

Beyond the Circuit

Exploring the motivations and meaning-making among male and female fans of the Oracle
Red Bull Racing team in Formula 1

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ABSTRACT

Formula 1 is an immensely popular sport in The Netherlands and this popularity particularly sparked a strong enthusiasm among Dutch fans towards Oracle Red Bull Racing and their Dutch driver Max Verstappen. Despite the widespread appeal of the sport, it still knows a predominance of men and is fairly male-oriented. This study seeks to grasp these gender dynamics among fans, both men and women, by examining the following research question: *How do Dutch male and female fans negotiate meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context?* Through semi-structured interviews with ten fans and performing a succeeding thematic analysis, meaningful understandings were uncovered that help answer the research question. The findings indicate that all participants developed a passion for the sport and were introduced to it through their fathers. Having followed Formula 1 for several years or since childhood, they express a desire to continue supporting their favorite driver, Max Verstappen, even if he changes teams. Participants attribute meaning to their involvement with Oracle Red Bull Racing by recognizing its impact on their daily lives, such as how they spend their leisure time. This relates to findings where they all appreciate the sport for its entertainment value, aesthetic appeal, and as an escape from daily routines. Another way both male and female fans derive meaning from their fan engagement is by watching as many races as possible, purchasing merchandise, attending Grand Prix's, following the sport on social media and discussing it in real life. While most take a passive approach to their engagement, this does not diminish their perception of themselves as dedicated fans. However, female fans often feel the need to prove their knowledge to be seen as authentic fans, experiencing hegemonic masculinity within the Formula 1 community. Nevertheless, all fans recognize the importance of gender representation, valuing the qualities and experience of individuals involved in the sport regardless of gender. To conclude, participants negotiate meaning to their fan engagement with Oracle Red Bull Racing through various ways, highlighting the influence of male family members, online and offline activities, and the masculinity prevalent within the sport.

KEYWORDS: *Fandom, Formula 1, engagement, gender, sports fans*

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1. Introduction

The first Grand Prix of Formula 1 took place at the Silverstone circuit in the United Kingdom in May 1950 (Llurba & Briel, 2023, para. 6), creating the starting point of a phenomenon that fascinates many people across the world. A typical Grand Prix weekend starts with two free practice sessions on Fridays, involving the 10 participating teams, each consisting of two drivers and cars. A final one-hour practice session takes place on Saturdays, enabling the teams to make final adjustments to their cars, and is followed by the qualification. This stage is pivotal as it decides the starting positions for the subsequent race on Sundays, serving as the primary element and usually lasts for about two hours (Formula 1, n.d., para. 2). Throughout a Formula 1 season, the teams work towards earning the driver's championship and constructor's championship. To receive these titles, a team has to achieve the most points, which are allocated according to their ranking in the final race (Elshebiny, 2023, para. 3). Over the last few decades, the motorsport expanded its mostly European based events, by organizing races in South America, North America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Middle East (Formula 1, n.d., para. 16). This growing popularity can be seen in the numbers published by Liberty Media, showing an increased amount of people being captured by the sport. The races reached a record attendance of 5.7 million people in 2022, whilst also growing its TV audience to 1.54 billion viewers (Liberty Media, 2023, p. 1).

Oracle Red Bull Racing is a team where this growing popularity is clearly visible, as it belongs to the top three of most favorite teams and their Dutch driver Max Verstappen is viewed as most favorite (Formula 1, 2021, paras. 6–7). For Oracle Red Bull Racing fans, the exhilarating competition goes beyond just the racing weekends, as fans nowadays have the opportunity to constantly be updated about their favorite sport, team or driver. This racing team and the racing competition itself employ several resources to engage with their audience, including a website, mobile app, and social media such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram or X (Formula 1, n.d.; Red Bull Ring, n.d.). Another platform that covers Formula 1 is Netflix, in particular through its sixth seasons of the series “Drive to Survive”, which draws the audience nearer to the spectacle of the motorsport. By filming during race weekends, Netflix is present and can thereby offer insights from behind the scenes (Gretton, 2024, para. 6). Since the costs for Grand Prix tickets are becoming more expensive, online resources offer a cheaper solution to stay informed (Palermo & Delaine, 2023, p. 15).

While Formula 1 is evolving on different facets, like fan engagement, it still has a long road ahead when it comes to gender diversity as it is a male-oriented sport. This is observable in the structure of the teams, including the managers, drivers and pit crew, who lack female representation (Matthews & Pike, 2016, p. 3). For instance, currently all Formula 1 drivers and team principals are males, resulting in a significant predominance of men within the sport. Women do participate in Formula 1, though they often occupy subordinate, assisting or accommodating positions. Additionally, the total amount of women who have participated as drivers in the motorsport is limited to five (Sturm, 2021, p. 117). Recent news regarding Christian Horner, the team manager of Oracle Red Bull Racing, causes Formula 1 to become caught up in debates surrounding gender dynamics as he is accused of inappropriate behavior towards a female employee (Benson, 2024, para. 1). Two years ago, Horner also made the news when he commented on female Formula 1 fans, suggesting that young girls are interested in the sport because of the “great looking” drivers (Hall, 2022, para. 3).

The existence of a narrative within motorsports that is geared towards men is not only visible within the sport itself, but it also plays a role within a sports fandom. For instance, according to Allison and Knoester (2021), these male-oriented circumstances can result in female fans of Formula 1 being stigmatized and isolated, transforming sports into an environment that is not accommodating for women (p. 8). This raises the issue of how female Oracle Red Bull Racing fans view their participation in the male-dominated motorsport compared to their male counterparts. Given the significant role of fan engagement with a sports team (Huettermann et al., 2019, p. 2), it becomes important to explore the perspectives and experiences of both male and female Dutch fans, specifically those who support the Oracle Red Bull Racing team. This role manifests itself in the deeply engaged connections that fans frequently develop with their favorite team (Funk et al., 2016, p. 114), often resulting in actions that aid the chosen team (Funk & James, 2001, p. 121). By shedding a light on these occurrences, one gains a deeper understanding regarding the way different genders within this fandom negotiate meaning to their engagement with Formula 1. Based on the aforementioned information, this study concentrates on answering the following research question: *How do Dutch male and female fans negotiate meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context?*

1.1 Social and academic relevance

This research holds social relevance as it explores topics associated with gender dynamics within a male-oriented sport, contributing to a more inclusive fan community. Therefore, it is crucial to consider that practicing motorsport and the viewing of it on television is linked to hegemonic masculinity (Tippet, 2023, p. 149), which can contribute to a feeling of exclusion and marginalization among women belonging to the fan culture of Formula 1 (Allison & Knoester, 2021, p. 319). Besides, while being part of a sports culture, women have been characterized as 'inauthentic' or 'inferior' sports fans compared to men (Pope, 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, as of 2022 there is an apparent existence of female fans within the world of Formula 1, with women making up 40% of the fan base. Recent research also shows a growing attendance of female visitors during the Formula 1 races (Hamlin, 2022, para. 4). After Liberty Media acquired Formula 1 in 2017, the owners made it their priority to attract a younger and female audience (Allen, 2021, para. 3). This adds to the societal relevance, as it provides deeper understandings for other motorsports working towards a more diverse fan base.

From an academic perspective, this study offers significant relevance since it explores the engagement of male and female sports fans within the context of Formula 1. It addresses an existing literature gap, as most studies focus on the wide-reaching scope of male and female sports fans or are centered on a specific sport, such as football (Dietz et al., 2021, p. 184; Pfister et al., 2013, p. 850; Ridinger & Funk, 2006, p. 155). The academic relevance of this research also lies in bridging a knowledge void on fans of Formula 1 in The Netherlands, as most research concerning this topic originates from outside the country or revolves around other subjects than motorsports fans. For instance, Cobbs et al. (2017) examined how corporate sponsorship enhances team survival within Formula 1 (p. 5), while Howe (2022) focused on gender dynamics in the racing league (p. 455). The previously described literature gap is quite remarkable, given that Formula 1 is the second most popular sport in The Netherlands (Nielsen Sports, 2019, p. 7) and the Grand Prix in Zandvoort belongs to the most watched races, attracting 4.3 million Dutch television viewers (Van Denderen, 2023, para. 2). Additionally, from the early years of Formula 1 to the present day, sixteen Dutch drivers participated in the sport (Merkx, 2023, para. 1). Moreover, previous research on sports fans primarily focused on men, overlooking the experiences of female sports fans (Pope, 2017, p. 1).

1.2 Outline of thesis

The first chapter provides a foundation for this thesis by introducing the research topic and elaborating on the social and academic relevance. To answer the research question, the following chapter establishes a theoretical framework that addresses the existing literature and theories on concepts such as fandom, fan engagement, meaning-making, sports fans, and male and female sports fans. Subsequently, the third chapter discusses why a qualitative approach was selected and clarifies the methodology, by outlining the application of a thematic analysis. Chapter four presents the results of the interviews with ten male and female fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team and how they give meaning to their fandom. The last chapter concludes the findings of the thesis and provides an answer to the research question. In doing so, this chapter also highlights the limitations of the study and points out recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

Since the goal of this research is to understand how Dutch male and female fans attribute meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context, it is crucial to construct a theoretical framework that explores prior literature applicable to this topic. The theoretical framework starts with explaining the concept of fandom and fans, while examining the corresponding definitions and highlighting the different levels of commitment and engagement. In addition, an enhanced understanding of the motivations behind sports fandom is provided, as well as the differences between male and female fans, which is essential to unravel possible differences and similarities in fan behavior and experiences within a male-dominated sports culture like Formula 1. Lastly, this chapter presents the process of meaning-making that sports fans attribute to their fandom.

2.1 Fandom and fans

From following your favorite racing team on social media to buying a scale model of a driver's helmet, these happenings are examples of how fandom within Formula 1 can manifest itself. Fandom is a topic that has been widely researched and can be defined as a subculture rooted in communal recognition between individuals who come together based on their mutual interest in a media object, consequently connecting people from different backgrounds (Jenkins, 2012, p. 1). Fiske (1992) proposed another definition of fandom by indicating that it generally originates from entertainment products that are mass-produced and mass-distributed, commonly associated with books, music, film or sports (p. 30). Within a fandom, there is a social hierarchy in place where social standings and positions are distinctly set out based on fans' expertise, knowledge, and experience regarding their fan object (Fuschillo, 2018, p. 3). According to Bird (2002), fandom involves taking part in fan activities alongside others who cherish the same enthusiasm for a particular entity, creating a community dependent on their affection, dedication and gratitude towards it (p. 33). The active participation in fan activities mirrors the notion of a participatory culture defined by Jenkins (2006), meaning that within a fandom its members are convinced that their participation holds value and that there is a feeling of social connection between its members who create, consume, and share media to pass on their collective interest (p. 7).

