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Sprinting to Success?: F1 fans' excitement towards change in sport competition formats

Driven by an increasing digitalised consumption of leisure, and consumer preferences evolving to favour speed and immediate gratification during consumption, new shorter formats of sport competitions are being introduced. Since 2021 Formula One have been discussing complementing their traditional race format, with alternative shorter formats to re-ignite the excitement of their fans. In this study, we explore the proclaimed excitement of fans towards the three different proposed formats of F1 races through a large-scale survey (N=2,107), showing the in fact negative effects that proposed format changes have on F1 fans' anticipated excitement. What emerges instead is the importance of the length of fandom in influencing fans' receptivity to format changes, rather than the generation in which they belong, stressing thus the significance of intra rather than inter-generational exploration of fandom.

Keywords: Fandom; Sport fans; Motor racing; Sport consumption; Leisure consumption

The Formula One World Championship, often shortened to F1, is the top level of single seater racing and overseen by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) (Budzinski & Feddersen, 2020). With its position at the top of the racing industry and one of the most watched sports globally, the FIA have been able to grow their wealth, annual revenue increased to \$3.2bn in 2023 with operating profit also increasing to \$392mn in 2023 (Agini, 2024). However, despite these increasing figures, recent data are showing that the current viewership rates are significantly lower than the peaks recorded in 2008 (600 million in 2008

to 445 million in 2021 – Lange, 2021), which a major concern for F1's economic future, as lower spectatorship means lower potential revenues for both F1 and participating teams. F1, like most sports has changed since its formation, with the CEO of the F1 Group Stefano Domenicali, stating that F1 has an obligation to try to create the best spectacle possible (Sparisci, 2022). The FIA had to also battle against the perceived uncompetitive nature of the sport. In both the driver and constructors' championships, extensive periods of dominance increased the predictability of outcome by serial winners Michael Schumacher (Ferrari), **Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)**, Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) and Max Verstappen (Red Bull) (Budzinski & Feddersen, 2020).

Simultaneously, the sport's move from free-to-view to pay-TV **was** lucrative for F1's **short-term** revenues but **undoubtedly damaged its viewership (Sturm, 2023)**, with 50% of spectators consequently no longer watching live broadcasts (Grand Prix Drivers Association (GPDA), 2021). This is consistent with Gratton and Solberg's (2007) research examining Rugby League's shift to paid TV, revealing that spectatorship **in the UK** dropped dramatically post-transition. It also identified that the shift harmed long-term engagement, reducing exposure to younger generations **who might not be able to afford pay-TV subscriptions, something that can** subsequently harm the sport's economic future. In response to **this audience decline**, the recent documentary by Netflix, Drive to Survive, was used to engage a younger and more diverse audience to the sport (Soble & Lowes, 2024). However, even with this, the uncompetitive nature of the sport combined with the decision to move from free-to-view have resulted in reports that fans, and even drivers, are less excited by F1 (Richards, 2019), **raising concerns about the future of the sport.**

Seeking to solve this issue, and to give circuit operators the chance for an additional race day and revenue, the FIA toyed with the introduction of a shorter form of contest to be held alongside the main race, known as the **F1** Sprint race. Despite being introduced in 2021, the

format has undergone changes to get to its current form due to a mixed reception from fans and drivers alike (Saunders, 2023), and was selected over alternatives such as Reverse grid races (in which the order of the top 10 drivers would be reversed - Autosport, 2015). In their own words, F1 explain that their new Sprint format maintains ‘the Grand Prix as the main event’ over the course of ‘a three-day affair’ but offers fans ‘even more excitement’ (F1, 2024). **In 2024, there will be six of these three-day events, in which F1 Sprint races will be held following separate shorter races, Sprint Shootouts (qualifying rounds), all before the final Grand Prix race (F1, 2024).**

