced by the FORMULA 1 HEINEKEN SILVER LAS VEGAS GRAND PRIX. Based on various resources that were analyzed and the in-depth research performed, Liberty Media is charging exorbitant fees for tickets to specific Grand Prix™ races at the expense of fans while attempting to increase the number of races during the season and the format of race weekends to the detriment of the teams and drivers. Creating excitement and maintaining momentum around the sport while entertaining the audience attending race weekends are all important to any marketing strategy, but there must be a better balance between fans, drivers, and the corporate strategy. Liberty Media successfully catapulted Formula One™ onto a grander stage. Still, as research suggested, their hunger for more fans, more venues, and more money is coming at the expense of a beloved sport, its drivers, and teams who might not be able to withstand the added undue pressure going forward.

Prior to Liberty Media purchasing Formula One™, it was already established as "an expensive affair, so much so that it is considered to be the most expensive sport in the world" (Phatak, 2023) and offers plenty of excitement during the season. Keeping fans engaged, however, in the offseason requires forethought and creativity with the types of content produced for fans. According to the Deloitte

series addressing fan engagement, "General team news is the most popular type of content followed by news related to player/coach roster changes and injury updates" (Deloitte Development LLC, 2020). This basic form of engagement does not move the needle. To see a definitive difference, content needs to have continuity and be personalized to generate "appreciative value" (Deloitte Development LLC, 2020).

The 2022 Formula One™ season was the first in its televised history in the United States to average 1 million or more viewers per race (Hall, 2022). "As television viewership records fell by the wayside all year, the 2022 Formula 1 World Championship™ season has ended as the most-viewed ever on U.S. television, smashing a record that was set just one year ago" (Hall, 2022). The 22-race season in 2022 included the debut of the FORMULA 1 CRYPTO.COM MIAMI GRAND PRIX, which set the record for the most-watched live Grand Prix™ in the United States with 2.6 million viewers (Hall, 2022). And this momentum should continue into the season.

In a sport where rules limit the weight of trophies to 11 pounds because drivers are so weak by the end of a race to hold it, (FIA, Formula One™ Sporting Regulations, 2023, p. 79), Formula One™ generates immense passion from teams, athletes, and fans – but it also generates a lot of money for those with a stake in its success.

Liberty Media needs to reach the fans by hiring someone just like them. A person who was an avid follower of Formula One™ years before the rest of the nation caught on; who understands the technical intricacies of the sport; who has attended several United States Grand Prix™ races; who has a deep love and appreciation for the sport; and who understands how to effectively communicate with a rowdy, dedicated bunch of fans. That person is me; I am that same Formula One™ fan.

## Resources

## Appendix A

### Google Forms Formula One™ Survey

An uncompleted view the respondents had of the Google Forms Formula One™ survey and the Reddit post asking for respondents within the /formula1 community. The 26-question survey was posted to the Reddit r/formula1 community with a link in the post ([see a copy of the blank survey](#)).