People belonging to a fandom are identified as fans and individuals within these communities rise above the role of passive observers. They are not only consuming content but are actively engaging with their fan object by gathering information and content (Jenkins, 2012, p. 287). Duffet (2013) elaborates on the definition of a fan as he mentions a fan is “a person with a relatively deep, positive, emotional conviction about someone or something famous” (p.18). Mainstream media have frequently contributed to the stereotypical portrayal of fans by negatively depicting them as uneducated, ignorant, and immature (Sullivan, 2012, p. 193). Early associations that surrounded the phenomenon of being a fan did not cast them in a better light, describing them by using the term “fanatic” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 192). However, Gray et al. (2017) noticed a shift in societal perceptions of fans since the early 1990s, by acknowledging their crucial role as producers in the media industries (p. 3).

Additionally, the scholars state that fans nowadays have the opportunity to defend themselves and express their opinions through social media platforms (Gray et al., 2017, p. 4). This type of behavior is also known as fan activism, which encompasses the power of social media to form communities, encouraging fans to thoroughly employ these platforms by expressing their distress surrounding political and social issues in an active manner (Click et al., 2015, pp. 7–8). According to Jenkins (2012), fan activism can be described as follows:

Forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture (para. 1.8).

Within the Formula 1 community, a noteworthy occurrence of fan activism occurred during the Austrian Grand Prix in 2022, as female fans spoke out on social media platforms like X to share their experiences of abuse and harassment (Richards, 2022, para. 4). These fan-driven efforts illustrate the strength of fan activism in bringing attention to social issues (Brough & Shresthova, 2012, para. 2.3), since it pressured Formula 1 to publicly take action and denounce such conduct, which the racing organization did through their campaign called *Drive It Out* (Rust, 2023, para. 3). It shows a video featuring the 20 drivers, as well as Stefano Domenicali, the President and CEO of Formula 1, and Mohammed Ben Sulayem, president of the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile. The message they convey indicates that abuse, whether online or at events, is not welcome in the motorsport (Formula 1, 2022).

2.2 Defining sports fans

When specifically focusing on sports fans, they can be identified as “individuals that are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete” (Wann & James, 2018, p. 2). Nevertheless, there are variations present within a fandom itself concerning the manifestation of fan behavior, given the fact that activity can range in extremity (Hunt et al., 1999, p. 439). Sports fans can be distinguished into three categories: temporary, devoted, and fanatical (Samra & Wos, 2014, p. 268). Within these categories, different degrees of commitment to a sports team are demonstrated. The temporary fan shows fascination towards a sports object but is bound by location or a limited period of time. Once this fascination is concluded, the fan is no longer taking part in activities relating to the sports object and goes back to everyday behavior. The devoted fan stays true to their team or sportsperson and integrates their fandom as a crucial, but not the most important, element of self-identification. The fanatical fan’s self-identity is prominently shaped by being a fan and activities go further than those of the devoted fan (Samra & Wos, 2014, p. 270). These categories are important for uncovering potential differences in the level of commitment among Dutch male and female fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team.

The strength of the relationship between a fan and a sports object is defined as fan engagement and expresses itself in transactional and non-transactional behavior. Non-transactional behavior goes beyond purchasing and consuming practices, including activities such as positive word-of-mouth and sharing knowledge about a team or a game with other fans (Yoshida et al., 2014, p. 399). This type of behavior focusses on the social aspect of fan engagement as it shows how fans engage in discussions surrounding a sport before, during and after its events (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022, p. 51). De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) elaborate on this by stating fan engagement is described as the prosocial actions of a sports fan (p. 389). It is “a concept to reflect fan's involvement with a sports team or with other fans of the sport team” (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022, p. 3). The phenomenon does not only offer advantages for a sports team but also for its management and other fans (Yoshida et al., 2014, p. 403). For instance, word-of-mouth serves as a powerful type of sports marketing as participation in discussions concerning a team is a common activity among sports fans (Uhrich, 2014, p. 38). Transactional behavior focusses on activities like attending events, purchasing merchandise or watching games on television (Yoshida et al., 2014, p. 400) and is characterized by exchanges rooted in costs and benefits (Fathy et al., 2021, p. 330).

Based on the aforementioned, it can be stated that the definition of a sports fan cannot be conceptualized in a universal manner. Nevertheless, within the bounds of this study, the concept of being a fan of Oracle Red Bull Racing refers to someone behaving like more than just a passive participant, which is frequently referred to as sports spectators who show no desire to align themselves with one particular athlete or team (Wann & James, 2018, p. 3). Meanwhile, Oracle Red Bull Racing fans are people whose involvement with the sport continues on a deeper level and goes beyond just the mere act of watching races on television (Mastromartino et al., 2018, p. 4). These findings correlate with Spinrad's definition of a sports fan (1981), which is described as follows: "the person who thinks, talks about and is oriented towards sports even when [the fan] is not actually observing, or reading, or listening to an account of a specific sports event" (p. 354). This demonstrates the deeper level of engagement of Oracle Red Bull Racing fans, exemplified by following Max Verstappen or the team on social media, buying their merchandise, engaging in conversations about the sport with others, attending live Grand Prix events, or sharing team or sport related content on online platforms.

2.3 Motivations for being a sports fan

Gaining insights into the motivations of being a sports fan helps to uncover the underlying factors that drive fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing to align themselves with the team. Sports fan motivation is: "a self-determined and volitional state that energizes a desire to engage in sport goal directed behavior to acquire positive benefits" (Funk, Beaton, & Alexandris, 2012, p. 364). It encompasses the reasons behind their perceptions and actions regarding a team or athlete (Kwon & Trail, 2001, p. 149). As demonstrated by Mastromartino et al. (2018), sports fan motivations can be categorized into two main groups: internal and external motivations (p. 9). The internal motivation could be inherent to human nature and are often labelled as 'push' factors stemming from within the sports fan, compelling them towards product consumption. In this case, sports fans take part in sport events as social get-togethers to satisfy their social and individual needs (Min et al., 2022, p. 2). On the contrary, external motivations are shaped by societal norms and can appear through 'pull' factors instigated by a sports institution or team via a range of marketing approaches in order to lure customers by catering to their demands (Zhang & Byon, 2017, p. 53).

In general, sports fans have eight common motivations for being a fan that belong to the widely used Sport Fan Motivation Scale, including self-esteem, eustress, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, family, and escape (Wann, 1995, p. 377). Self-esteem refers to fans who gain pleasure from watching sports as a result of feeling accomplished and successful when their team wins a game or competition. The eustress motive entails a wish for exhilaration and stimulation stemming from watching sports, whereas the entertainment motive indicates a person's wish for an enjoyable pastime. Economic is the fourth motive, involving individuals who are drawn to the possible economic benefits that come with betting on a sports event. Aesthetic relates to sports fans who are encouraged by the aesthetic aspect of a sport that can be seen in sport movements or the competitiveness among sportspersons. Group affiliation revolves around the social character of sport immersion, providing an opportunity to hang out with friends or like-minded people. Meanwhile, the family motivation encompasses a fan's need to spend time with family. The last motivation is escape and highlights the engagement with sports as a way of escaping from one's everyday life (Wann, 1995, p. 377).

2.4 Male and female sports fans

When investigating the dynamics of sports fandom, it is crucial to consider the role of gender so that possible differences or similarities can be discovered between male and female sports fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team. One of those differences are revealed by James and Ridinger (2002), who state that women are inclined to possess a more intense loyalty to a specific team, whereas men tend to have more loyalty to sports across the board (p. 273). Furthermore, previous research indicates that males express themselves more firmly as sports fans compared to their female equivalents, but both groups are similarly inclined to declare themselves a sports fan (James & Ridinger, 2002, p. 273; Ware & Kowalski, 2012; p. 226). Another difference is that female fans frequently describe a sentiment of marginalization and a feeling of inauthenticity, which can be explained by the existing dominance of males over females in a male-oriented sport like Formula 1 (Matthews & Pike, 2016, p. 1; Pope, 2017; p. 87). The role of male fans is also visible in the way females become sports fans as sports introduction for women often occurs through men, emphasizing men's dominant position in this process (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, pp. 9–10).

Knowledge is a crucial factor in being a sports fan and there is a common assumption that male fans tend to display this attribute more compared to female fans (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, p. 10). As mentioned by Pope (2017), some of the occurring stereotypes regarding female fans are the notion that women show a lower commitment to sports compared to men, women are inclined to possess lesser sports knowledge than their male counterparts, and that women's engagement in sports is driven by motives viewed as inauthentic, like sexual interest (p. 87). Female sports fans respond to the feeling of marginalization in several ways. For instance, female fans frequently have the impression that they need to demonstrate their own abilities to a greater extent purely on the basis of their gender or they feel compelled to adopt more masculine characteristics in order to validate their authenticity (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, p. 13). Furthermore, female sports fans attempt to attach little importance to femininity and choose to decline feminine team apparel to project themselves as more authentic fans (Sveinson et al., 2019, p. 739). Simultaneously, women sometimes feel empowered as a fan as they are able to apply their sports knowledge in different contexts, showcasing that they do not conform to the traditional portrayals of female sports fans (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, p. 12).

Differences between male and female enthusiast are also noticeable in the motivations for sports fandom mentioned in the previous paragraph. Understanding the dynamics of male and female sports fandom is important because it helps to reveal how gender shapes motivations, experiences and behavior of Oracle Red Bull Racing fans. For instance, Ware and Kowalski (2012) conclude that female fans are more motivated because of the social element of consuming sports, including spending time with friends or family and the social setting of watching sports (p. 234). On the contrary, male fans are more motivated because of self-esteem and aesthetic reasons as they experience individual achievement when their favorite sports object wins and they appreciate the visual appeal of sports (Wann & Waddill, 2003, pp. 486–487). Additionally, men commonly embrace sports fandom due to their prior involvement in playing sports and find joy in learning about sports (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000, pp. 225–226). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that scholars have revealed contradicting findings when investigating variations in sports fan motivations among genders (Pope, 2017, p.4). As mentioned by James and Ridinger (2002), social interaction does not emerge as an important factor motivating fans of either gender (p. 269).

