

FORMULA 1
DRIVE TO SURVIVE

Consumer Psychology Detective: Kristian Nikula

Formula 1: Drive to Survive is a Netflix documentary series launched in 2019. Initially a documentary experiment, it has since merged into an important part of the sport's identity, bringing new audiences into the paddock and reshaping how the sport is followed around the world (Formula 1, 2026). As an F1 fan with experience in sports media, I wanted to take a deeper dive into the consumer psychology behind one of the most remarkable audience transformations in modern sports entertainment.

Background: What happened?

2014

- Formula 1: Global viewership and fan engagement are declining.
- Reputation of 'old boys club'.
- High technical barrier for new fans.

(Wood & Burkhalter, 2023)



"I'd rather get to the 70-year-old guy who's got plenty of cash... There's no point trying to reach and sell to these kids..."

— Bernie Ecclestone, F1 CEO (ex), ESPN UK (2014)

2017

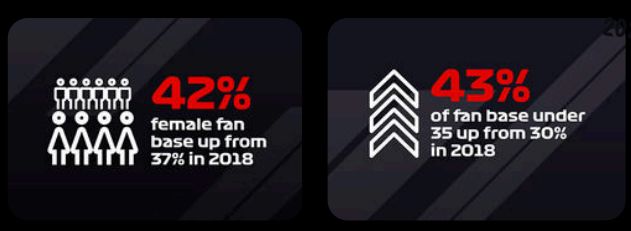
- Liberty Media Acquires F1
- Extensive fan research conducted.
- Identifying millennials as a key untapped market.

(Wood & Burkhalter, 2023)

2019

Season 1 of Drive to Survive published on Netflix.

2025

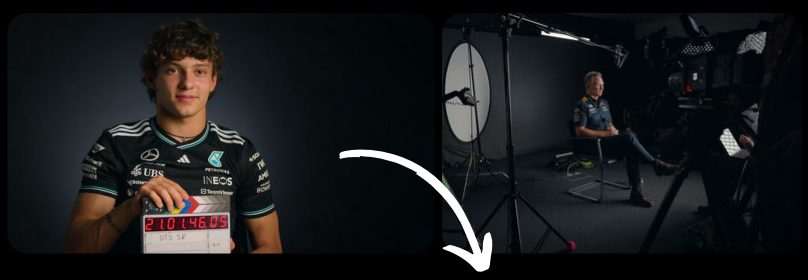


Demography evolution: 2018 vs 2025 (Formula1.com, 2025).

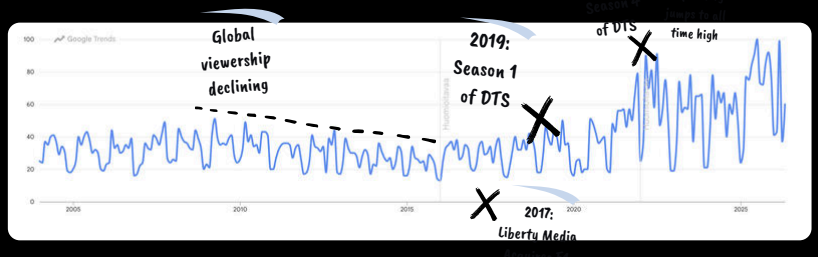
- The demographic shift is explainable by new identity entry points grounded in consumer psychology. There were no changes to the racing product itself.

Why did Drive to Survive work?

Peripheral Route Persuasion and Identity Formation:
The two screenshots below, taken from Drive to Survive (2026), contain no technical specifications or sporting results. Only character, personality, and human drama. Kimi Antonelli, a teenage rookie navigating the pressure of a legendary team, and Christian Horner, a team principal under interrogation in the interview room.



1. **Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986):** When motivation or ability to process information is low, peripheral cues like emotion and narrative drive attitude formation. Drive to Survive exploits this by using driver personalities and human stories instead of technical knowledge as the entry point to F1 fandom.
2. **Halo Effect (Thorndike, 1920):** A positive feeling toward one stimulus transfers to everything associated with it. Liking a driver makes you like their team and their sport, turning personal attachment into merchandise purchases, race attendance, and live viewership.
3. **Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978):** People categorise themselves into groups and compare their in-group favourably against out-groups. Once a viewer self-assigns as a McLaren or Ferrari fan, that membership becomes stable and drives consumption to signal identity publicly.