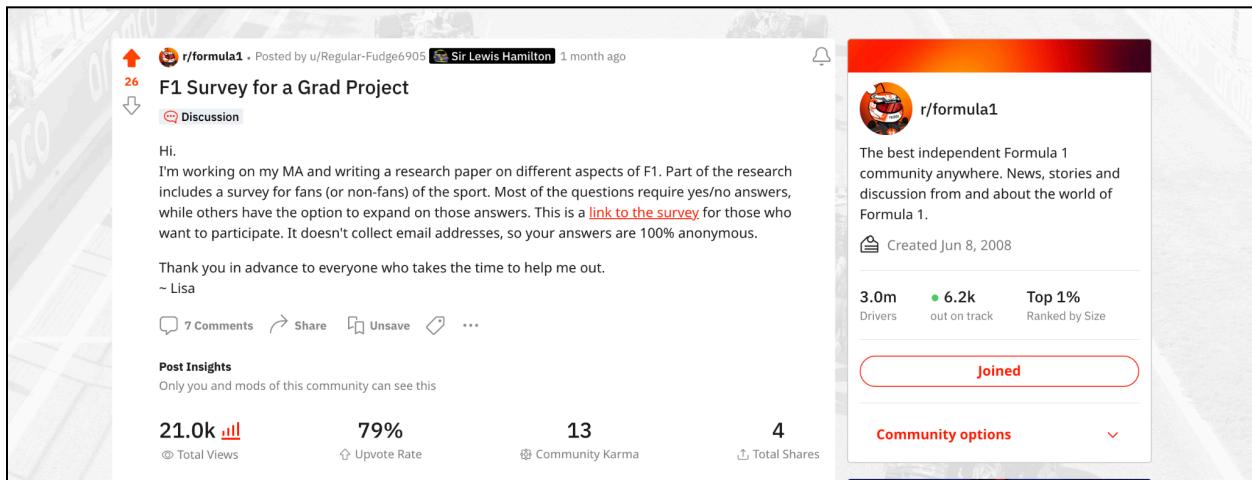


Figure A1: This is a screenshot of the initial post to the Reddit r/formula1 community on March 8, 2023, with a link to the Google Forms Formula One™ survey.

## Appendix B

### Google Forms Formula One™ Survey Responses – Part 4: 2022 Season

Part 4 of the Formula One™ survey asked respondents questions about their interest level during the 2022 Formula One™ season after the Championship was decided with five races left in the season.

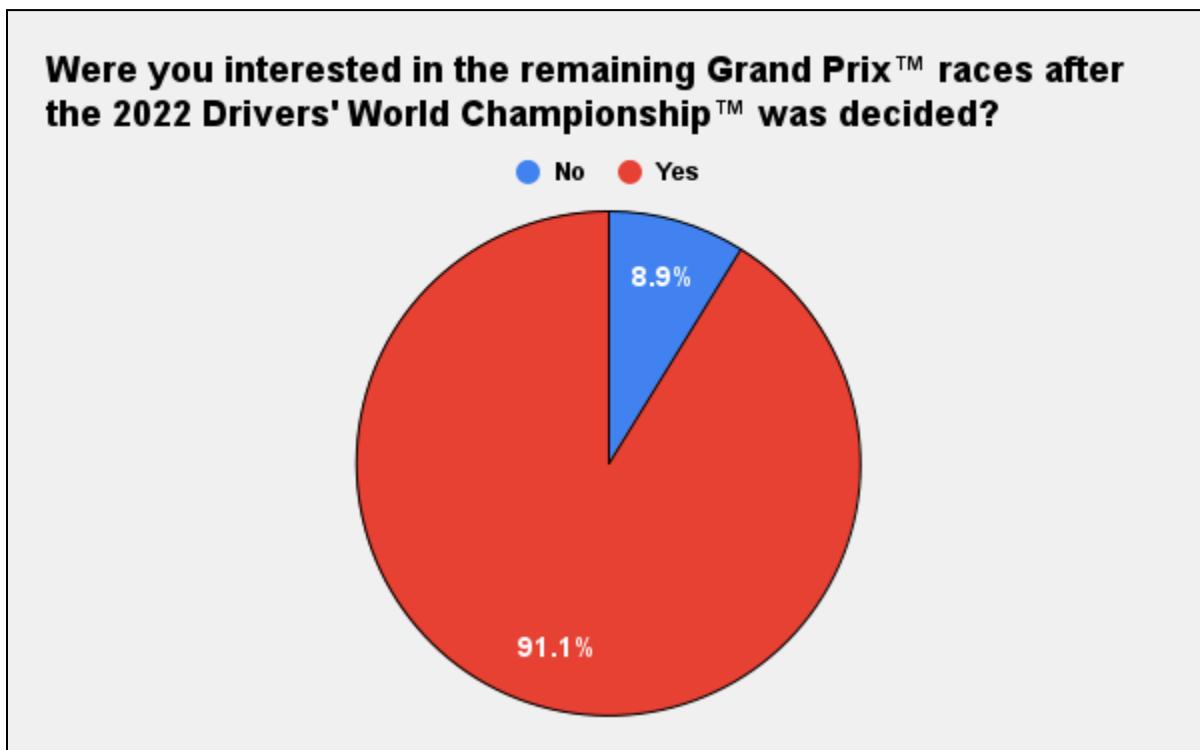


Figure B1: This pie chart is a visual representation of the Formula One™ survey question that received 191 responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