2.5 Hegemonic masculinity

The prevalence of male domination and the subordination of women is otherwise known as the concept called hegemonic masculinity (Dietz et al., 2021, p. 186). It is a social construct wherein stereotypical masculine characteristics are the cultural norm, upholding men's social positions in terms of power, control and status, over women in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). These masculine characteristics are an ideal commonly assigned to men and are deeply rooted in societal norms, with men often expected to conform to these standards and values (Bryson, 1987, pp. 357–358). Some of the hegemonic masculine traits that still exist within motorsports are bravery, aggression, toughness and power (Sturm, 2021, p. 118). However, according to Cleland et al. (2020), certain men hold hegemony over other men and there are varying levels of access to it among men (p. 5). In certain circumstances, hegemonic masculinity can be threatened, leading to displays of protest masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 847). Sporting events are venues where protest masculinity occurs, which may manifest itself as fan misconduct, including violence, racism, sexism, and other types of discrimination (Cleland et al., 2020, p. 5).

Four different processes need to be taken into account when examining the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in sports (Bryson, 1987, p. 349). In the first stage, known as 'defining sports', sports are predominantly associated with male participation, potentially leading to a limited presence of female participation (Bryson, 1987, p. 351). The second process, called 'direct control of sports', underscores the dominance of men in influential positions within the sports sector, even in sports where women constitute the majority of participants (Bryson, 1987, p. 352). In the subsequent stage, termed 'ignoring women in sports', the extensive disregard for female involvement in sports by both media outlets and sports consumers is highlighted, frequently facilitated with the support of sports organizations (Bryson, 1987, p. 353). The last step, named 'trivialization of women in sports', illustrates the confinement of female athletes and spectators to stereotypical portrayals and the depiction of their objectification, resulting in an inferior position compared to men in the sports sector (Bryson, 1987, p. 356).

The idea of hegemonic masculinity was initially developed alongside the concept called emphasized femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). Emphasized femininity revolves around the subordination of women and is organized to cater to "the interests and desires of men", particularly regarding issues concerning the upbringing of

children and marriage (Connell, 1987, p. 183). Based on the findings of Tippet (2023), the Grid Girls, which have been eliminated in 2018, serve as an example of emphasized femininity within Formula 1 (p. 145). It contributed to men being portrayed as actively participating in the sport, while women are depicted as passive objects. However, there are instances in which female fans resist the notion of emphasized femininity and publicly denounce other women who do conform to it (Pope, 2017, p. 206).

In regard to sports fandom, hegemonic masculinity is studied at a local level since it encompasses interacting with fellow fans in social settings, for example during the attendance of sports gatherings (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013, p. 328). Hegemonic masculinity patterns at the local level arise from direct and personal interactions and are deeply rooted in distinct social contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 839). Hoerber and Kerwin (2013) illustrate how hegemonic masculinity prevails within the context of sports fandom, as they describe the immanent assumption that men are inherently sports fans unless they explicitly state otherwise, whereas women are typically not perceived as sports fans except if they show beyond doubt that they are a fan (p. 328). When specifically examining hegemonic masculinity within Formula 1, it becomes apparent that there is an emphasis on the masculine domain of technology due to its prominent role in the motorsport (Lumsden, 2010, p. 4; Sturm, 2021; p. 116). Consequently, fans of Formula 1 are also expected to exhibit knowledge of the technical aspects and of the sport itself in order to be a part of the community (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013, p. 329). Davis and Duncan (2006) discovered that sports knowledge is as a means to showcase and strengthen hegemonic masculinity (p. 260).

2.6 Meaning-making

While there may be downsides to following sports, studies suggest that sports fandom is linked to positive results regarding the pursuit of meaning (Wann & Fast, 2022, p. 2). Generally speaking, meaning-making is a method by which people make sense of the world around them and it revolves around finding a purpose and significance in one's life (Sosis & Kiper, 2022, p. 6; Wann & James, 2018, p. 20). Additionally, meaning in life is characterized by the belief that individuals belong to something greater than oneself, carrying significant psychological implications as it corresponds to mental well-being (Wann & Fast, 2022, p. 2). Meaning in life is found through diverse origins and these origins are not fixed, but evolve as people persistently seek to achieve, preserve and develop their sense of

meaning in life (Delia et al., 2022, p. 46). Individuals frequently reference to social connections and leisure activities such as recreation or hobbies when discussing elements that contribute to meaning in life. Considering that sports fandom as a leisure activity is deeply rooted in social interactions, it can be indicated that it plays a role in fostering convictions about life's purpose and meaning (Wann, 2022, p. 24). This social aspect is also highlighted by Wann and Fast (2022), as they point out that sports fandom is a collective happening, often encountered in sports stadiums, where joint beliefs, rituals, and aspirations bring fans together in a unified community (p. 9).

Nevertheless, there are differences among people in their likelihood to report that sports fandom provides meaning in life (Wann & Fast, 2022, p. 5). This correlates with the findings of Wann (2022), as he indicates that overall participation in sports fandom and the extent to which fans identify with their favorite team play a significant role in the belief that sports fandom facilitates meaning (p. 24). Team identification, the level of a psychological connection fans experience with a team wherein the team is viewed as an extension of the fans, holds a significant position in their social identity (Wann et al., 2017, p. 94). The pivotal role of sports fandom and team identification in shaping the identities of fans indicates that engaging with sports and teams offers meaning and a connection to a greater entity beyond their individual selves (Wann & James, 2018, p. 20). Some of the meanings that sports fandom brings to people's lives expresses itself in self-growth as discovering meaning involves individuals transcending their own boundaries. Fans can transcend their everyday existence "(...) by connecting to something larger than themselves, whether that is the history of the sport or the anonymous community of competitors" (Sosis & Kiper, 2022, p. 9). Furthermore, Delia et al. (2022) found that sports fandom contributes to mental health, as it offers a means to remain involved, keep learning and exchange knowledge with others, which gives a sense of importance (p. 50). Additionally, sports fandom lessens unpredictability and provides structure, resulting in life arrangements and patterns that anticipate meaning in life. In this manner, sports fandom therefore serves as a useful tool for fostering a sense of purpose (Wann, 2022, p. 24).

3. Research design

This chapter outlines the approach taken to provide an answer to the research question of this thesis. The first part of this section focusses on the research design, examining the selected method and justifying its suitability for this study. Afterwards, it delves into the specifics of the sample and sampling strategy, as well as the process of data collection and the thematic analysis. This is employed as a technique for analyzing the data collected through interviews, which aims to uncover common patterns and themes. The next part provides details regarding the operationalization and concerns making used concepts observable. Lastly, this chapter reflects on issues related to validity, reliability and ethics.

3.1 Research design

A qualitative method was used for this study as it helped to provide an answer on how Dutch male and female fans attribute meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context. First of all, this research technique is most suitable as it investigates matters within a natural environment, providing an understanding and explanation regarding the manner in which people give meaning to social phenomena, such as fandom (Flick, 2011, p. 2). Since the objective of this study is to understand the perspective of fans and how they give meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team, a qualitative method fits best as its power lies in its capacity to clarify underlying patterns of human actions that are often challenging to quantify (Tenny et al., 2022, para. 2). Besides, it is a flexible method and is applied when perceptions into individuals' emotions and thoughts is needed (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226). A qualitative method does not aim towards generalizing its findings to a broader population since its main objective is to depict a detailed comprehension of what is occurring within a specific situation (Koerber & McMichael, 2008, p. 462). Additionally, according to Boeije (2010), meaning can be attributed to a social phenomenon based on grounded theoretical viewpoints from previous research (p. 5).

Regarding data collection, ten semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted in order to provide an answer to the research question. This data collection method was chosen as carrying out interviews generates more knowledge regarding the meaning of experiences, perspectives or interests of an Oracle Red Bull Racing fan (Brennen,

2017, p. 29). Additionally, this approach has the ability to reveal supplemental information since the interviews are semi-structured (Bryman, 2012, p. 12). This element allows the interviewer to stay attentive to the participant's answers, while still contributing to the relevancy of the subject (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, a predefined series of questions were used during the conversations but it is not mandatory to precisely comply with it, as it more so serves as a tool to start of the interviews and enhance reliability (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). To delve further into the supplemental information given by the fans, probing questions were asked to gain more information about their fandom (Flick, 2007, p. 7). An overview of the complete interview guide can be found in Appendix B. The interviews were conducted with ten Dutch Oracle Red Bull Racing fans and took place during April and May 2024 in a face-to-face setting in The Netherlands, lasting more or less between 45 to 60 minutes. A recording was made of every dialogue by employing a password protected phone, which was used for transcription at a later stage.

3.2 Sample and sampling strategy

In qualitative research, sampling is a procedure involving the selection and identification of items appropriate for analysis, with the objective to draw significant conclusions and achieve an overarching representation of the research phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2013, p. 534). Purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling often used in qualitative research, is chosen as a strategy and requires the selection of participants based on specific characteristics considered relevant for the goal of this study (Flick, 2007, p. 5). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the data acquired with purposive sampling does not indicate generalizability to the overall population, given that not all Oracle Red Bull Racing fans are included in the sample size (Flick, 2007, p. 6). To make certain that the participants met all the sampling criteria, it was decided to post a message on the researcher's social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, that clearly outlined these criteria. The potential participants that were suitable to take part in this research were contacted, asked if they wanted to participate and invited to make an appointment for the interview. Following the recruitment of the first interview participants through purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used as an additional sampling strategy in this research. Snowball sampling refers to the process in which the initial interviewees put forward other suitable individuals within their own network (Gyarmathy et al., 2014, p. 2).

Specific sample criteria are prepared that interviewees must comply with in order to qualify for participation in this research. The participants in this study are required to hold the following characteristics: (1) identify as male or female, (2) have the Dutch nationality, (3) be located in The Netherlands, and (4) be fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team. Given that the participants have the Dutch nationality and reside in The Netherlands, this ensures the likelihood that they share similar experiences as fellow Dutch fans. In an effort to ensure the most comprehensive representation, the sample size is divided as evenly as possible across gender and age demographics. The justification for incorporating the Dutch nationality as a sample criterion is rooted in the popularity of Dutch driver Max Verstappen among Dutch fans. He is part of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team and since his rise in 2017 he became particularly popular among fans from The Netherlands (Motorsport Network, 2021, p. 40). This has ensured that the Netherlands now ranks among the top five markets in Formula 1 (Bremer, 2021, para. 1).

