

# *Spend to Drive: Meritocracy, Anomie, and the Culture Industry within Formula One*

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**Abstract:** This dissertation examines the motor racing sport of Formula One, the highest level of international racing for single-seater formula racing cars and whether the lack of meritocracy and the existence of anomie in Formula One is creating a culture industry where capitalism is permeating culture and replicating set formats which result in the standardization of culture. The project draws on analyses of secondary resources and accounts of drivers, team principals, and sports journalists, as well as an in-depth exploration of the ideas of meritocracy, anomie, and the culture industry through academic writings. This analyzes how F1 became a culture industry through the push of lack of meritocracy and the existence of anomie.

**Keywords:** Meritocracy, Formula One, Culture Industry

## 1. Introduction

Horkheimer and Adorno declared that the "whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" [1]. They believed that the aforementioned culture industry changed things dramatically and brought on standardization of popular products and an increasing passivity of standardization of popular products which in turn led to detractions from real issues within.

### 1.1. Lack of Meritocracy within Formula One

When used as a verb, the word "merit" is similar in meaning to the word "deserve" [2]. We've all heard "they deserve this because they worked hard" at least hundreds of times throughout our lives. We've also heard its counterpart, "they don't deserve this because they didn't work out", just as much. The idea that one has to have worked hard to deserve or "merit" one's success is drilled into most people's brains. Meritocracy represented and manifested this very common belief into a much-desired social system. British sociologist Michael Young coined the term and declared it a system where "merit became the arbiter, attainment the standard, for entry and advancement in a splendid profession" [3]. As arguably the pinnacle of motor racing with only twenty athletes out of the entire global population participating in the sport, and driver salaries as high as forty million, Formula One is nothing but a "splendid profession" [4]. Young goes on to state that in such covetable industries, "many successful men preferred to send their children up the social ladder into the profession", but that "succession was quite common enough to be a very serious impediment to productivity" to further back up his call for the need of meritocracy in society [3]. Though viewed by many as a passion,

Formula One is a business at the core and it is impossible to run anything with an impeded productivity. However, one-fifth of the 2022 Formula One drivers are sons of former Formula One stars and over one-half of the lineup are sons of millionaires and billionaires. Furthermore, the term "pay driver" has been thrown around within the premise of the sport for a long period, thus indicating the level of merit existing regarding the sport. Formula One, at the national and international level, is dominated by the economically privileged, affluent division of society. The economically privileged echelon has been for decades and remains an elite sport. Perhaps the lack of meritocracy within the sport and its unwillingness to change the rules pushed it towards gearing to become a culture industry sell-out to make up for the stunted productivity.

## **1.2. The Existence of Anomie within Formula One**

The majority of those in the public eye are often perceived as living carefree lives filled with grandeur and are immune to any struggles ever. In a high-exposure and physically demanding sport such as Formula One, the expectation for drivers is even higher than normal as those involved often have to deal with not only the public but what goes on internally within their respective teams. Current McLaren and the youngest ever British driver to debut in Formula 1, Lando Norris, stated that he struggles heavily with the state of his mental health: "I found myself questioning my own self-belief: worrying if I had what it took, comparing myself with my teammate and other drivers" [4]. Seven times world champion Lewis Hamilton has expressed his feelings of aimlessness as well, "I have struggled mentally and emotionally for a long time, to keep going is a [consistent] effort but we have to keep fighting" [3]. While many praised the two drivers for speaking up regarding their struggles, aforesaid Max Verstappen dismissed them by exclaiming "Why would you say your weakness... I would never say that kind of things" [4]. The striking contrast between these driver's comments illustrates the lack of social solidarity within Formula One supports Durkheim's argument "for the need to promote the moral values necessary to bolster organic solidarity" (70). With Verstappen opposing talking about the struggles that Norris and Hamilton spoke about so candidly and the rest of the drivers giving negligible responses, there exist distinctive moral values which in turn means no solidarity. As beliefs differ within Formula One society, media allows the drivers to stand up for what they view as important. Due to how our lives nowadays are dictated by the presence of all different kinds of media and the high speed at which information is spread, the drivers can receive support and witness actions taken from their statements which can help with the issues that they are facing. Lando Norris says that he's gravitated towards using his media platforms more to speak about his struggles as he received positive responses and learned "how much of a difference [he] can have on people around the world" [4]. This proves that sport serves as a powerful mechanism for attaining social capital and once the social capital is attained, it can be converted into economic capital [5-7]. Therefore, Formula One's emerging interest in gaining a place within the culture industry can be seen as prompted by the existence of anomie within it.