## Appendix C

### Google Forms Formula One™ Survey – Part 5: Drive to Survive

Part 5 of the Formula One™ survey asked respondents questions about the Netflix series, Drive to Survive. Along with these questions, the respondents had the option to share their overall thoughts on the series ([see respondent comments](#)).

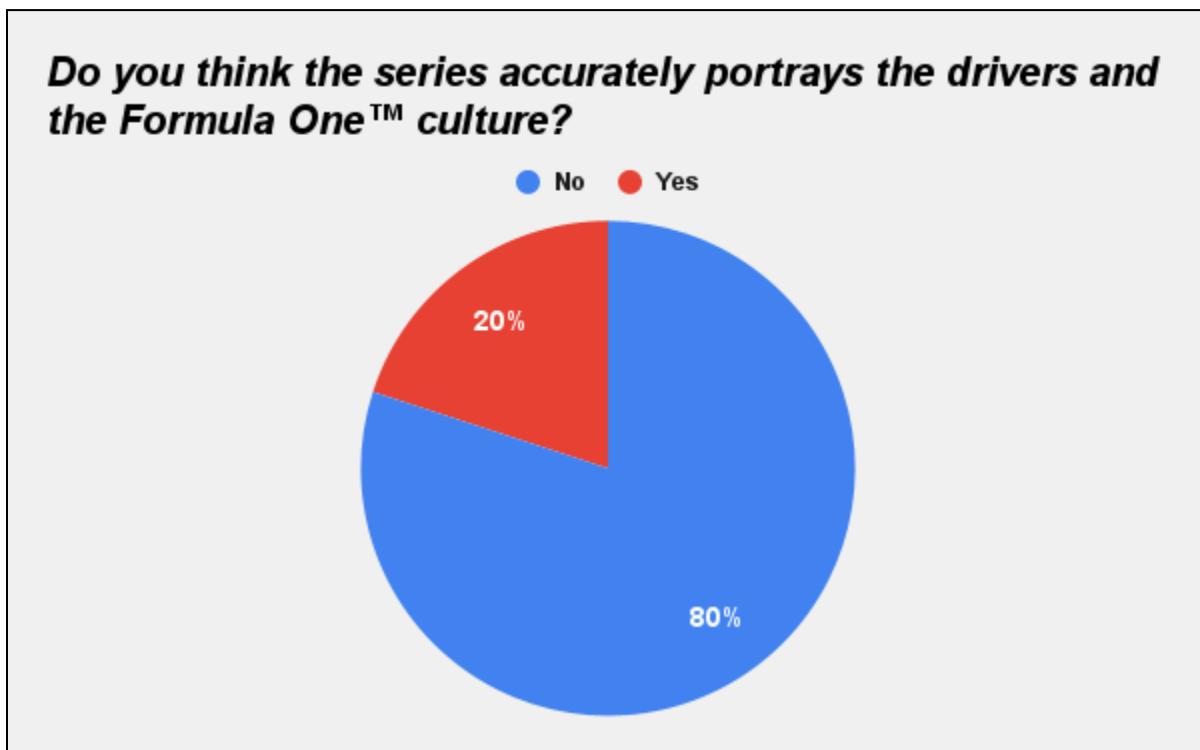


Figure C1: This pie chart is a visual representation of the Formula One™ survey question that received 150 anonymous responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