The sample included five individuals who identified as male fans (N=5) and five individuals who identified as female fans (N=5) of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team and consisted of people from a diverse age range, with the youngest interviewee being 21 years old and the oldest interviewee being 66 years old. All of the participants are working fulltime in different jobs and industries, varying from a nurse at a hospital to a social media marketer at a museum. A detailed overview of the respondents in terms of their personal information and background can be found in Appendix A. During the interview process, data collection stopped after conducting the tenth interview because the data was not revealing any new information or insights, meaning that saturation was reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022, p. 1).

3.3 Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted during the process of data analysis, serving as an analytical tool for the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 4). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this method aims to discover repeating patterns, create codes, and assemble themes to address the research question and allows for flexibility (pp. 5–6). Considering the extensive amount of data that will be gathered, a thematic analysis assists in finding possible differences and similarities within the texts (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, this

method is highly effective when aiming to interpret actions, beliefs, and encounters within a research context (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). It is worth pointing out that the chosen data analysis does not adhere a strict linear continuation of phases. Instead, it is known as an iterative practice and entails a constant movement, both forwards and backwards, across the phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). Discovering underlying themes within the collected data requires an inductive approach driven by the data itself, without depending on a predefined coding framework that restricts the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12).

The approach that was used for executing a thematic analysis, is the one proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), for which it is necessary to undertake and follow six different steps. The first one involves becoming familiar with the data, which indicates that the researcher has to immerse themselves in the texts. The second step is about constructing primary codes and is valuable when one needs to manage and minimize the amount of data that requires examination (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 16–19). After this, the next steps are recognizing, evaluating, describing and labelling themes. Lastly, the final step revolves around manufacturing the closing report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 22–23). During the analysis, five overarching themes emerged, namely: “the establishment of fandom”, “motivations for sports fandom”, “fan engagement and activities”, “emotional connection and loyalty”, and “gender dynamics”.

3.4 Operationalization

The main goal of this research is to understand how Dutch male and female fans attribute meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context. To measure the main concepts within this study, motivations for being a fan and fan engagement, it is crucial to operationalize those variables. Operationalization ensures that abstract concepts can be translated into effective definitions that qualifies them to be measured (Seeber, 2019, p. 5).

The first concept, motivations for being a fan, will be operationalized based on the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) designed by Wann (1995), suggesting that fans have eight common motivations for being a fan, including self-esteem, eustress, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, family, and escape. These concepts, which are defined in the theoretical framework, can be researched by asking the following questions during the

interviews: why are you watching the Formula 1 races, how important is the social element of being a fan for you, and what motivates you to be a fan of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team.

The second concept, fan engagement, can be operationalized by applying the two categories of fan engagement constructed by Yoshida et al. (2014), namely transactional and non-transactional behavior, of which the meanings revolve around the theoretical framework as well (pp. 399–400). Possible interview questions that can be asked, are: how do you normally stay engaged with Oracle Red Bull Racing, how does being an Oracle Red Bull Racing fan manifests itself in your daily life, have you ever purchased any merchandise, and in what ways do you spread information about the team with others. To sum up, the operationalization of the main concepts, which are fan motivation and engagement, is necessary to effectively measure these variables among Dutch male and female fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team in Formula 1. Through conducting interviews, this research explores why individuals support the team and how they give meaning to their engagement, both on a transactional and non-transactional level.

3.5 Validity and reliability

As discussed by Roberts and Priest (2006), validity and reliability serve as means to showcase and convey the scientific rigor in a research process and to illustrate the trustworthiness of the research results (p. 41). Reliability in qualitative research emphasizes the demonstration of transparency regarding the research process by providing thorough descriptions on various methodological techniques and procedures (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 9). It illustrates the notion of coherency across the applied analytical techniques (Roberts & Priest, 2006, p. 41). The concept of validity is commonly described as ensuring that the employed methods accurately measure the particular concepts being examined (McDougall, 2000, p. 722). It concerns the degree of correspondence between what we intend to measure in relation to what we actually measure (Roberts & Priest, 2006, p. 41). Despite the absence of a globally accepted expression and measurement for assessing qualitative research, there are several ways to strengthen the validity and reliability of study findings (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 35).

To ensure reliability in this study, it included an apparent and transparent description of the research process by providing a detailed overview about the research design, data collection and data analysis in the methods chapter (Coleman, 2022, p. 2044). Furthermore, this research increased reliability by guaranteeing technical precision throughout the recording and transcription process for all interviews (Roberts & Priest, 2006, p. 43–44). The prepared interview guide also improved reliability as it facilitated the researcher in posing identical questions to the interviewees, ensuring consistency in their responses regarding the discussed topics (Boyce & Naele, 2006, p. 5). In relation to the interview questions, a significant effort was made to focus on their clarity and appropriate formulation to prevent reliability concerns, given that the formulation of a question can have consequences for the results of an interview (McDougall, 2000, p. 723).

In order to enhance the validity of this study, various approaches were implemented. First of all, this research aimed to outline the academic foundation in a transparent manner by developing a theoretical framework and afterwards the concepts were made measurable through an operationalization. According to Rao and Reddy (2013), the validity of social research outcomes relies heavily on the operationalization of significant concepts (p. 108). Moreover, before conducting the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with the aim of improving the interview guide, which is crucial for achieving validity in this research (Dikko, 2016, p. 521). Lastly, another important aspect of validity is reflexivity, meaning that the role of the researcher is acknowledged and possible biases, experiences, and viewpoints are recognized (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). These matters, such as the researcher being a female with interest in Formula 1, could shape the investigation.

3.6 Ethical concerns

Before starting the interviews, this research took ethical matters into account. First of all, every participant received uniform and thorough information regarding the purpose of this research in order to establish informed consent and they had to complete an informed consent form by reading and signing it (Flick, 2007, p. 6). This informed consent form included the aim of the research, its risks and benefits, and anonymity preferences. It also highlighted the participant's rights by mentioning participation is voluntary and it is possible to stop participating at any time. Prior to starting the interviews, participants were also asked for consent regarding audio recording and were notified about the option to

withdraw. Secondly, following the completion of data collection, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim and adhered to ethical standards by utilizing pseudonyms to make sure the interview participants maintained their anonymity. The guaranteed anonymity entails that the identity of the participants is protected and reading the research does not enable one to associate a specific response to its corresponding respondent (Babbie, 2017, p. 65).

4. Results

This chapter addresses and analyzes the findings of the ten in-depth semi structured interviews in order to answer the research question: *how do Dutch male and female fans negotiate meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context?* After transcribing the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted resulting in the identification of five main themes. These themes are “the establishment of fandom”, “motivations for sports fandom”, “fan engagement and activities”, “emotional connection and loyalty”, and “gender dynamics”. The first theme presents the processes by which individuals are introduced to Formula 1 and the various factors that shape their fandom towards Oracle Red Bull Racing. The second theme explores the motivations for being a fan. Afterwards, the engagement and activities that individuals partake in regarding their sports fandom are discussed, taking into consideration the contact between fans. Then, the emotional connection and loyalty that fans feel towards the team are examined. Finally, the last theme explores the impact of gender on fan experiences and interactions in the Formula 1 environment and how male and female fans navigate their roles.

4.1 The establishment of fandom

Based on the interviews it can be stated that most of the participants, either male or female, mentioned that their interest in Formula 1 was sparked by a male figure in their family. The introduction to the sport happened mainly through close family members, such as their sons, fathers or brothers. Ruud (male, age 66, project manager) underlines this presence of a male family member: “My son had been following Formula 1 for a while. I got into it through him and became a fan when the first news came out that Max Verstappen would become a driver.” In the process of turning into fans of Formula 1, fathers play the most significant role for men and women alike, with no participants reporting the involvement of a woman in this journey. This raises questions about the visibility and influence of female role models in sports fandom, which seems limited according to the experiences of the participants. Interviewee Lola (female, age 39, financial administrator) mentions the influence that her father had during the build-up of her interest in the sport: “My father enjoyed motorsports and auto racing. Basically, everything related to speed. So, I was exposed to it at home as a kid and just started watching along sometimes when it was

on TV.” For Willem (male, age 21, student), his interest in Formula 1 also stems from his father who in turn inherited the passion from his father. In this case, the ongoing pattern of male figures igniting an interest in sports is apparent across various generations. For as long as Willem can remember it was a fixture on the TV in his household every weekend and he always found enjoyment in watching it. The way in which fans are introduced to Formula 1, as described by Ruud, Willem, and Lola in the above example, corresponds with the insights of Pope (2017) and Sveinson and Hoeber (2016). They conclude that numerous female sports fans attribute their fandom to a male influence and it primarily are fathers who introduce them to the sport (Pope, 2017, p. 119; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, pp. 9–10).

For half of the interviewees their immersion in the sport took place when they were younger. Some of the participants still have strong memories from their youth about the moment they were introduced to the sport, as for example Emma (female, age 26, project manager) describes as follows: “Since I was a little girl, I always sat with my dad on the couch watching Formula 1. I was maybe around five years old back then.” Laura (female, age 26, project manager), another participant who emphasizes her enduring fan status, recalls such an active memory:

I have actually been a fan of Formula 1 since I was very little because my father always watched Formula 1 back when Schumacher was still very active. I was really just a baby then. So, it was really ingrained in me from a young age. My father also always had those Nintendo Formula 1 games and we played them together. I also have this old baby video of me standing in front of the TV. I am really hanging onto the TV cabinet and my dad is watching Formula 1.

These remarks indicate that childhood memories, which involve watching races and participating in activities with family members, become cherished moments. Notably, the two participants above are the only ones who shared specific childhood memories regarding the role of their fathers in introducing them to Formula 1 at a young age and both of them are female fans. This highlights the significant role that early familial exposure plays in fostering a lasting interest in sports among women. Furthermore, these quotes are consistent with the findings of Dixon et al. (2008), who argue that the early parental socialization of women is expected to have a profound and enduring influence on their long-lasting engagement and behavior related to sports, including participation as sports fans (p. 540).

