



# Drive to Survive and its fan base as an Emergent Culture: A Study of the Netflix Series Formula 1: Drive to Survive

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**Abstract:** Formula One is the highest and most expensive form of motorsport. Simply referred to as "F1," the elite motorsport is also a sphere for car manufacturers to showcase their engineering innovations and technologies. In spite of being the epitome of motorsports, F1 as a sport and entertainment is in constant search of unexplored audience clusters, thereby expanding its market and generating revenue. Thus, the media-controlling bodies of Formula One, in partnership with Netflix, produced the docuseries *Drive to Survive*, which explores the micro dynamics, the drama, and the humane side of the sport. This paper analyses how the European-centered and complex motorsport of F1 is made approachable to budding enthusiasts, particularly in countries such as the United States of America, and how the Netflix series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* acts as a catalyst in producing emergent fan cultures.

**Index Terms - Formula 1, Drive to Survive, Culture, Dominant, Residual, Emergent, Demystification.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Formula 1 is the most technologically sophisticated racing series in the world and is frequently regarded as the apex of motorsport. An F1 season consists of 20 to 22 races a year, spread all over the world where 20 of the best drivers in the world race in 10 teams, against each other in single-seater cars. Rather than just being a racing series to be enjoyed by the fans, it is a medium for large automotive brands such as Mercedes, Ferrari, Alpine, Aston Martin, Honda, and others to showcase their strengths. So, in addition to helping the teams win races, the technologies and innovations used in the current iteration of F1 cars also contribute to the improvement of road vehicles. For instance, the same knowledge that increases power for racing can also be used to decrease fuel usage in a moving vehicle. Similarly, F1 is a flag bearer for research and development in various other industries such as data servers, connectivity, digital engineering, and much more ("INSIGHT: Five Examples Why F1 Is Accelerating the Future," n.d.). Thus F1 could be dubbed the fastest R&D lab in the world. However, a steady flow of revenue is required to sustain the never-ending research and developments. The launch of Formula 1: Drive to Survive, a Netflix and Formula 1 co-production, in March 2019 contributed significantly to the sport's current popularity boom. According to the Global F1 Fan Survey 2021, the documentary series *Drive to Survive* has been successful in making the sport more approachable by introducing it to new, younger, and more diverse viewers. Thus, the web series has increased fan involvement both directly and indirectly, which has increased revenue for the sport and its R&D sectors.

*Formula 1: Drive to Survive* is a Netflix original docudrama series which showcases exclusive and behind-the-scenes looks at the teams and drivers of Formula 1. The ongoing series consists of 5 seasons, each based on the previously concluded Formula 1 season. Prior to the launch of DTS, the 2017 Formula 1 season had one of the lowest cumulative viewers in the 21st century at 603 million. The revenue was in a downward spiral and the billion-dollar industry was slowly dying. Liberty Media Corporation, an American mass media company, acquired F1 for \$4.6 billion, and a whole restructuring was done. F1 which was considered an old man's sport underwent radical transformations in their approach towards new audience clusters to make it more fan-centric and diversified. Fast forward to 2021, the cumulative viewership has increased to 1.55 billion ("Formula 1 Announces TV, Race Attendance and Digital Audience Figures for 2021 | Formula 1®," 2022). The sport has a growing Gen Y and Gen Z fan base and has spread from being British/European-centered to a worldwide sport. Ian Holmes, head of media rights and content creation for F1, claims that the Netflix sports documentary series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* had a significant impact on the recent upswing. (Gentrup, Sports, Greenberg, & Poindexter, 2021). So how does a TV series revive a billion-dollar industry, directly affecting the culture of the sport's enthusiasts, leading to the emergence of new cultures, and thereby increasing the revenue, which in turn helps in the development of the sport?