## **1.3. The Culture Industry within Formula One**

Just as financialization is important in every aspect of personal and professional capacities, Formula One's ongoing success wouldn't have happened without it. Every team has to make money to pay their drivers, engineers, mechanics, etc. and they do that through different sources - sponsors, selling certain knowledge to other teams, merchandising, and media appearances. While prize money still makes up the majority of a team's income, media has also become a key player with every team vying to put out more attractive content on all social media platforms and the recent deal between the sport and top steaming service Netflix.

A California-based company, Netflix is the most popular subscription streaming service in the world and Formula One's series "Drive to Survive" on the platform has skyrocketed American interest in motor racing with race viewership doubling since the show's premiere. However, not all approved of how Formula One has chosen to market itself as an entertainment product and felt that there's now a "Netflix-ization of the sport" with the audience now more focused on the driver's personalities as opposed to the race itself. World champion Max Verstappen has even gone as far as calling Formula One's emergence in pop culture "over the top" and not factual. While Verstappen felt that standardizing and reducing the motor racing sport down to dramatized entertainment violated the sport's culture and put out falsified driver personalities, McLaren Racing CEO Zak Brown believed there to be no issues as "it's drawing a tremendous amount of people in the sport". Despite Verstappen's strong protest and other drivers' disdain; the Netflix and Formula One partnership continues with "Drive to Survive" being renewed for more seasons. This is a clear indication that "economic factors dictate" within Formula One and though it used to be a sport with a certain *je ne sais quoi*, it has now conformed to change its content to better facilitate the culture industry.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Concepts of Meritocracy within Formula One

Whether the notion of meritocracy exists has always been a heated topic, especially within sporting events. Before 2021, a budget cap for the teams did not exist within Formula and the big teams such as Mercedes, Ferrari, and Red Bull Racing were able to spend almost four times the amount smaller teams spent, thus creating an unlevel playing field. Even with the budget cap in place, there still existed disparity between the teams as costs such as driver salaries, engines, and marketing are not included within the restrictions. As sponsors were only willing to put their resources behind the winning teams, the top teams were able to afford "the staggering costs as a marketing expense that ensured their logos were plastered" while the smaller teams could not and had little exposure [10]. Small media exposure meant even less chance of gaining more sponsors which meant that the bottom teams still had to struggle to keep their places. When it comes to revenue earned from participating in the sport, Formula One "funneled much more of the revenue...to winning teams than to outfits at the bottom". Therefore, Formula One became a cultural product through Netflix and participating in culture industry made much more sense. The teams at the bottom now had an opportunity for mass marketing without having to spend colossal amounts of money.

Though the idea of meritocracy is usually associated with individuals, a clear disparity already exists between the larger infrastructure that is the teams. With only twenty seats available, Formula One is possibly the most competitive sport in the world and one cannot help but wonder if those who made it onto the racetracks deserve to be there. The term "pay driver" has been thrown around for ages and indicates the level the notion of merit exists within the sport. The 2022 drive lineup features only five drivers with an ordinary family, wealth, and social background. Previously mentioned world champion Max Verstappen and three other drivers are all the sons of former Formula One drivers with the remaining eleven all being sons of millionaires and billionaires. Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff gives an "estimating a total of £8m" as the average cost of becoming an F1 driver, a hefty sum that most parents cannot afford. As a result, many drivers had to look to sponsors to help continue their careers. However, just as the top teams were able to attract sponsors due to their already enormous media presence and the bottom teams struggled, it was the same for drivers. Well-known drivers were able to gain more backers while lesser-known drivers got stuck in one place with no way to move forward. Meritocracy represented the idea that individuals can advance or be chosen and given equal opportunities regardless of their family, wealth, and social background. This notion is not seen in any aspects of Formula One racing from individuals to the whole. Withal, the lack of

meritocracy within sport prompted its growing involvement within the culture industry as the standardization and replication of set formats provided more opportunities for both financial gains and media exposure.

## 2.2. Concepts of Anomie within Formula One

Most think that the view from the top is always the best, but Formula One has proven that not to be the case. Even without worrying about a seat in the race and resources, the sport is still incredibly taxing on the athletes involved. The term anomie created by French sociologist Emile Durkheim presented the notion of the "lack of a sufficiently secure framework by which people are provided with a sense of moral regulation and social integration" [8]. There are little to no social regulations within the sport of Formula One which creates a system that builds up uncertainty which in turn can result in personal feelings of despair and more.