Although male family members had a crucial position in drawing the male and female participants into Formula 1, all of the interviewees mentioned Max Verstappen's success as another factor that contributed to them becoming fans of Oracle Red Bull Racing in specific. Additionally, they specifically became fans of the racing team around three to eight years ago, dating these happenings back to the years between 2016 and 2021. A period in which the Dutch driver worked his way up and was competing for and winning championships, which attracted widespread national interest in the sport (Motorsport Network, 2021, p. 40). This popularity is also evident from the interviews, as all participants indicate that Max Verstappen is their favorite driver. Femke (female, age 29, online marketer) indicates in what manner this aspect played a role in her journey of becoming a fan of the team: "Well, that is actually mainly because of Max Verstappen, as he is truly a Dutchman and represents our country. And that is why I am also a fan of the Red Bull Racing team, because Verstappen is a driver there." This also applies to Dennis (male, age 24, hospital employee), as he states he became a fan of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team purely because of Max Verstappen and that the arrival of the Dutch driver sparked his interest to delve more into the sport. The results show that all respondents mention that Max Verstappen's Dutch nationality, in addition to his strong performances in Formula 1, is also an important reason for becoming an Oracle Red Bull Racing fan. The role that this nationality plays within the fandom of the participants is also evident in the words of Wouter (male, age 31, project manager):

I think with Max Verstappen we finally had a Dutchman in Formula 1 who was really good and actually achieved results. I started to embrace that more, thinking now I support Max (...) and then you gradually become more of a fan over the years, growing with him. You end up becoming Red Bull Racing fan rather than watching other teams.

The accomplishments of Verstappen have sparked a profound sense of national pride among Dutch fans, who perceive him not solely as a talented athlete but also as a representation of their country on the international stage of Formula 1. The strong enthusiasm of the interviewees for Oracle Red Bull Racing, driven in part by Max Verstappen's victories and Dutch background, illustrates the concept of sports fandom defined by Wann and James (2018). According to them sports fans are individuals deeply interested in and consistently following a sport, team, or athlete, showing a desire to be part of the experience rather than being passive onlookers (Wann & James, 2018, pp. 2–3).

4.2 Motivations for sports fandom

As described above, all fans were introduced to the sport through a male family member and the nationality and success of Max Verstappen have an impact on the development of their fandom towards the Oracle Red Bull Racing team. Based on this, the motivations of the participants for being a fan were examined. All participants mentioned at least two or more motivations, reflecting the multifaceted reasons underlying their support for Oracle Red Bull Racing. The findings from the interviews regarding the motivations for being a fan of Oracle Red Bull Racing among the participants in the study can be linked to the widely recognized Sport Fan Motivation Scale, which identifies eight common motivations for sports fandom (Wann, 1995, p. 377). The participants expressed motivations such as entertainment, escapism and aesthetics, aligning with the categories of the scale. The interviews reveal that the motivations for being a fan of the team among the participants show no significant differences between male and female fans. Both genders share similar motivations for being a fan, with entertainment emerging as the primary motivation mentioned by a significant number of interviewees. Seven out of ten participants expressed that entertainment is a key driver for their continued support of Oracle Red Bull Racing. This motivation is explained, for example, by Joep (male, age 51, IT professional), who referred to the season when Verstappen won the championship for the first time: “That was super exciting, but it is also very entertaining (...) and just good TV to watch. And I generally find it enjoyable TV to see those lap times increase or decrease. I find that very appealing.” Another respondent, Dennis, watches mainly because it is entertaining: “You can just enjoy watching and also be in the company of, well, people and other fans. But the latter is more of a bonus for me.” As outlined by Melanie (female, age 29, HR employee), entertainment is also an important motivation for her sports fandom and she clarifies it in the following manner:

I watch the sport because of its spectacular aspect, which I find entertaining to see. And it is also partly an escape from the daily grind. I often watch it alone, so in that sense, it gives me something to do on Sunday.

This quote indicates that, in addition to entertainment, escapism is also a common motivation for sports fandom, as it is mentioned by five participants. It allows them to relax and temporarily disconnect from their everyday life that is accompanied by its share of distractions. Emma, for instance, finds it nice to break away from the daily routine by

watching an enjoyable sport. For her, it is like a hobby outing that mostly takes place from the comfort of her own home. The remarks made by Wouter clearly demonstrate that individuals are motivated to be a sports fan because it allows them to detach from their everyday lives: "For me, it is truly an escape from the everyday routine. As I mentioned earlier, I just enjoy living in my own little bubble when watching Formula 1."

Another motivation that plays a significant role in motivating fans to support Oracle Red Bull Racing are aesthetics, with three participants expressing admiration for the visual appeal of the team's cars and the overall spectacle of Formula 1. Regarding the allure of the sport, Emma's motivation to be a fan of Oracle Red Bull Racing stems from her recognition of the racing competition's status as the top tier and the corresponding associated financial commitment, which she believes adds a touch of class compared to other motorsports and creates a luxurious and chic appearance. She also refers to the appearance of the team itself: "I just always find it a beautiful teamwork. Like, for example, when you see such a pit stop or how Red Bull Racing celebrates together when they have won." An additional element of the aesthetic motivation highlighted by the interviews is the attractiveness of the car. As Ruud puts it: "Well, what also motivates me to watch is the stunning appearance of a car. It looks amazing." This is further elucidated by Willem's personal viewpoint:

At the moment, I find the cars quite beautiful you know. They have had their ups and downs, they have had better years (...) And I find the speed of the cars beautiful when you see them, you know, when you really see them on the track.

These interview insights relate to the findings of Wann and Waddill (2003), who explicitly state that it is mostly male fans often emphasizing the aesthetic motivations (pp. 486–487). This is evident as two male participants, compared to one female participant, expressed admiration for the visual appeal and speed of the cars, which aligns with the aesthetic reasons highlighted above. However, no participant mentioned family or group affiliation as their primary motivation, which contradicts the findings of Ware and Kowalski (2012), who conclude that female fans are more motivated because of the social element of consuming sports, including spending time with friends or family (p. 234). On the contrary, these insights thus overlap with earlier studies by James and Ridinger (2002), which state that social interaction does not emerge as an important factor in the motivation of fans of either gender (p. 269).

4.3 Fan engagement and activities

Another theme that can be identified in the interviews are the types of fan activities individuals engage in and whether these activities are consistent among all fans in this study. In this research on Oracle Red Bull Racing fans, it emerges that there is no disparity between male and female fans in terms of their engagement in activities. This contradicts previous findings which state that men show a higher commitment to sports and are more inclined to participate in traditional sports fan activities (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000, pp. 225–226; Ware & Kowalski, 2012; p. 226). Though it is important to acknowledge that this study has a smaller sample size, whereas the aforementioned research involves a larger number of participants.

4.3.1 Watching television

In terms of viewing behavior, the majority of the interviewed fans watch the race on Sundays and the qualifying session on Saturdays. In some cases, participants may not be able to watch due to certain circumstances such as work, vacations, sports matches or different time zones. Joep states the following about his viewing habits: "I find those races in China, Japan, and Australia too early. So, I do not watch them live." If such a scenario happens, all participants state that they rewatch the broadcast afterwards on TV. Importantly, all participants expressed a strong preference for watching the races and qualifying sessions live if possible. This viewing pattern aligns with what Dennis describes:

I generally always watch it later if I have work commitments. I often have to work on weekends and I also play sports, which takes place on weekends too. Then I have my rugby matches. So, I cannot always watch it, but of course the best thing is if I can watch the race live on TV.

Many fans express a strong desire to watch the races live to avoid reading spoilers on social media, where details about the winner, results, and dropouts are often shared straight away. This opinion is common among both male and female fans who wish to retain the excitement and unpredictability of live races. It emerges that they cannot maintain their excitement otherwise, as indicated by Dennis: "Then I already know who is going to win, and I do not like that. It takes away some of the suspense."

However, most participants indicate that they do not watch the free practice sessions on Fridays, as these usually take place during working hours or at night. Some participants mention that they watch the free practice sessions later or view a short summary of about

ten minutes. As Lola puts it: "For the free practices, if we cannot watch them, we only watch the 10-minute summary and that is fine. Because the free practices are not necessarily for the viewer, but actually for the driver to make those adjustments." Only two male interviewees state that they watch the free practice sessions and make an effort to allocate time for this whenever possible. Furthermore, three male and two female participants mentioned that they also watch the race previews and post-race analyses on TV. Emma addresses this in the upcoming manner: "I often catch the pre- and post-match commentary as well. Actually, it encompasses a large part of my weekends." For Ruud, watching the previews and the debrief on TV serves a way to conclude the race weekend: "I think it is a nice way to have a chat about everything that has happened."

4.3.2 The presence of social media

The interviews reveal that the fans do not limit their activities to the race weekend itself but also engage with Formula 1 throughout the week. This is in line with the discussion of Spindrad (1981), which describes fans as individuals who consistently think about, discuss, and focus on sports, without directly watching or hearing about a particular sports event (p. 354). They enjoy learning new things about the sport, staying updated on developments within Oracle Red Bull Racing, communicating about related matters with other fans, and to familiarize oneself with the team and its drivers, all facilitated through actions on various social media platforms. Nine out of ten participants indicate that they follow developments within the sport mainly through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. Unlike the others, Ruud is the only one who does not use social media as part of his engagement with the sport, as he opts to read the newspaper instead. He adds that this preference may be due to his age as he is 66 years old.

In the interviews, it appears that Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are used for staying up-to-date with the latest news and developments, viewing and sharing memes, and following Oracle Red Bull Racing and their coureurs. Two participants mention that they watch short videos on TikTok because of the entertaining and fun aspect of it. Femke is one of the fans using this channel intensively: "I use TikTok because they post a lot of videos there. For example, the official Formula 1 and Red Bull account are very active there. They often jump on trends and I see those on my *for you page*." Another common thread running

through the use of these three channels is the viewing and forwarding of memes. For instance, Laura indicates that she primarily relies on Facebook and Instagram, the platforms she herself uses the most, to stay updated. She explains her social media activities as follows: "There are also many meme accounts for Formula 1 that I follow and they are just hilarious. After a race, they always make memes and I forward those because I find them very funny." Laura delves further into her use of Facebook, noting that she primarily engages with this platform to participate in various Formula 1 related groups. According to her, these groups occasionally share interesting content. However, she mentions that she uses Facebook less frequently for following the sport, as she does not spend much time on that platform anymore. Furthermore, three participants explicitly state that they utilize Instagram as a platform to follow specific drivers, such as Max Verstappen, in order to receive updates on their personal lives and to become better acquainted with them as private individuals. WhatsApp is another widely used social media platform among Oracle Red Bull Racing fans, with four out of ten participants highlighting its importance for staying connected with other fans during, before and after a Grand Prix weekend. They use it to share information, chat with fellow fans, and discuss race events. Wouter explained: "I have a few people I frequently send Formula 1 messages to. If I see something on my phone, I take a screenshot and send it via WhatsApp. I do this regularly with anything I find interesting." As for Lola, the main reason for participating in WhatsApp conversations is to stay connected with people: "I also keep in touch with other fans through WhatsApp. I am in a few Formula 1 groups and often forward news articles. For instance, when Adrian Newey announced his exit, I immediately sent a message about it." Lola adds that, particularly during a race, she feels she experiences it with multiple people simultaneously, even if they are in different locations, due to being part of a group chat.