Drawing upon Raymond Williams's theory of Dominant, Residual, and Emergent from the book *Marxism and Literature*, we could analyze the existence of different cultures present in the fandom of Formula One and how the Netflix original series *Drive to Survive* acts as a catalyst, particularly in the emergence of a new culture. According to Raymond Williams, culture is "a theory of reflections between elements in a whole way of life." (Williams, 1958). He views culture as a living, interconnected thing. At regular intervals, it always witnesses transformation. The terms "residual," "emergent," and "dominant" are closely related to culture. The dominant culture refers to the cultural forms and practices that are widely accepted and widely practised in a society. In contrast, residual culture refers to the cultural conditions and practices that persist even after losing their dominant status. Finally, emergent culture refers to the new cultural forms and practices that are beginning to emerge and gain popularity in a society. For Raymond Williams, Dominant culture refers to the cultural conditions and practices that are widely accepted and widely practised in a society. These cultural forms and practices are often associated with the most powerful groups in society, and they are seen as normal, natural, and universal. Dominant culture includes things like mainstream music, art, fashion, and language, as well as mainstream political, economic, and social institutions. Residual culture refers to the cultural forms and practices that persist even after losing their dominant status. These cultural forms and practices may have been popular in the past, but they are no longer widely accepted or practised. Residual culture can include things like folk art, traditional crafts, and local customs, as well as alternative political, economic, and social institutions. Emergent culture refers to the new cultural forms and practices that are beginning to emerge and gain popularity in a society. These cultural forms and practices may be seen as challenging or subverting the dominant culture, or they may represent new cultural expressions that have not yet been widely accepted or recognised. Emergent culture can include things like new art forms, new musical genres, and new social movements and political ideologies.

Raymond Williams's concepts of Dominant, Residual, and Emergent could be analyzed in the broad spectrum of Formula 1 and its fandoms, the dominant culture of the fan base are ideals of Formula 1 being an exclusive sport, catering for the few who could understand and indulge in the technological marvels it possesses. This attitude could be attributed to the residual ideals of former owners and directors of the sport, who rejected the notion of F1 being appealing to younger generations and having a strong social media presence. However, after the change in the ownership of Formula 1 in 2017, much effort has been done in expanding the market for the sport. One of the significant initiatives undertaken by F1 was producing the documentary series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*, with Netflix. The series provided a breakthrough in various international unexplored markets for Formula 1, thereby creating an emergent fan culture which is young, diverse, and inclusive, directly in contrast to the demographics of the dominant fan base.

Many research studies have explored the acceptance of emergent cultures by dominant cultures. The 2014 research article "Negotiating the Acceptance of Emergent Cultural Forms: A Case Study of the Acceptance of Hip-Hop Culture in Japan" by Shintaro Miyazaki explores how emergent cultural forms can be negotiated and accepted by dominant cultures. The case study examines the acceptance of hip-hop culture in Japan. The author argues that the acceptance of hip-hop in Japan was shaped by the negotiation of cultural differences and the adoption of cultural practices that were compatible with Japanese cultural norms. "From Emergent to Accepted: Negotiating and Mediating Queer Space in the Public Sphere" by Kaitlin E. Phillips (2017), examines the negotiation and mediation of queer space in the public sphere, and how emergent queer cultural practices can be accepted by dominant cultures. The author argues that the acceptance of queer culture is contingent upon the negotiation of cultural differences and the creation of spaces where queer culture can be expressed and celebrated. Another research work titled "From Emergent to Established: The Shifting Dynamics of the Korean Wave in China" by Buhm Soon Park (2014), examines the acceptance of the Korean Wave (K-pop, K-drama, etc.) in China and how emergent cultural practices can become established within dominant cultures. The author argues that the acceptance of the Korean Wave in China was facilitated by the adaptation of Korean cultural practices to Chinese cultural norms and the establishment of cross-cultural networks and collaborations. This paper focuses on how the *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* viewers became an emerging culture within the Formula 1 fandom and how the sport's established fan group came to terms with their existence, similar to the studies mentioned above.

The Formula One Group, the parent company of Formula 1 was partly owned by British business magnate Bernie Ecclestone before being bought by the American-based company Liberty Media. As the former CEO of F1, Ecclestone rejected the idea of F1 catering towards a younger audience and having a strong social media presence. In an interview with Campaign Asia-Pacific in 2014, he asserted that Formula One prefers to serve the wealthy over-70s to chasing after a younger population that cannot afford luxury brands and watches and is more interested in social media. This focus on middle-aged and septuagenarian demographics has thus constructed a mystification of the sport for the budding audience. The fact that Formula 1 is arguably the most expensive sport in the world fuels the dominant ideals of the exclusiveness of its fans. There are high costs in running a team and participating in the sport. The drivers and the engineers earn significantly high salaries. The major sponsors of the teams and F1 are luxurious brands such as Rolex, Ritz Carlton, Hilton, Richard Mille, and Hugo Boss. This has contributed to the perception of Formula 1 as a millionaire's sport, as it is often seen as a domain of the super-rich and the privileged. Thus this exclusive attitude among its fan base itself was unintentionally backstabbing the relevance of the sport in the emerging younger digital markets.