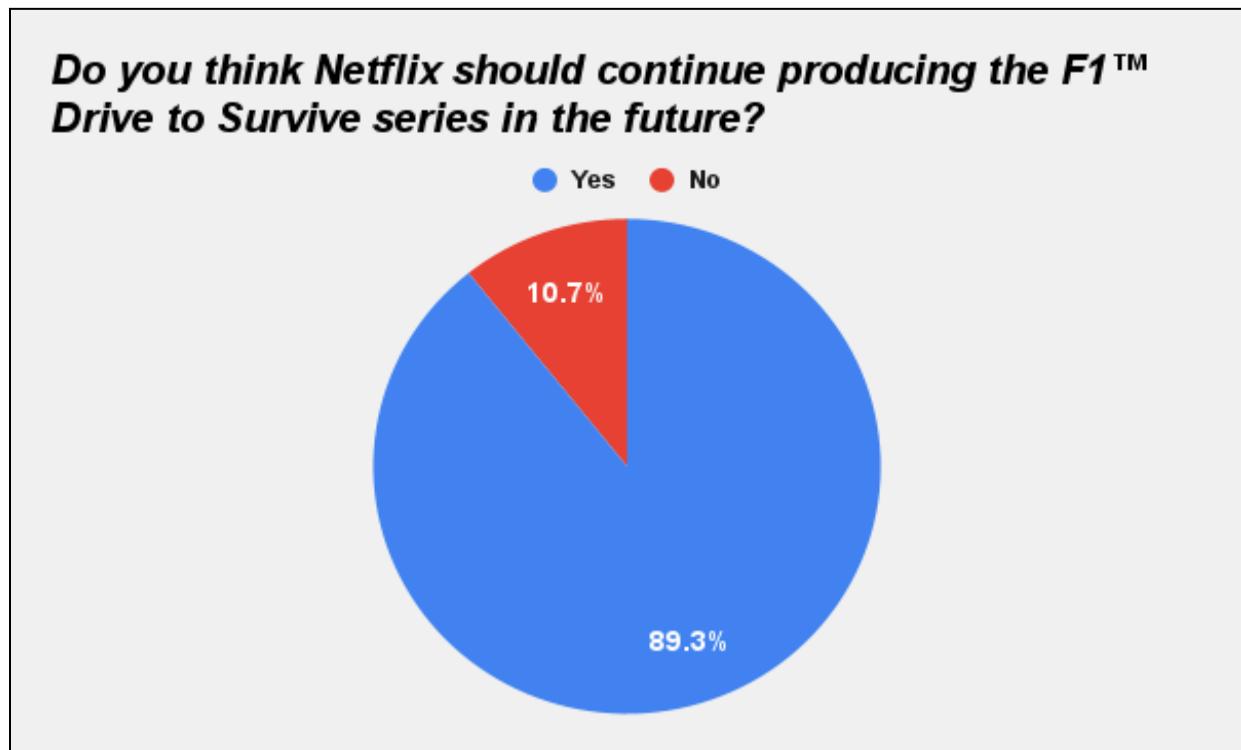


Figure C2: This pie chart is a visual representation of the Formula One™ survey question that received 149 anonymous responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

## Appendix D

### Google Forms Formula One™ Survey – Part 2: Grand Prix™ Weekends

Part 2 of the Formula One™ survey asked respondents questions about which sections of a Grand Prix™ weekend they usually watch and their frequency and interest in attending a Grand Prix™ in person.