Long-term temporal accumulation, inextricably linked to financial accumulation through time, generates speed and success. Thus, 'it takes far more time and resources to develop and build a car than it does to race it' [9]. 'Dead labour' dominates the immediate present and leaves a profound mark. Jenkins contends that industries and intra-industry teams build and preserve competitive advantage through 'dynamic capabilities and, more importantly, 'sustaining capabilities [10].' Dynamic skills, which are generally associated with new entrants, enable swift adaptation to environmental upheavals (such as technological innovation or regulatory changes) to be exploited to their advantage against perceived slow, rigid incumbents. While in Formula one competition, organizations require sustaining qualities to be competitive and dominant in the long run. These sustainability capabilities are the accumulation of resources such as cash, brand position, industry knowledge, and skill that allow a company to reconfigure its resource base and adapt to change and new rivals. He demonstrates how Ferrari, the largest and oldest team, has remained in the top three constructors since 1950, despite numerous changes in technology regimes. While it was rarely able to adapt as quickly or as easily as other teams, its sustaining capabilities, the strength of resources such as finance (from Fiat), the Ferrari brand, and its political skills in working with the regulatory body (the FIA) - enabled it to maintain a competitive advantage by 'slowing down the clock speed of the industry relative to their speed of change' [9].

## 2.3. Concepts of the Culture Industry within Formula One

Amidst the enjoyment of watching the thrillingly high speed of racing cars at the Grand Prix in beautiful locations, it is easy to forget that Formula One is a business at its core. Businesses are what make up the economy and build up capitalism which in turn creates "economic forces dictated the content of the cultural products" [8]. In other words, the existence of businesses pushes for the existence of what Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School referred to as the "culture industry". Their writings explored this particular idea and expressed "how intertwined culture, personality and the economy had become" through it [8]. The trinity that the culture industry thrived from delineates the world of Formula One identically: the teams and history created a sense of culture within the sport, and the drivers brought economic wealth. If a culture product works, then it would get replicated over and over again until one would get the replication of set formats.

Semiotics thus contributed a large portion of the explanation of its culture industry. The meaning-based advertising model contends that consumer responses to commercials are determined by the meanings attributed to major goals in consumers' lives. Audiences must be given the chance to understand the content of the ad according to their interpretative framework for sophisticated targeting via intended polysemy [11]. Advertisers use purposeful ambiguity when they create confusing messaging to appeal to two separate audiences with the same message (target). Mercedes,

for example, requested Hamilton to make an ad for the AMG team in 2018, with the epilogue driving the future of performance. These phrases may convey to F1 fans that Mercedes is the top performer in the performance vehicle market so far, with a commitment to establishing a championship squad in the future. For brand-conscious customers, the phrase may instead emphasize the brand's social standing. Mercedes-marketing Benz's strategy has always been to continually develop and challenge, and the good performance of the Mercedes-Benz team in F1 competition, on the one hand, may make consumers more loyal, while also constantly drawing new consumers. Ambiguity is used to raise the attention and attractiveness of ads (aesthetic purposes), not for strategic reasons.

### 3. Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, the phrase "pay driver" has been bandied around within the context of the sport for a long time, indicating the amount of merit present in the sport. At both the national and international levels, Formula One is controlled by the economically privileged, affluent segment of society. The economically wealthy strata have been and continue to be an elite sport for decades.

Disrupt the 'human capital' narrative, which is based on a restricted meritocratic perspective that may justify huge incentives. We must acknowledge the institutionalized, objectified, and embodied features that are involved in accumulation formations. This is why we have sought to illustrate how the elite are, in some ways, rooted inside the business itself, and how, to understand their benefits, we must place them within this wider historical and physical context. Elites are developed as a result of long-term accumulation processes. This shifts the conversation away from worries about human capital and whether high pay and incentives are a fair return for work in spot markets. It lets us recognize that the most advantaged are not fundamentally different from other social groupings that likewise rely on particular types of capital, but rather those who can maximize such advantages. Economically, as Piketty demonstrated, the return on capital grows proportionally to the total amount of capital. In the context of 'winner take all markets,' this produces non-linear or outlier effects at the top.

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