As the F1 Group CEO explained, format changes such as the Sprint and Reverse, were put on the table as ways to innovate the sport and leisure experience F1 offers. For Domenicali, new sport formats are ‘a need that can't be postponed, [in order] to have even more spectacle’ (Sparisci, 2022). However, in spite of F1 executives singing the praises of the Sprint format, claiming that fans “love” the format (Cooper, 2021), the response has been mixed (Grand Prix Drivers Association (GPDA), 2021), with popular pundits loudly supporting alternative formats, such as Reverse grids, in order to produce more excitement (Cozens, 2022). Nevertheless, F1 persisted with the Sprint format for the 2022 season with a further three events, with further plans to increase the number of Sprint events per season in future, arguing that fans welcome the change (Cooper, 2022).

F1’s argument that fans have embraced the excitement of new formats suggests that their fans are receptive to change, something that previous studies on key stakeholders’ perceptions of changes in their beloved sport have questioned (Fletcher et al., 2024a). In this study on cricket, it was argued that changing a sport in order to fit the wider push towards a more digital leisure consumption creates threats to the essence and true enjoyment of the game (Silk et al., 2016). F1 could arguably be viewed as a more modern type of sport, with its heavily mediatised nature making it a prime example of a mediatised spectacle in the digital

leisure age (Sturm, 2023). As Sturm (2023) argued, F1 has long been considered a media spectacle, making F1 races mediated experiences for leisure consumers of the digital age (Boyle & Haynes, 2024; McGillivray et al., 2021; Sturm, 2014), with this race format change further illustrating how the sport itself is not only influenced, but in fact transformed through and due to the spectacle (Sturm, 2014; Boyle & Haynes, 2024). While F1 has been inseparably and proudly linked with digital leisure consumption, the claimed acceptance and indeed excitement to welcome changes to the nature of the sport itself by its fans calls for further enquiry.

To this day, despite the status and global interest in Formula 1, its fandom remains widely under researched, with few notable exceptions focusing predominantly on the aspect of fans' perceived and portrayed masculinity (e.g., Fleming & Sturm, 2011; Sturm, 2011). As such, it is not known how fans of F1 truly feel about the changes in their sport and what determinants might impact on what section of fans react positively or negatively to change. In this study, we aim to explore the proclaimed excitement of fans towards the three different proposed formats of F1 races (Traditional, Reverse and Sprint), in order to identify any underlying factors that might be influencing their perceptions. Through this analysis, light is shed on the importance of the length of fandom and the key role it plays in informing fans' perceptions of, and receptivity to, change; thus adding to the wider inquiry on fandom and change reception (Dixon, 2014a,b; Fletcher et al, 2024a).

Excitement in Sport and Leisure Fandom

Maguire's (2011) work on the quest for 'exciting significance' and 'pleasurable excitement' in sport and leisure built upon Elias and Dunning's (1986) seminal thesis on the quest for excitement. These authors helped enshrine the understanding that a central factor of individuals' desire for sport and leisure is underpinned by their needs for socially approved

forms of pleasurable excitement. As Maguire (2011, p.919) puts it, “the function of leisure activities has to be assessed in relation to the ubiquity and steadiness of excitement control”. Maguire’s broadened scope, with a more explicit focus on leisure, also helped build bridges between concepts of excitement in sport and leisure with key concepts of identity-formation and self-realization. Put succinctly, the excitement that individuals seek to gain through their consumption of sport and leisure then firmly connects to how those same individuals construct and perform their own identities and lifestyle (Maguire, 2017), which is being shaped by the increasingly commodified nature of leisure (Maguire, 2011).