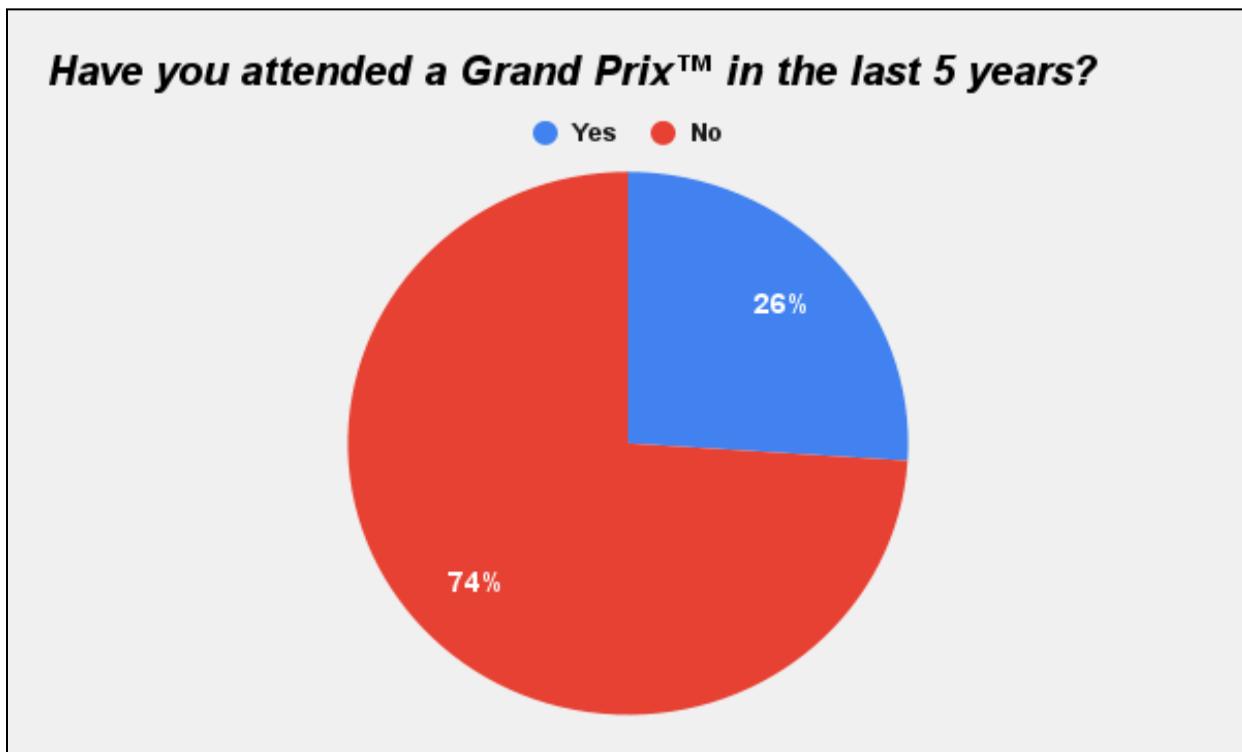


Figure D1: This pie chart is a visual representation of the Formula One™ survey question that received 196 anonymous responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