Search Popularity of "F1" (Google Trends, 2026).

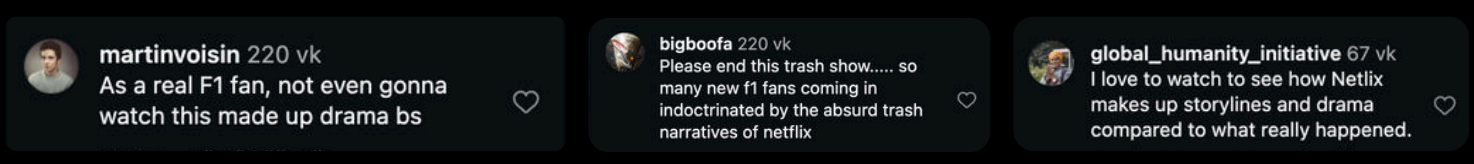
✓ Explosive fan growth and entertainment value

- Drive to Survive lowered the technical barrier to F1 fandom through peripheral route persuasion, requiring no prior knowledge and allowing emotional character narratives to do the persuasion work.
- The Halo Effect has efficiently converted driver attachment into broader brand loyalty across merchandise, live viewing, and race attendance.
- SIT creates durable group identities. Once a fan self-identifies as a McLaren or Ferrari supporter, consumption behaviour follows naturally and consistently.

✗ At the cost of sporting authenticity

- Manufactured drama risks authenticity. Verstappen boycotted the show for "faking rivalries" (AP via Boss Hunting, 2022) and Norris accused episodes of being "almost lying" (BBC Sport, 2025). New fans arrive expecting constant drama rather than strategy, while long-time fans feel on-track stories are sacrificed for character conflict.
- Social media negativity rose from 11% to 20% between 2021 and 2024 (The Race, 2025), prompting F1's anti-abuse campaign (Sky Sports, 2022). SIT's in-group dynamics likely contribute, and the SIDE model (Reicher, 1995) suggests that anonymity online further intensifies this.

The same dramatisation that brought millions of new fans in is also what alienates the ones already there.



As Formula 1 has become more mainstream, some long-term fans appear to have experienced a loss of distinctiveness, which can help explain why hostility toward newcomers has emerged in parts of the fanbase.

Recommendation: Restoring Distinction Through Quiet Signaling

In response to long-term fans' loss of distinctiveness identified above, I would propose the following merchandise campaign for Formula 1 to restore this distinctiveness:

- **What:** Limited-edition F1 clothing referencing obscure racing history and vintage team identities: colours, geometry, vintage logos. Decipherable only by culturally competent fans. **Examples:** JPS Lotus black-and-gold jacket; Gitanes Ligier logo tee.
- **Psychological principles:** Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) holds that people balance two drives: belonging and uniqueness. Mass adoption made the F1 fanbase "too inclusive," threatening veteran fans' need for differentiation. These fans act as 'patricians', signaling not wealth but cultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), these objects reward an "aesthetic disposition" that newer fans cannot access, distinguishing veteran fans from those who consume the sport at a surface level.
- **Expected response:** Veterans reclaim their distinctiveness sweet spot. Items that require expertise to decode create strong in-group belonging among insiders while maintaining clear separation from the mainstream casual audience.
- **Why it works:** Post-Drive to Survive, long-term fans risk feeling their expertise is devalued. As with Harley-Davidson, when a brand becomes too mainstream, nurturing subcultures preserves loyalty. Rewarding depth of knowledge converts potential alienation into devotion, giving F1's most dedicated fans a secure subculture and a legitimate status marker within the sport's own hierarchy.



Appendix

AI Use Statement

Claude by Anthropic was used to support the research process, including identifying relevant academic sources, locating credible news articles, and structuring the poster layout. Google Gemini was used to generate mockups for the recommendation. All consumer psychology analysis, theory application, critical assessment, and academic arguments were developed by the author. All sources were independently verified before inclusion.

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