The commercialisation of sport and commodification of leisure have often been key in driving forward **changes in the way in which sport is being produced and consumed**, with traditional television and radio broadcasts now working alongside newer online and **on-demand platforms; the latter** now accepted as integral parts of the sporting landscape and the wider digital leisure consumption (Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2023; Silk et al., 2016). As a result of the increasing digitalised consumption of leisure, **in our modern-day accelerated culture as Redhead (2016) puts it, referencing Virilio’s appreciation of accelerated modernity (Redhead, 2006)**, consumer preferences are evolving to favour speed and immediate gratification during consumption. **Sport events are being led as a response** to favour the aspects of excitement and entertainment to attract and maintain the interest of younger generations of fans, **who might no longer be interested in or expected to consume sport in their traditional (passive and slow in comparison) format (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018; Sturm, 2020; Crawford, 2004)**. However, despite the need for sporting governing bodies to adopt new practices in this ever-changing space, not all these changes have been met with universal approval.

For example, T20 cricket, a shorter format of the popular sport was developed to respond to an increasing disinterested younger demographic that was finding traditional cricket slow and

difficult to follow (Gilal et al., 2021). T20 is believed to have assisted in increasing both the physical and the virtual consumption of the sport, especially among the younger generation of fans who valued its shorter and more exciting nature of the contests (Gilal et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, and despite the positive reception from generations Y and Z, due to the value placed on excitement and entertainment, it is argued that fans belonging to generation X favoured nostalgia and thus expressed a preference for more traditional formats of the sport (Gilal et al., 2021).

Similar patterns were observed when examining The Hundred, a novel, short, countdown format of cricket competition that was developed by the English & Welsh Cricket Board (ECB) in an attempt to attract new fans (Fletcher et al, 2024a). The initial figures suggest that the competition was able to attract this new audience, however, concerns were also noted regarding the wider and long-term impact on fans' engagement with cricket overall (Fletcher et al, 2024a).

In earlier explorations of resistance to change by traditional sport fans, we also note that most of these changes were eventually accepted by fans. For example, within Dixon's (2014b) review of the 'Disneyfication' of football (Bryman, 1999) responses showed a broadly positive picture. Not only have fans grown to accept the modern methods of commerce and communication within their fandoms but they would complain if these opportunities were reduced (Dixon, 2014b).

All these in turn have led decision makers in sporting bodies to express their belief in the need to forge new sport formats, in fear that the younger generations perceive their current offerings as too slow or time consuming (Sparisci, 2022); remembering that sport directly competes with other (increasingly dominant) leisure activities including computer gaming and time spent on social media (Newman, 2010). Moreover, the attention span of individuals may be reducing due to the bombardment of stimuli facilitated by our increasingly digital

world, with this **believed to be** more prevalent amongst younger demographics who have grown up in the digital era (Newman, 2010). Consequently, the preferences of individuals consuming sport and leisure are believed to increasingly favour speed and immediate gratification, rooted in shorter and more intense viewing sessions (Axford & Huggins, 2011), **something that is also favoured by the algorithms of online platforms, guiding (or dictating) how sport events are to be broadcasted in order for their (online) consumption to increase (Petersen-Wagner & Lee Ludvigsen, 2023).**

While format changes in sports can be suggested for many reasons, including as a response to a decline in the interest from the fans and thus as an attempt to re-ignite their excitement or gain new fans, whether their intended results are being achieved remains uncertain. In this study, we wanted to examine the potential (proclaimed) excitement of fans towards the three different proposed formats of F1 races, and any underlying factors influencing it. Through this, our understanding of fandom and its relationship with change in sport can be also deepened, further assisting in exploring its ever-developing nature (Dixon, 2014a,b; Fletcher et al, 2024a).

Data Collection and Methods

Data were gathered through the online survey platform Qualtrics. The survey was distributed via digital forums on motorsport websites and social media groups on Reddit and Facebook. The survey was designed to assess fans' perceptions of Traditional, Sprint, and Reverse F1 formats, focusing on their feelings of excitement. Before the survey was published publicly, seven individuals were recruited for a pilot study to enhance clarity and neutrality and to reduce the potential for misunderstandings (Saunders et al., 2019). Based on the feedback obtained during this process, the current study made minor amendments to improve question clarity and neutrality (e.g., 'on merit' was replaced by 'based on performance').

