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From Track to Spectacle: Event Entertainment Strategies and New Audience Development in Formula 1 — A Case Study of the Las Vegas Grand Prix

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Abstract. Professional sport is shifting from race day and broadcast toward experience, content and destination, and organizers increasingly design events according to the logic of entertainment products. While existing research has largely discussed the shift toward entertainment in professional sports from the perspective of media communication, few studies have examined the issue from the perspective of event production to reveal the underlying operational logic behind the restructuring of event formats. Taking the Las Vegas Grand Prix, first staged in 2023, as a single case, this paper draws on official primary documents from 2023 to 2025 and addresses three questions concerning mechanisms, evidence and boundaries. It finds four mechanisms at work. Product hybridization, consumption stratification, scene extension and communicative self-reinforcement each lowers a distinct threshold of entry, and evidence across four levels points consistently to the arrival of a new consumer segment, with the share of women among global fans rising from 37 percent in 2018 to 42 percent in 2025. Because a single-case design cannot isolate the contribution of entertainmentization, and the key evidence was commissioned by the rights holder, the conclusion is stated in multi-causal terms.

Keywords: Formula 1, Las Vegas Grand Prix, entertainmentization, audience expansion

1. Introduction

In 2025, visitor numbers in Las Vegas declined by 7.5 percent year on year [1], while the Las Vegas Grand Prix, first staged in 2023, sold out for a third consecutive year [2]. In a city losing visitors, why did a new event sell out for three consecutive years? Professional sport's value base is migrating, and organizers increasingly design events along the logic of entertainment products. There are three main lines of research in this area: media theory examines how media logic reshapes the production and consumption of sports; research on motorsports indicates that the sport is restructuring its content to better suit media dissemination; and research on streaming explores the connection between sports documentaries and the construction of fan identity [3-5]. Urban studies focus on the long-term impact of major sporting events on public spaces, with the Baku street race serving as the most instructive case study [6, 7]. These lines concentrate on media content, leaving

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the redesign of the event form largely unaddressed, and scholarship on the Las Vegas Grand Prix remains scarce. None of this work addresses why a city can lose visitors overall while a newly created event within it sells out year after year. This paper addresses how entertainmentization brings new consumer groups into a street-circuit setting. The question matters in three respects: host cities can broaden their audience without diluting the competitive core, research attention can shift to event product design, and the costs transferred onto residents can become visible. The paper pursues three questions: which mechanisms lower the participation thresholds of non-core fans, what can show a new audience has arrived, and what costs accompany the model and limit its expansion.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Research context

Mediatization theory addresses how media logic reshapes the production and consumption of sport [3], and research on motorsport supplies more concrete mechanisms, such as converting the interactive apparatus of racing into a fan-voting device [4]. Mediatization, however, explains a shift in logic rather than a product strategy, and must be translated into an operational level. Streaming research provides a second line: an observable association exists between sports documentaries and the formation of fan identities [5], although these studies rarely ask what happens to the event product beyond the filmic text. Running in parallel is the commodification of fandom, which places the arrival of new audiences inside that same commercial logic.

Urban research addresses another side of mega-events: their long-term impact on urban public space [6]; the closest study to this case is the Baku city street race [7]. The event portfolio perspective adds that expanding a single event into a year-round portfolio is a structural means of amplifying derived demand, a point taken up in the framework below. Mediatization theory excels at explaining shifts in logic but lacks practical analytical tools for product-level analysis; streaming media research focuses on documentary texts and rarely translates into practical applications for the transformation of offline event products. Each line has its own emphasis, but all stop at media content or urban consequences, and few move into the event product itself.

2.2. Conceptual definition and analytical framework

This paper defines entertainmentization as a product strategy in which, while retaining the competitive core, organizers systematically embed performance, celebrity, urban scenery and non-racing consumption elements into the event product and its consumption chain, shifting the value proposition from the race result to a composite experience. What distinguishes it from ordinary entertainment packaging is that it is not a temporary promotional campaign: it runs through product design, the layout of the consumption chain and long-term audience management as a systemic strategy. "New audience" refers to spectator and consumer groups not previously part of the sport's core audience, approximated by first-time attendance, structural shifts toward younger and more female audiences, and the share of non-racing spending, with limitations discussed in the conclusion.