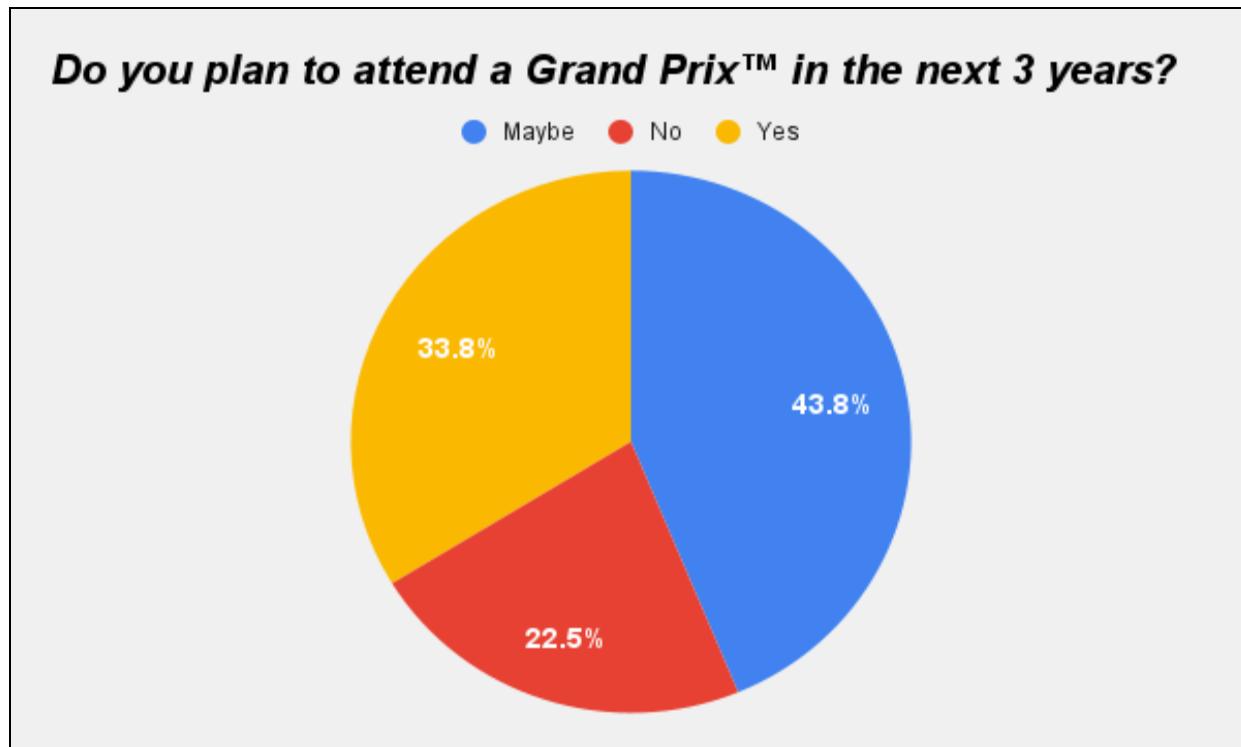


Figure D2: This pie chart is a visual representation of the Formula One™ survey question that received 80 anonymous responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

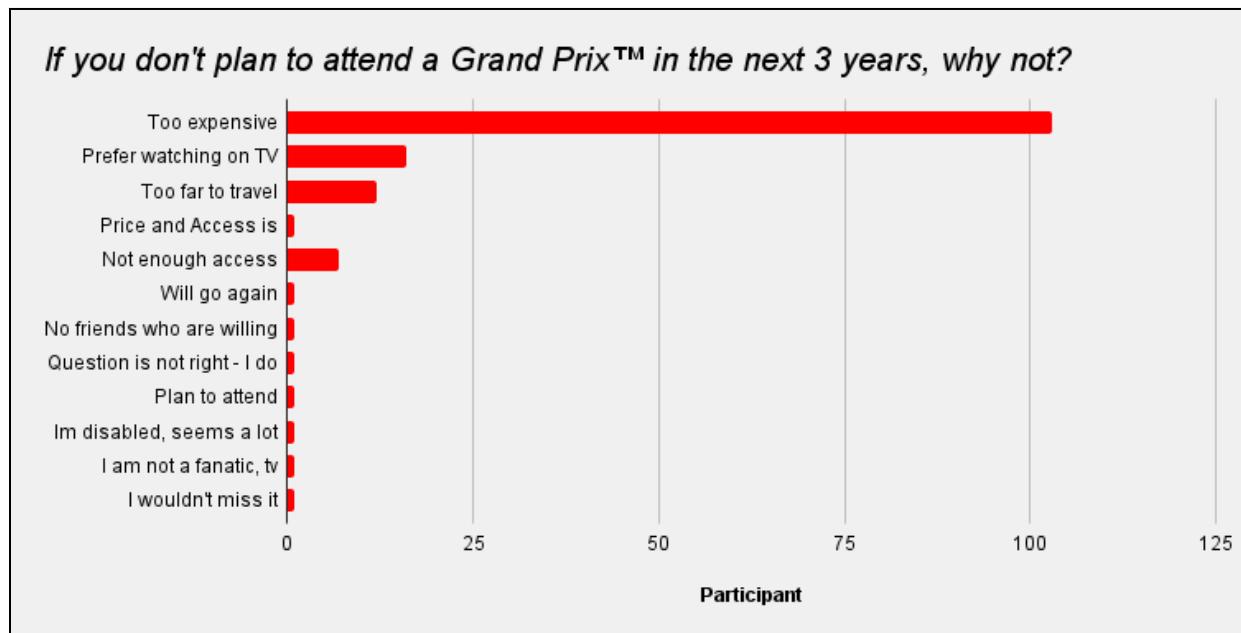


Figure D3: The line graph is a visual representation of the Formula One™ survey question that received 147 anonymous responses from the Reddit r/formula1 community.