The documentary web series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* upon its introduction, have contributed to the demystification of the sport and in creating an emergent fan base among Formula 1 enthusiasts. The series has effectively influenced converting the agnostics, particularly in the United States, to fans who consistently tune in to watch Formula 1 races. According to Andrew Lawrence of *The Guardian* "Since the arrival of Netflix docuseries *Drive to Survive*, Formula 1 has hailed the arrival of new fans around the globe, but perhaps most crucially, it finally claims to have cracked into the American market in a big way". Formula 1 has long been trying to tap into the US audience and *Drive to Survive* seems to have unlocked the path. Another major audience cluster Formula 1 and *Drive to Survive* tapped into were the Generation Y and Generation Z age groups. According to Nielsen Sports and Motorsport Network research based on 10 important global markets, 73m new individuals expressed interest in

Formula One in the previous 12 months. They are mostly young as well: 77% of those new followers were in the 16–35 age range.. Formula 1 fan base, which is traditionally male-dominated, has also seen an increase in female audiences in recent years. The focus on personal stories and behind-the-scenes drama in *Drive to Survive* has helped to make the sport more relatable and engaging for fans of all genders. This has helped to attract a new generation of fans, including many women fans that may have previously been put off by the technical and male-dominated image of the sport. Alejandro Soberon, the president of race promoter CIE says that the number of female fans attending the event[Mexican Grand Prix of 2019] has risen by 30% compared to last year. He further added that the show particularly affected women who, up until they realised there was drama involved, considered the idea of racing to be very, very boring. There was a distinct perspective in the series, and he believes that it was beneficial. ” (Rencken & Collantine, 2019).

One of the key ways in which *Drive to Survive* demystifies Formula 1 is by explaining the technical aspects of the sport in an accessible way. For example, the series explains how Formula 1 cars are designed, how they are powered, and how they are driven. It also offers an exclusive, behind-the-scenes look at the inner workings of the F1, including team meetings, race strategies, and on-track action, giving viewers an insight into the sport beyond the race. This helps to make the sport more understandable for viewers who may not be familiar with the technical details of racing. In addition to explaining the technical aspects of the sport, *Drive to Survive* also focuses on the personal and exclusive stories of the drivers and teams. The series shows the human side of Formula 1, by interviewing the drivers, team principals, and journalists highlighting the challenges, personal stories, rivalries, and struggles that the drivers and teams face both on and off the track. This helps to make the sport more relatable and engaging for viewers, who may not have previously been interested in Formula 1. The series also has a high production value with stunning visuals, excellent sound design, and engaging music, making it a visually appealing and immersive experience for viewers. Although, a great deal of creative license is employed such as using inaccurate engine sounds, screeching noises, commentaries produced exclusively for the series, and non-linear montages to enhance the dramatization of the sport, which are questioned by passionate fans for their inauthenticity.

Being the epitome of motorsports, Formula 1 was in dire need of increased revenue to sustain its never-ending research and development. The dominant fan base of the sport was ageing and the complex technical aspects involved in racing mystified Formula 1, which made it unappeasable to the younger generations. The sport with its rich history and heritage was moving towards extinction but when a radical restructuring was done in its portrayal to the audience, it showcased a significant boom in the sport's popularity. This revival was greatly attributed to the Netflix and Formula One co-produced series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. The series tapped into new audience clusters, particularly in the US which successfully converted agnostics of F1 and fans of other forms of motorsports to stans of Formula 1 drivers, teams, and the sport. Accessible story-telling, behind-the-scenes footage and personal interviews with drivers helped to reveal the humane side of the sport, making it relatable for the average viewer. *Drive to Survive* thus demystified the sport and helped in the emergence of a diverse fan culture which includes various geographies, age groups, socio-economic backgrounds and genders. The series has now become an integral part of Formula 1, and the dominant fan base has accepted the new fans that have started following the sport after watching the series.

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