The remaining social media channels mentioned by some interviewees include LinkedIn, X, and Snapchat. One participant utilizes LinkedIn to read interviews with members of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team and updates about the car. Wouter and Lola are the only two participants who mention the use of X to find information about the sport. In contrast to these two fans, Willem states that he no longer uses this channel: "I used to keep an eye on X, or Twitter as it was called before, but I have actually stopped using it altogether because it became so hostile towards others you know." Furthermore, two male participants indicate their use of Snapchat for occasionally taking photos and then sending them to friends.

Situations in which they partake in this activity include instances such as when Max Verstappen secures a victory or when they attend a Grand Prix. Dennis describes this as follows: "Well, with Snapchat, I would share photos and videos with friends and say I am here now at a Grand Prix. Yeah, things like that. And sometimes they are jealous that I am attending and they are not, haha." The active engagement with various social media platforms mentioned by the interviewed fans reflects the participatory culture of Jenkins (2006), which emphasizes a feeling of social connection within a fandom (p. 7). These media technologies are allowing its users to create, consume, and share media to pass on their collective interest.

4.3.3 Offline fan behavior

Engaging in discussions and conversations about the sport with others, including friends, family members and colleagues, appears to be another common activity highlighted by all interviewed fans. Participants often talk about the sport in various social settings, such as at the coffee machine at work or during parties. These discussions are a common way for fans to interact and share their passion about the sport and Oracle Red Bull Racing. Subjects that are frequently brought up during these exchanges mainly revolve around the potential winner, race outcomes, team strategies or incidents that occurred. Emma describes a situation in which she talks about Formula 1 with others:

It sometimes happens at a party or with people who know me (...) and we might talk about the race, what is coming up, how the Formula 1 weekend has been going so far, or other random things you know. For example, this weekend there was a piece of grass on fire at a circuit. Then you discuss it with someone else who also watches Formula 1 (...). We just gauge each other's opinions, we laugh together about things or just discuss stuff together.

The act of attending a Grand Prix also stands out as a noteworthy fan activity in the interviews. Four male and three female participants shared that they have attended at least one Grand Prix event or more. This demonstrates that the activity is not solely undertaken by men, as both male and female fans dedicate roughly the same amount of time visiting race weekends (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000, p. 227). Among all the participants, only three out of ten individuals, comprising two women and one man, have never attended a race event of Formula 1. However, two of these participants are planning to go to the Austrian Grand Prix

this summer and already bought tickets for the event. The main reason why they have not yet attended such an event in person is not due to reluctance but rather a lack of means to afford the high financial costs associated with a race weekend. Ruud, who recently bought a ticket for his first Grand Prix, discusses why he has not taken this step before: “That just costs a lot of money. So, it is not yet a sport that is accessible to everyone. If you want to go for an entire weekend, well, that costs quite a bit.” Laura also shares her thoughts on this situation:

I have never been to a race and I am really disappointed about that, but it is simply because it is very expensive. I think me and my boyfriend would like to do it someday, but it has not happened yet because it is quite costly and it takes a lot of time to get there. So, I want to, but I need to save up first.

What also emerges from the interviews is that the participants who have attended a Grand Prix consistently highlight the atmosphere and the overall experience of the event. One aspect they often mention is the feeling of being part of a group, which is also evident from Lola’s comments: “We were sitting at the Max Verstappen grandstand. So, everyone was dressed in orange and everyone had an orange shirt on, which really gives you that sense of group unity.” Another participant describing this sentiment is Willem, but he specifically notes the sensation of belonging to the *Orange Army*, which serves as the overarching name for fans of Max Verstappen:

It really does feel special to be among them. There are a lot of people who mainly come for one person, because 99% of the people at Zandvoort are there for Verstappen. I definitely feel like I am part of a group.

These experiences align with the theory proposed by Wann and James (2018), emphasizing that engaging with sports leads to a greater team identification and consequently offers individuals a sense of belonging and connection to something larger than themselves (p. 20). In addition to the sense of togetherness, the interviewees also emphasize that they attend a Grand Prix for all that such a weekend has to offer. For instance, Melanie states that she ultimately goes there to have a party and fully immerse herself in that atmosphere. Emma further elaborates on this aspect and highlights the changes she has observed over the years during her various visits to Grand Prix events: “In the past, attending a race solely revolved around the race itself. However, nowadays, it encompasses an entire weekend of

entertainment during the whole day, featuring DJs, extravagant performances, fireworks, and more."

Despite a large portion of participants indicating that attending a Grand Prix is very expensive, nine out of the ten interviewees do have the financial means to purchase Formula 1-related merchandise, primarily including items such as home décor, clothing and caps. It is noteworthy that this activity is undertaken by both male and female fans. Willem underscores the significance of purchasing merchandise as part of his fan activities: "I occasionally buy merchandise. Actually, a bit too often. I think I have about thirty Formula 1 caps, of which I believe around twenty are from Red Bull or Verstappen." However, female participants predominantly purchase merchandise for home decoration, while they attribute wearing Oracle Red Bull Racing team clothing mainly to male fans and they buy such apparel for male figures close to them. Lola illustrates this in the following way:

I definitely have all three of the championship shirts. So, when Max won his first championship, I thought, yes, I need to have that (...). But I have specifically bought Red Bull merchandise for my husband, not so much for myself. It is not the most feminine clothing to wear, you know. But yes, I do buy merchandise sometimes.

Furthermore, the notion that female fans primarily purchase merchandise for the home is confirmed by Laura. She recalls the acquisition of a Max Verstappen painting that she and her partner bought together when the driver became a world champion for the first time:

It was quite an expensive item at the time, but it was definitely worth it. It is truly an eye-catcher in the living room. It is super cool, and occasionally we buy those miniature helmets. Max sometimes has miniature helmets from his races (...). We found those really cool, so we bought them. However, we don not really have shirts or anything like that. I do not find Red Bull's clothing very attractive.

Overall, these results contradict previous research, which stated that female sports fans purchase more merchandise than male fans (Hansen & Gauthier, 1993, p. 17). The findings from the interviews contradict this theory, as both men and women actively buy merchandise. It challenges the notion of a significant gender difference in this aspect of fan engagement. This overarching theme demonstrates that fans are people whose involvement with the sport continues on a deeper level and goes beyond watching races on television (Mastromartino et al., 2018, p. 4). The results also align with the findings of Yoshida et al. (2014), demonstrating that fan engagement consists of both transactional activities, such as

attending events, purchasing merchandise or watching games on TV, and non-transactional activities, like positive word-of-mouth and sharing knowledge with other fans (pp. 399–400).

4.4 Emotional connection and loyalty

Experiencing a wide range of emotions and feelings during a Grand Prix weekend is something all interviewed fans mention, whether they are actually attending a race in person or watching it on television. These results align with previous research by Wann et al. (1994), describing the positive and negative emotions that sports fans experience when their favorite team wins or loses (pp. 354–355). One of the moments that evokes feelings of happiness and pride is when Max Verstappen wins. Emma, for example, experienced a rollercoaster of emotions when Verstappen became world champion during the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix: "When they became champions, you feel happy and maybe even a bit proud. Even though you did not have to do much yourself. My dad and I were looking at each other, crying. That is part of it too." The feeling of happiness that this moment entailed was also experienced by Wouter. He describes it in the following way: "Actually, when Max became world champion and Red Bull also became world champion in 2021, yes, I was really very happy. I was literally jumping for joy." These findings indicate that the participants experience a strong emotional involvement during positive moments in Formula 1.

Nevertheless, the interviewed fans also indicate experiencing negative emotions during a Grand Prix. They recall moments when Max Verstappen, for example, loses a race or retires due to a technical failure or accident. Wouter experiences these emotions in a similar manner, as he expresses: "It can really put me in a bad mood. Like last Sunday, for example, he came second and he could not help it, but he ran over a pole and got damaged. Then Red Bull does not win and I do think, damn it, why did you do that?" Another participant who recognizes this frustrating and disappointing feeling is Melanie:

In the years when it was tense, you know, whether Max would win a race or not, I could really get bitter if, for example, he retired or something. So, I could really curse at Red Bull or if they had a wrong pitstop strategy in my opinion. I would really be sitting there swearing at my TV.

It should be noted that the interviewees do not dwell extensively on retirements or losses by Oracle Red Bull Racing. This is partly because in some situations participants find it

interesting if another driver wins and they know that new opportunities will come again. For instance, Dennis indicates that he appreciates it when an overtaking maneuver is made: “Even if someone overtakes Red Bull, if it is a beautiful overtaking maneuver, it is a beautiful overtaking maneuver.” One of the participants who also appreciates the impressive maneuvers of other drivers is Laura:

When the race is over I also think, okay so be it, and then I mainly just carry on with my day. It is not fun, no, but we are people who just keep going. (...) I still find it interesting to see who wins because then the whole field shifts again, and I find that fascinating.

Furthermore, it appears that the fans are emotionally involved in the sport, as some of them indicate feeling a high degree of emotional engagement during impressive moments in Formula 1, such as crashes. Femke provides an example of such a lasting memory: “A few years ago, there was, of course, the crash with Grosjean, and yes, something like that really leaves an impression on you. I really empathize with him, you know.” Another interviewee who also discusses these incidents is Ruud, as he mentions: “The less favorable aspects are of course the accidents and there is always the inherent risk of a crash.”

With a sport that plays an important role in the leisure time of all interviewed respondents and evokes many different emotions among them, it was revealed that the majority of participants are predominantly fans of Max Verstappen as an athlete and of Formula 1 in general. One aspect of this is seen in the future perspectives of the fans relating to their loyalty with Oracle Red Bull Racing, as outlined by Emma: “If Max moves to another team, my passion will likely shift towards that team as well. (...) For me, it is more about the driver because I am a fan of a specific driver or drivers.” This outlook on the future is also shared by Melanie:

What I am saying is, I am primarily a fan of Formula 1 and of a specific number of drivers. And if those drivers all switch seats, then I am just as easily for another team as I was for one team. I am more attached to the drivers, particularly those I find somewhat sympathetic and deserving of success.