From these lines an analytical framework follows: four mechanisms, each lowering one threshold of entry. Comprehension is the threshold at which product hybridization aims, drawing on mediatization research [3, 4]. Consumption stratification addresses the economic threshold, and it rests on the structural coexistence of divergent consumer groups within a single Grand Prix [8].

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Contact is opened up by scene extension, which spreads contact points from the circuit to the whole city and the whole year [9]. Communicative self-reinforcement lowers the social threshold, drawing on social media as an institutionalized platform for fan growth [10] and on the commodification of fandom [11].

The mechanisms are not independent. Hybridization supplies a reason to enter, stratification supplies a price point, scene extension widens the occasion from circuit to city, and self-reinforcement lowers the psychological cost. They are not arranged in a sequence, but form a closed loop that moves from cognitive contact to cost compatibility and then to social retention. Only in combination do they convert a fan-centred audience into a diversified consumer base.

The paper adopts a single-case qualitative design, appropriate for how and why questions. Three grounds justify the case. The event sold out in each of its first three editions, making it the fullest realization of the entertainmentization strategy; the combination of a street circuit with a destination-type event represents a new direction in staging professional sport; and continuous, verifiable official primary documents exist for 2023 to 2025. Sources fall into seven categories, each annotated with the issuing body, year and nature. Destination statistics and event press releases are primary sources for the event-side analysis [1, 2]. The official statistics and activity pages add destination-side detail [12, 13]. The rights holder's financial results, season review and economic impact report supply commercial and impact data [14-16]. Broadcast press material and an independent third-party survey provide external corroboration [17, 18]. Evidence is organized into four levels: audience structure, attention and reach, participation and consumption behaviour, and commercial outcomes, plus a layer of attribution checking. The first two come from self-reported surveys and platform-reported figures and are of moderate strength; the third consists of behavioural records and is the most verifiable; the fourth comes from audited financial statements, the hardest but the most confounded. Each level must independently support a judgement, and conclusions are drawn only where the levels agree, with divergence reported as such. Analysis follows a theory-driven thematic procedure modelled on pattern matching. Mechanisms and indicators are specified in advance from the framework in Section 2 and compared with the material level by level, each instance recorded as congruent, partially congruent or non-congruent. Credibility rests on multi-source triangulation, the exclusion of rival explanations and an audit trail of sources.

3. Findings

3.1. Four mechanisms lowering the thresholds

Product hybridization lowers the threshold of comprehension. What spectators buy is no longer the result of a ninety-minute race but a bundled experience of sport, performance, celebrity and urban scenery. The circuit is itself evidence of the strategy: this street track of just over six kilometers, two kilometers run along the Las Vegas Strip, is the second-longest layout after Spa [12]. Entertainment has been placed on an equal footing with the race: the 2026 line-up spans pop and electronic music, and the post-race party moved into the Sphere [13]. Yet the racing has not been displaced. The 181 overtakes of the inaugural 2023 race were the most recorded in any round that season, and the 2024 edition still ranked first on the calendar [13], so showcasing and competitive spectacle need not conflict. The mechanism works on the barrier of comprehension: when spectators can obtain a complete experience without first decoding the sporting rules, those who know nothing about racing are given a reason to enter.

Consumption stratification lowers the economic threshold. Product differentiation turns an elite good aimed at a few into a mass good: the event offers a continuous line from ordinary grandstands

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to chef-led dining and immersive premium products such as the Wynn Grid Club [13], supporting a race-week audience that exceeded 300,000 in 2025 [15]. Existing research notes that divergent consumer groups coexist within one Grand Prix as a structural feature rather than an exception [8]. The mechanism works on the economic barrier: stratification turns a single price point into a continuous range, allowing consumers with different budgets to find an appropriate point of entry.

Scene extension lowers the threshold of contact. The ticket is only the entry point; what is mobilized is the derived demand for tourism, accommodation, dining and retail around the event. The 2024 race week drew 306,000 attendances, including 175,000 out-of-town visitors who stayed an average of 3.7 nights and spent more than US$2,400 per person outside the event [16]. With Grand Prix Plaza, a 39-acre permanent facility, the consumption cycle stretches from a single race week to the whole year [2]. This corresponds closely to the derived demand amplification anticipated by the event portfolio literature [9]. The mechanism works on the barrier of contact: with contact points distributed across the city and throughout the year, those who would never travel specifically for a race can engage with the event as part of another trip.