## Appendix

Formula One™ Grand Prix™ United States Television Audience from 2021 to 2023

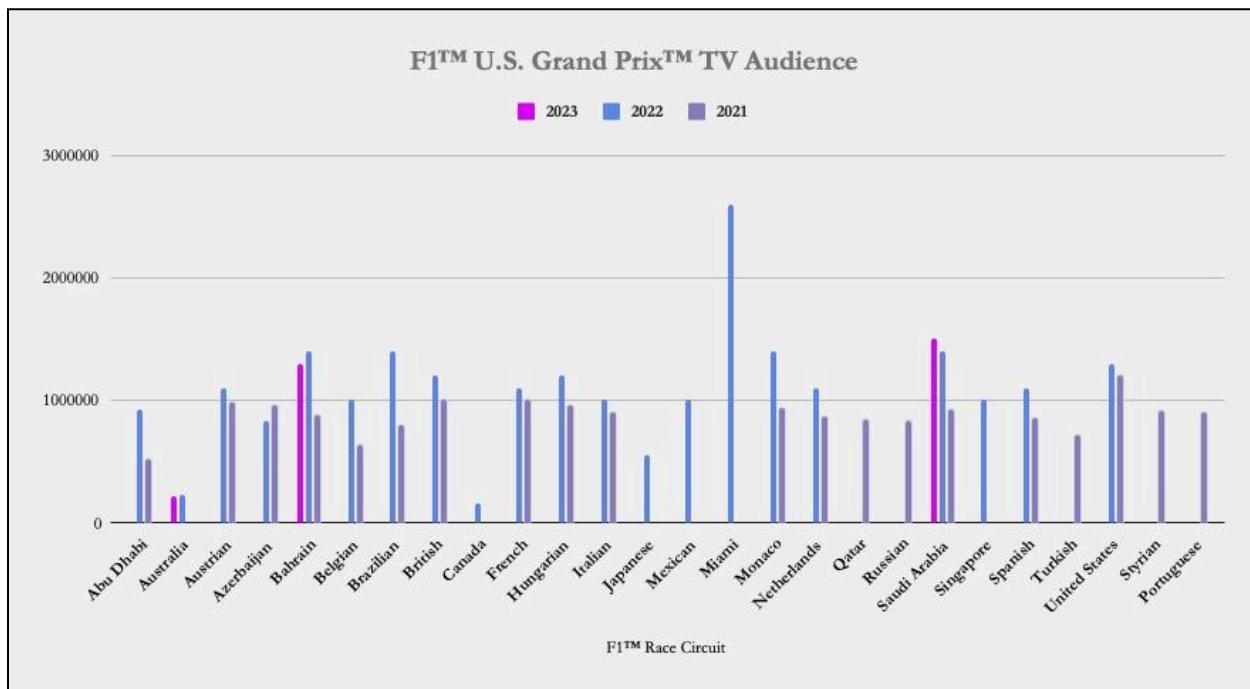
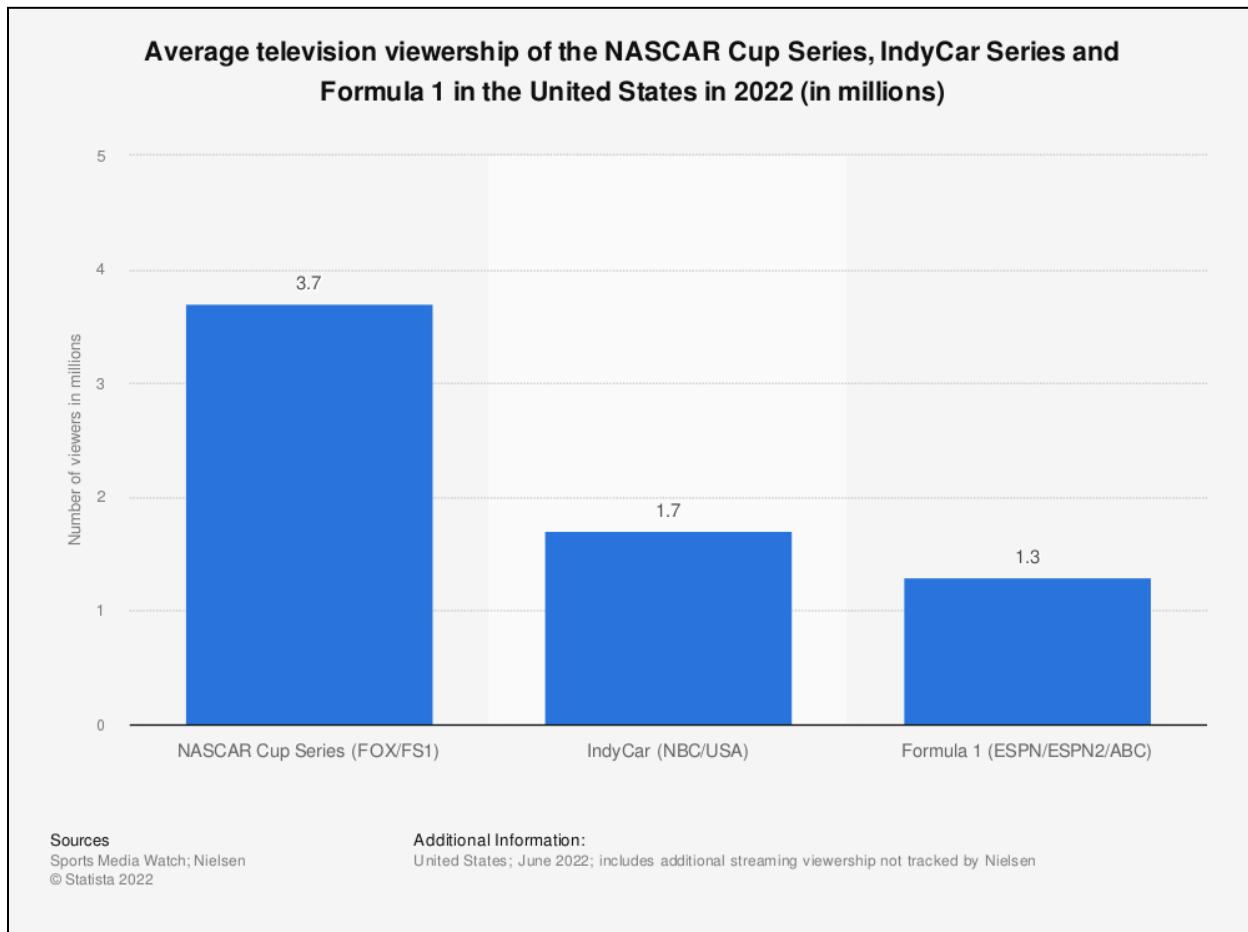


Chart A1.

In 2022 in the United States, the average television audience of the NASCAR Cup Series was 3.7 million, the IndyCar Series was 1.7 million and the Formula One™ Grand Prix™ in Austin was 1.3 million (Sports Media Watch, 2022). Although viewership for the FORMULA 1 ARAMCO UNITED STATES GRAND PRIX 2022 was

up year over year, there was still a significant gap between NASCAR's engagement when compared to Formula One's™ that should be addressed.



Other sports have taken notice of Formula One's™ growth following the first Drive to Survive season in 2019. The IndyCar series *100 Days to Indy* "will concentrate on the related activities of the teams in the races leading up to the crown jewel of their series, the legendary Indianapolis 500" (Bridges, 2023).