If Max Verstappen ends his racing career in Formula 1, Lola also mentions that she will mainly look at which driver she finds the best and has the goodwill factor. She elaborates on this, as she comments: “If Max ever leaves or quits Formula 1, then I will look more at the driver who I find most likable or the best. And then I do not think it matters to me which

team it is.” These statements illustrate that there is a more profound loyalty between fans and individual athletes as opposed to the teams they represent within Formula 1. To clarify this, Willem makes a comparison with another sport, namely football: “I believe that in Formula 1, the connection is somewhat more detached compared to sports like football, where fans are typically loyal to the team rather than the individual players.” These results contradict the findings of James and Ridinger (2002), who state that there are differences in loyalty between genders (p. 273). They argue that women are more inclined to show loyalty to a specific team, while men develop more loyalty to the sport as a whole. However, the results indicate that both male and female fans of Oracle Red Bull Racing actually show more loyalty to Max Verstappen as a driver.

Alongside the loyalty described by the interviewees, another noteworthy finding in this study is that all participants, regardless of gender, are similarly inclined to declare themselves sports fans. This aligns with previous research indicating that both male and female fans are equally likely to identify as sports enthusiasts (James & Ridinger, 2002, p. 273; Ware & Kowalski, 2012, p. 226). Dennis explains why he sees himself as a fan of Oracle Red Bull Racing: “I am now truly a fan of Red Bull Racing. I have merchandise, cheer them on during Grand Prix races, and always want them to win.” Laura delves even deeper into why she considers herself a fan:

Even if some people think the race is boring and find it dull that Max wins so many races, I can really enjoy it. I still find it fun, and I think that makes you a true fan. You watch for the sport itself and not necessarily for who wins (...). I believe there is always something interesting to watch in a race. So, I think you are a true fan if you watch for the sport and not just for Max and if Max drops out, you still want to watch.

Among the participants, the majority considers themselves to be devoted fans, with only one male fan viewing himself as a temporary fan. Willem is one of the individuals placing himself in the category of devoted fans: “I am a devoted fan you could say. I do want to follow it and all, but it is not like my life revolves around it (...), but I am a fan through thick and thin.” These findings align with the fan categories established by Samra and Wos (2014), who state that the devoted fan stays true to their sportsperson and integrates their fandom as a crucial, but not the most important, element of self-identification (p. 268). This is also

evident from Melanie's comments when she talks about to what extent the sport is a part of who she is as a person.

It does not define who I am, you could say. I am just who I am and I happen to enjoy Formula 1. If Formula 1 was not in my life or did not exist, I would not be a completely different person. (..) But indeed, it does occupy your mind. It is also occasionally like a void you fall into when a Formula 1 season ends.

4.5 Gender dynamics

The interview results show that gender dynamics within the Formula 1 community play a significant role in shaping experiences and interactions, particularly for female fans. Among the participants identifying as female, it was found that four out of five recognize the pressure to share their knowledge of the sport to be taken seriously within the fan community. Therefore, the majority of female fans often find themselves in the position of proving their expertise and dedication to the sport, encountering surprised and skeptic reactions from male counterparts when they express their fandom. The reactions that female Formula 1 fans receive from male fans aligns with the notion that knowledge is a crucial factor in being a sports fan (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, p. 10), reflecting an assumption that women are inclined to possess lesser sports knowledge than their male counterparts (Pope, 2017, p. 87). One of the female fans that acknowledges this sentiment and feels challenged to share her knowledge on Formula 1 is Emma: "I think people who do not know me personally would not expect it at first and then they are surprised. That is always funny." She continues by telling:

Men often react surprised (...) and then they think, yeah, she does not know anything about it. Until you start talking about it a bit and they ask questions like, hey, do you know what this means? And then I can answer that just fine.

Another female fan that recognizes the continuous need to demonstrate her knowledge and enthusiasm for the sport is Laura. She notes that men often expect women to prove their knowledge before they believe that female fans truly understand how Formula 1 works. She recalls being at a birthday party where she was chatting with her friend and a group of guys, when the conversation suddenly shifted to a recent Formula 1 race:

They started talking about it and I joined in the conversation. I made a remark about which engine was in that car at the time and you could really see them looking at me like, huh, how do you know this? I think someone even said "Oh, she really knows her stuff." And then I thought, yeah, why would I not?

For Laura, it is somewhat weird to assume that she does not have that knowledge: "In that sense, you do feel a bit odd or something, and you notice that there really is a prejudice about women who watch Formula 1." The encounter that Laura describes, reflects Bryson's (1987) first stage, 'defining sport', which belongs to a sequence of social processes facilitating the male domination of sports (p. 350). In this stage, sports are predominantly associated with male participation, limiting female presence (Bryson, 1987, p. 351). Besides the prevalent assumption that female fans possess lesser sports knowledge than male fans, there is also the belief that women are often perceived as 'inauthentic' or 'inferior' sports fans. This perception arises from the idea that women's interest in sports is primarily driven by motives such as sexual interest (Pope, 2017, p. 87). Emma also acknowledges having firsthand experience with this phenomenon. She states:

That is often said in such a group setting. Yes, I cannot deny there are some handsome men among them, but that is not the main reason why I would watch it. Actually, it is a bit negative when men assume that would be a reason or something. It is a bit of a superficial thought.

Emma's experience corresponds with Bryson's (1987) fourth stage, 'trivialization of women in sports', as the enthusiasm and participation of female sports fans is often diminished to superficial reasons, such as the attractiveness of male drivers (p. 356). It involves the stereotypical portrayal of female fans, downgrading them to an inferior status.

Sometimes, the challenges that female fans encounter within the male-dominated community of Formula 1 lead to protest masculinity, which manifests in fan misconduct, including sexism (Cleland et al., 2020, p. 5). Sporting events often serve as venues where protest masculinity occurs, contributing to an unwelcoming environment for female fans. This is demonstrated by the experience Femke had during the Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort last year. She mentions receiving an unpleasant and unnecessary remark from a man while she was just watching the race: "The race was over and I walked back to the exit with my neighbor's son. A man felt it necessary to make an unpleasant remark. It was a bit unsolicited and unwanted. He said, are you coming home with me." Femke adds that she

feels that this man would not be likely to make such a comment to another man.

Remarkably, all male fans claim they have never encountered negative experiences or remarks based on their gender. For instance, Joep says the following about the reactions he receives when he reveals that he is a Formula 1 fan: "That is actually quite neutral. Yes, just nice. I think that others or the people I know do not lose sleep over it. They simply expect that I am a fan." Ruud also comments on this: "I have never received negative reactions from people. Nor particularly positive reactions either. People around me react fairly neutrally. (...) They also expect that I am a fan. So, they are not really surprised."

Furthermore, the interviews highlight a growing awareness among Formula 1 fans regarding diversity in the sport, especially in terms of gender representation. It appears that both male and female fans find the current time suitable for creating more opportunities for women in various technical roles within the sport, extending beyond traditional positions such as PR and marketing. As Emma puts it: "I think it is cool when women are smart and manage to hold their own in such a male-dominated world. So yes, it is definitely exciting when women take on more technical roles in Formula 1." These statements reveal that both male and female fans recognize the dominance of men in influential roles within the sport, which highlights Bryson's (1987) second process, called 'direct control of sports' (p. 352). Wouter also supports the increasing visibility of women in prominent roles within the sport:

It would be good for the image of Formula 1 to place more women in the foreground. So, I definitely agree with that. I also think it is good, just like a few years ago when the grid girls were removed because it was simply a sexist expression in a completely male-dominated world.

Laura delves even deeper into what the presence of women in technical roles can signify. She links this to the Formula 1 Academy, a racing competition dedicated exclusively to women. She believes that increased visibility for this racing competition and for other women in prominent positions would not only enhance the sport's image but also inspire younger generations. She says, "I think that would maybe attract younger girls who are now going to the circuit with their dads, just like I used to do with my dad. They might think 'I can do this too' and that would be cool." The Formula 1 Academy is also referenced by male fans. For example, Wouter criticizes the current approach to this female racing competition and articulates his frustration as follows:

The way it is being done right now makes no sense. The cars are too slow and it is not even broadcasted. (...) The previous season was eventually canceled because there was no more money, in a sport that consumes billions every year. Then I think, come on guys, how hard can it be to do this properly if you are serious about such goals. Do not come up with this half-hearted effort. Either do it well or do not do it at all.

This aligns with Bryson's (1987) third stage, 'ignoring women in sports', as the lack of sufficient support and visibility of the Formula 1 Academy illustrate a broader neglect regarding women's involvement and capabilities in Formula 1 (p. 353). Wouter's previous statement highlights the demand for genuine commitment and meaningful action in fostering gender equality within the sport. The overall perception among most participants is that the focus should primarily be on one's qualifications, regardless of whether one is a man or a woman. This is particularly evident when considering team composition, as stated by Ruud: "I strive for quality. That might sound cliché, but I am not concerned with having a certain number of women on the team. You simply need a good team, and if a woman fits that criterion, then that is great." The idea of having equal opportunities within Formula 1, based on skills and expertise, is also addressed by Melanie. Regarding women who are interested in technical roles within the sport, she says the following: "If she is as good as a man, then she should have the chance to break into the team. It should not be the case that someone is excluded from the team because they are a woman." Overall, gender dynamics within the Formula 1 community challenge the experiences and interactions, particularly for female fans. However, there is a growing awareness among male and female fans regarding diversity within the sport.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore, through ten in-depth interviews, how male and female fans of Oracle Red Bull Racing attribute meaning to their own fan engagement with the team. In particular, the research goal revolved around determining how the participants became fans of the sport, what motivates them to be Formula 1 fans, how their loyalty to the team will develop in the future, and the way they experience the gender dynamics within the sport. Given the semi-structured approach of the interviews, fans had the opportunity to share their personal experiences, leading to candid discussions. From this, five themes emerged that answer the research question and these will be discussed in this chapter. The limitations of the study will also be reviewed and recommendations for future research will be given. This research thus answers the question: *How do Dutch male and female fans negotiate meaning to their engagement with the Oracle Red Bull Racing team within the Formula 1 context?*

5.1 Key findings and theoretical implications

Although Formula 1 is the second most popular sport in The Netherlands and Oracle Red Bull Racing belongs to the top three of most favorite teams, this study still addresses a literature gap as research concerning this topic originates from outside the country or revolves around another sport, such as football (Formula 1, 2021, paras. 6–7; Nielsen Sports, 2019, p. 7). Since the popularity of Formula 1 increased in The Netherlands, it became interesting to address the knowledge gap through research such as this. Through the course of this investigation, five major themes have been identified and brought to light, like the establishment of fandom, motivations for being a fan, fan engagement and activities, emotional connection and loyalty, and gender dynamics. The following section will delve into these findings, examining each theme in detail and comparing them with previous theories.