Communicative self-reinforcement lowers the social threshold. Spectators register preferences through their choices, and the more people watch and talk, the more viewers are attracted in turn. Formula 1's global social media following reached 114.5 million, up 19 percent, with 2.3 billion interactions, the highest among tier-one sports rights holders, and for this round alone over 1,200 creators produced more than 5,000 pieces of content during race week [15]. Fandom has long been both an audience and a commodity, so the arrival of new audiences can be understood within that same commercial logic [10, 11]. The mechanism works on the social barrier: visible participation lowers the perceived risk of joining, so that going to a Grand Prix with friends no longer requires a special explanation.

3.2. Evidence on new audiences and attribution checks

Showing that a new consumer segment has actually emerged cannot rest on a single type of data. The key indicators and the nature of the evidence behind them are summarized in Table 1. The four levels carry different degrees of credibility. Purchasing, travelling and on-site spending are high-credibility evidence, because they are behavioural records outside any survey instrument. Audience-structure figures come from self-reported questionnaires and are of moderate credibility. Revenue and impact data are the least attributable of the four, because they are aggregate figures that many factors move at once. The least direct of the four levels is audience structure. The share of women among global fans rose from 37 percent in 2018 to 42 percent in 2025, while 43 percent of fans were under 35. Among fans acquired in the past year, 48 percent were women and 57 percent were under 35 [15]. This points to a younger, more female-skewed audience, but the data are self-reported and of moderate strength, so the appropriate verb is "point to".

Attention and reach rest on firmer ground, though not on hard evidence. Despite a 1 a.m. start, the broadcast of the inaugural 2023 race in the United States averaged 1.3 million viewers with a peak of 1.5 million, 668,000 of them in the 18–49 core demographic, and a local rating of 7.4, the highest of any US market [17]. The reach of this kind occurred outside prime time and among non-traditional motorsport viewers, which suggests that the entertainment configuration, rather than the race result, was the draw. Behaviour is the most persuasive level. Tickets sold out for all three editions from 2023 to 2025 [2], and race-week attendance exceeded 300,000 in 2025 [15]; across the 2025 season 19 of 24 rounds sold out, with a record 6.7 million spectators on site [15]. Buying a ticket, travelling and spending on site are observable behaviours that do not depend on survey responses, providing stronger evidence that new consumers actually attended the event.

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Commercial outcome is the least attributable of the four data sets. Full-year revenue rose from US$3.411 billion in 2024 to US$3.873 billion in 2025, up 14 percent, and fourth-quarter revenue from US$1.126 billion to US$1.375 billion, up 22 percent [14]. At the destination level, the event has generated a cumulative economic impact of US$3.2 billion and US$43 million in 2025 taxes [12]. The increase cannot be credited to entertainmentization in full, because the number of races in the fourth quarter rose from six to seven [14].

The attribution layer actively rules out single-cause accounts. An independent large-sample survey found that 53 percent of American Formula 1 fans said the series had played a role in their becoming a fan, including 30 percent who called it a major reason; among fans under 45, 74 percent attributed their fandom at least in part to the series [18]. A small qualitative study found about two-thirds of respondents attributing their new fandom to the documentary, but with only 12 participants, it offers mechanistic support rather than an estimate of proportions [5]. Across the four levels, the evidence points to the emergence of a new consumer segment, but correlation is not causation.

Table 1. Key indicators and the nature of the evidence, Las Vegas Grand Prix (2023–2025)

Indicator	Value	Nature of evidence
Race-week attendance	Over 300,000 in 2025 (all three editions sold out, 2023–2025)	Behavioural record
2024 attendances	306,000 (191,000 unique attendees)	Behavioural record (commissioned report)
Out-of-town visitors	175,000, average stay 3.7 nights	Behavioural record (commissioned report)
Non-racing spend per person	Over US$2,400	Commissioned report
F1 full-year revenue 2025	US$3.873 billion (+14% year on year)	Audited financial statements
F1 Q4 2025 revenue	US$1.375 billion (+22%; races rising from 6 to 7)	Audited financial statements
Women among global fans	42% (37% in 2018)	Self-reported survey

Note: Revenue figures follow Formula 1's financial year; other figures are calendar-year. "Commissioned report" denotes the economic impact analysis commissioned by Formula 1.