First of all, it turned out that the establishment of fandom among Dutch male and female fans of Formula 1, particularly the Oracle Red Bull Racing team, finds its origin in familial influences and early exposure to the sport. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that male family members, predominantly fathers, play a significant role in introducing both male and female individuals to Formula 1. The research findings illustrate a

strong presence of male involvement in this process, with a notable absence of female relatives. This pattern corresponds with previous studies, emphasizing that numerous female sports fans attribute their fandom to a male influence and it primarily are fathers who introduce them to the sport (Pope, 2017 p. 119; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, pp. 9–10). Additionally, the success of Dutch driver Max Verstappen emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping fandom among the participants, especially towards Oracle Red Bull Racing. They all mentioned Verstappen as their favorite driver, while emphasizing they experience a sense of pride for The Netherlands whenever he represents their country on the international Formula 1 stage. Max Verstappen's success and Dutch heritage sparked a strong enthusiasm for Oracle Red Bull Racing among the interviewees, which reflects the sports fandom concept as Wann and James (2018) outline in their study (pp. 2–3). In their definition, sports fans are characterized as individuals deeply engaged in and consistently following a sport, team, or athlete.

Gender surprisingly played no role in the motivations for being a fan of Oracle Red Bull Racing. This research has shown that within the Formula 1 fandom, both men and women have essentially the same motivations. Key motivations such as entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics were prevalent among both male and female fans, indicating no significant gender differences in their reasons for supporting the team. This contradicts previous research that suggests social interaction is a significant motivation for female sports fans (Ware & Kowalski, 2012, p. 234). This study found that social interaction does not emerge as an important factor in the motivation of fans of either gender. The motivations that were identified, including entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics, align with the Sport Fan Motivation Scale, which identifies eight common motivations for sports fandom (Wann, 1995, p. 377). Entertainment emerged as the primary motivation for many participants, mentioning that the excitement and enjoyment they derive from watching Formula 1, particularly during Verstappen's championship season, keeps them entertained. Escapism was another common motivation highlighted by half of the participants. Watching Formula 1 allowed them to relax and temporarily disconnect from their everyday routines, enabling the fans to immerse themselves in a different world that creates a personal bubble. Aesthetics also play a significant role in the motivation of sports fans. Three interviewees admire the visual appearance of the cars and the overall spectacle of Formula 1. Some aesthetic aspects mentioned include the luxurious appearance of the racing competition, the teamwork

displayed during pit stops, and the speed of the cars. In relation to the other six motivations pointed out by the Sport Fan Motivation Scale, this study did not find these remaining motivations to be as prominently emphasized by the interviewed fans.

It is also evident that male and female fans showed little difference in the way they engage with Formula 1 and the associated fan activities they undertake. Contrary to prior research suggesting men show higher commitment and engage more in traditional fan activities (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000, pp. 225–226; Ware & Kowalski, 2012; p. 226), our findings revealed that both male and female fans exhibit similar dedication and engagement with Formula 1. Fans consistently try to watch the races live as it allows them to avoid spoilers and retain the excitement and unpredictability. Some participants even mentioned that they consciously consider this in their weekend arrangements and schedule activities accordingly or they catch up on the free practices, qualification sessions or races later. Another popular activity among all genders is the active use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp to stay updated, share memes with friends, and connect with others. The engagement with multiple social media platforms by the interviewees mirrors Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture, highlighting a sense of social connection within a fandom (p. 7). Regarding offline fan activities, it appeared that attending Grand Prix's is commonly executed by both male and female fans. With that, it denies the notion that this activity is exclusive to men, as indicated by previous research (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000, p. 227). Participants that visited a Grand Prix experienced a sense of belonging during these events, confirming Wann and James's theory (2018) on team identification in sports fandom (p. 20). This suggests that engaging with sports cultivates a sense of connection to something larger than oneself. Purchasing merchandise is another offline fan activity common among men and women, though the type of merchandise they buy may vary. For instance, male fans often buy clothing while female fans prefer home décor items. This finding contradicts earlier studies claiming women purchase more merchandise than men (Hansen & Gauthier, 1993, p. 17). According to this research, the engagement of Oracle Red Bull Racing fans to the sport involves much more than just viewing races on TV (Mastromartino et al., 2018, p. 4).

Finally, it becomes clear that gender dynamics play a role in the experiences and interactions of Formula 1 fans, especially female fans. Four out of five female participants report feeling pressured to prove their knowledge to be taken seriously, aligning with

research suggesting women are often seen as having less sports knowledge and being inauthentic (Pope, 2017, p. 87). In fact, a female fan reported experiencing hegemonic masculinity during the Dutch Grand Prix, which manifested as a sexist remark from a male fan. This incident demonstrates that sporting events often serve as venues where protest masculinity occurs, contributing to fan misconduct and an unwelcoming environment for female fans (Cleland et al., 2020, p. 5). The interviews also revealed a growing awareness among fans about the need for gender diversity in Formula 1. All participants support increasing opportunities for women in technical roles and some advocate for greater exposure of the Formula 1 Academy.

The conclusions drawn from the findings indicate that the meaning behind their ongoing engagement with Oracle Red Bull Racing is multifaceted. Revisiting the research question, it may be stated that all participants developed a passion for the sport and were introduced to it through their fathers is a significant aspect. As most have been following Formula 1 for several years or even since childhood, they express a desire to continue supporting their favorite driver, Max Verstappen, both now and in the future. However, it is evident that their fandom is primarily for the athlete and they are more inclined to reshape their engagement if the individual changes teams. Participants attribute meaning to their involvement with Oracle Red Bull Racing by recognizing its impact on their daily lives, such as how they spend their leisure time. This relates to findings where they all appreciate the sport for its entertainment value, aesthetic appeal, and as an escape from daily routines. Another way both male and female fans derive meaning from their fan engagement is by watching as many races as possible, purchasing merchandise, attending Grand Prix's, following the sport on social media and discussing it in real life. While most take a passive approach to their engagement, this does not diminish their perception of themselves as dedicated fans. However, female fans often feel the need to prove their knowledge to be seen as authentic fans, experiencing hegemonic masculinity within the Formula 1 community. Nevertheless, all fans recognize the importance of gender representation, valuing the qualities and experience of individuals involved in the sport regardless of gender. To conclude, participants negotiate meaning to their fan engagement with Oracle Red Bull Racing through various ways, highlighting the influence of male family members, online and offline activities, and the masculinity prevalent within the sport.

5.2 Limitations and future research

While this study offers interesting insights into Dutch fans and their engagement with Oracle Red Bull Racing in Formula 1, several limitations emerged during the research process. First of all, the sample size of this research was relatively small and comprised only Dutch participants. As a result, this research might not fully capture all viewpoints present within the larger fan community. Additionally, the findings may lack generalizability to wider demographics or other cultural contexts. This limitation could be addressed in future research by including a more diverse sample with individuals from different countries. Moreover, the sample of this study solely focused on fans of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team, limiting the examination of fan experiences across different teams and drivers within Formula 1. Future research could take on a more comparative approach to analyze fan experiences across multiple Formula 1 teams and drivers.

Secondly, despite the researcher's efforts to maintain self-aware and objective, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential for bias due to some existing familiarity and prior involvement with the sport. It is also noteworthy that the researcher herself was a woman, which could have impacted the research process. Nevertheless, this research tried to formulate an answer on the question of how Dutch male and female fans of Oracle Red Bull Racing negotiate meaning to their engagement with the team.

Lastly, while there was a good distribution in terms of gender and age among the participants, all individuals involved had been fans of the sport for a long time. This constrains the opportunity to gather perspectives from individuals who have recently become fans, who could provide unique insights into their evolving engagement with Oracle Red Bull Racing and Formula 1. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether new fans attribute meaning to their fan engagement in the same way as the more long-term fans.

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Appendix A: Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Level of education	Occupation
Dennis de Jong	24	Male	Dutch	Secondary vocational education	Healthcare worker
Ruud van den Berg	66	Male	Dutch	High school	Project manager
Willem Janssen	21	Male	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	Student
Emma Bakker	26	Female	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	Project manager
Femke de Vries	29	Female	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	Online marketer
Laura van Dam	26	Female	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	Project manager
Melanie van Heuvel	29	Female	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	HR employee
Lola Konings	39	Female	Dutch	Secondary vocational education	Financial administrator
Joep Smits	51	Male	Dutch	Master's degree	IT professional
Wouter de Vos	31	Male	Dutch	Bachelor's degree	Project manager

Appendix B: Interview guide

Topic	Questions
Introduction	<p>Background questions:</p> <p>What is your name, age, and gender?</p> <p>What is your nationality?</p> <p>What is your occupation?</p> <p>What level of education did you complete?</p> <p>Ice breaker questions:</p> <p>For how long have you been a fan of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team?</p> <p>Who is your favorite driver at the moment and why?</p>
Formula 1 in general	<p>Can you talk a little bit about Formula 1 in general?</p> <p>What are your favorite and least favorite aspects of Formula 1?</p> <p>How do you stay updated on news and developments related to the sport?</p> <p>What social media platforms do you use to look for content about Formula 1 and the Oracle Red Bull Racing team?</p> <p>Do you watch all the races, including the free practices and qualifying sessions?</p> <p>What reactions do you get from others when you express that you enjoy watching Formula 1?</p> <p>Do you usually watch Formula 1 on TV by yourself or do you like to watch the races with others?</p>
Fandom	<p>How did you first become a fan of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team?</p> <p>What motivates you to be a fan of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team?</p>

How do you express your support for the Oracle Red Bull Racing team, both online and offline?

How is your contact with other Oracle Red Bull Racing fans?

In what way do wins or losses of the Oracle Red Bull Racing team influence you?

Do you talk about the sport with other people?

Do you feel like you are part of a community as a fan?

Would you consider yourself a fan?

Have you observed any shifts in the sport since you first became a fan up until now?

Hegemonic masculinity

Is there a need, in your view, for more equality and diversity within the sport?

Have you ever encountered downsides or negativity by being a fan of Formula 1 due to your gender?

Have you ever encountered benefits or positivity by being a fan of Formula 1 due to your gender?

How do you perceive masculinity in both the sport and the community itself?

How do you feel about the characterization of Formula 1 as a predominantly male sport?

Do you believe there are differences in how male and female fans experience and engage with Formula 1?

Do you think Formula 1 should take an active role in challenging and redefining traditional notions of masculinity within the sport?

What are your thoughts on more female representation in both the sport and the community itself?