3.3. Costs and boundaries of the showcase model

Commercially, the picture is uneven. Ticket and hospitality revenue at this round fell short of expectations in 2024 before recovering to US$1.375 billion in the fourth quarter of 2025 [14]. Although the race sold out, citywide visitor numbers fell by 7.5 percent [1]. Success at the event level does not translate automatically into success at the destination level.

Spatial costs are more concrete: streets are closed, construction periods lengthen, and public space is temporarily privatized during the event cycle. The long-term impact of mega-event projects on urban public space is well documented [6]. The controversy over the Baku street race offers a ready analogy [7]. The organizer offsets some of this through local donations, but such data are self-reported and cannot constitute countervailing evidence. The economic impact report was

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commissioned by Formula 1; although it adjusts for crowding-out effects, the limitations of its multiplier model should still be acknowledged [16]. If spatial costs show up as closed streets, audience legitimacy shows up only in what the counts cannot capture. A product sold to people who may not follow the sport will always raise the question of who its spectators are, and neither the attendance counts nor the audience-structure figures can separate a committed fan from a first-time attendee. A final caution concerns the honeymoon effect. The initial jump in interest may reflect novelty rather than structural demand, and whether a broader consumer base becomes genuine resilience depends on the retention of new audiences rather than first-wave attendance. The claim can be tested in later editions through two observable indicators: the retention rate of new spectators across successive years, and the share of repeat purchasers in the ticket base.

4. Discussion

The Baku city street race [7] offers the closest comparison. Both are destination-type events that depend on attracting external attention, and the differences are equally clear: Las Vegas is itself a mature entertainment destination, so the event did not manufacture appeal from scratch but reorganized existing urban symbols, making its entertainmentization look more like a rearrangement of resources than the creation of spectacle from nothing. The paper also contributes to mediatization theory [3] by shifting the discussion from content to product form, since contemporary events are mediatized not only through broadcast and documentary but also through circuit design, ticketing structures and consumption settings. As for the audience effects of sports documentaries, the evidence suggests that content-driven and product-driven paths are more likely to be additive than substitutive [5, 18].

Several alternative explanations cannot be fully excluded. First, calendar expansion is one such explanation, since the number of fourth-quarter races rose from six to seven, which directly affects the comparability of revenue [14]. The growth of the U.S. market matters as well, where new rounds and home drivers may independently generate attention. Shifts in the competitive order cannot be ignored either, since championship uncertainty has historically correlated with viewership, nor can the macroeconomic environment, given cyclical swings in outbound travel and discretionary spending. The claim advanced here is therefore that entertainmentization and the entry of new audiences occur together and are mutually supporting, not that entertainmentization alone caused the growth. Organizers should recognize that entertainment provision and the competitive core can proceed in parallel, provided the quality of competition is not diluted; the racing record discussed in Section 3.1 shows that showcasing does not necessarily harm spectacle. Destination marketers should recognize that event success does not automatically equal destination success, and that the two should be planned and evaluated separately; the divergence between citywide visitor numbers and race attendance, set out in Section 3.3, is a reminder. Evaluators should guard against single-cause attribution and inflated multiplier effects, and should state the commissioning relationship whenever economic impact data are cited.

5. Conclusion

Entertainmentization works through product hybridization, consumption stratification, scene extension and communicative self-reinforcement to expand a fan-centred audience into a diversified consumer base. The four levels of evidence converge in showing that a new consumer segment has arrived, though the attribution evidence requires a multi-causal interpretation. The model is bounded by commercial volatility, urban costs, and the risk that the honeymoon effect will fade. The move

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from track to spectacle buys not simply more spectators but a broader consumer structure that also demands more maintenance. The study's principal limitation is the recency of the case. The case is too recent for direct scholarship, so the argument rests on triangulation between official primary documents and secondary empirical research. The economic impact report was commissioned by Formula 1 and draws on more than 5,000 spectator questionnaires; the fan-base data are drawn from the rights holder's own season review. Both carry an element of self-presentation, and a single-case design cannot separate entertainmentization from other growth drivers. All materials are public documents, and no human participants were involved.

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