Data were collected using a multistage sampling approach to maximise survey reach and diversity, while ensuring our sample possessed the required prerequisite knowledge. Firstly, voluntary sampling was employed to maximise our response rate (Ochoa & Revilla, 2023). This is crucial as a larger sample size enhances data reliability and reduces the likelihood of false observations being identified (Ochoa & Revilla, 2023). Secondly, a purposive sampling technique was utilised to ensure that data were relevant, by capturing responses only from fans familiar with the sprint format (Saunders et al., 2019). To achieve this, a screening question “Are you aware of the Sprint Qualifying/Sprint format” was included to filter out individuals who might have stumbled upon the survey without the required knowledge of the format changes we aimed to examine.

The survey was promoted by digital motorsport influencer ChainBear who has more than 530,000 followers on YouTube, including a channel which produces Hispanophone content. The benefits of this voluntary promotion from this influencer were that the survey had a larger reach due to his significant audience. Additionally, because of the analytical nature of ChainBear’s F1 content, and the international demographics of his audience, this endorsement likely significantly increased response quantity and possibly also the reliability of the sample. Through these distribution methods, a total of 2,976 responses were collected. After removing all incomplete answers, we were left with a total of 2,107 completions from 86 nations.

The respondents were predominantly male (90%) and mostly young adults, 18-24 years old (40%) and 25-34 years old (33%). ANOVA was carried out (using the ‘multcomp’ package) to examine the differences in the excitement of F1 fans in consuming three different F1 formats. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test were conducted to further investigate the differences in excitement across the formats after a significant ANOVA result. Then, this study investigated the effects of demographic factors on

fans' intention to watch the F1 Sprint format, employing ordinal logistic regression (using the 'MASS' package). Ordinal logistic regression was used to examine the relationships between an ordinal scale dependent variable (in this case, intention to watch F1) and a combination of ordinal categorical variables (in this case, age and length of fandom) as well as a nominal categorical variable (in this case gender). This method is particularly suited for cases where the dependent variable is ordered, but the distances between the categories are not assumed to be equal, allowing for an analysis of how different factors influence fans' intentions.

Results and Discussion

To meet the aim of the current study, we investigated F1 fans' proclaimed excitement levels in consuming F1 across different race formats: Traditional, Sprint, and Reverse. The results showed that the Sprint format emerged as notably distinct. An ANOVA was conducted initially, which revealed significant differences in excitement among the formats ($F[2, 5817] = 377.76, p < .001$), suggesting a variation in how these formats are perceived by the fans (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the Sprint format showed the lowest excitement mean values compared to the Traditional and Reverse formats.

Subsequent post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test highlighted that the difference in excitement between the Sprint and Traditional formats was statistically significant. In other words, F1 fans' excitement for the Sprint format was lower than for the Traditional format ($p < .001$; see Figure 2). This significant difference in excitement between the Sprint and Traditional formats highlights the challenge F1 faces in innovating while maintaining fan engagement, and contradicts the arguments made by F1 executives that fans enthusiastically welcomed the Sprint format (Cooper, 2021).

On the other hand, the lack of significant differences between the Reverse format and the Traditional format suggests that the new format does not drastically change how fans feel

compared to the Traditional race. This finding supports our focus on the Sprint format for further analysis, as it appears to provoke distinct responses among fans, suggesting a potential divide between novelty and a more traditionalist approach to race-viewing preferences.

As a result of the post-hoc comparisons, the ordinal logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine the effects of age, gender, and length of fandom on the intention to watch the Sprint format. The results indicate that while age and gender do not significantly influence fans' intention, the length of an individual's F1 fandom is the only significant predictor. Specifically, the distribution of excitement across the age categories shows a relatively uniform pattern, suggesting that the appeal of the Sprint format is broadly consistent across different age groups (Figure 3). This in turn would suggest that unlike what is often expected, and indeed found in previous research dealing with stakeholders' perceptions of change, change is not always welcomed by a younger audience (Fletcher et al., 2024a; Gilal et al., 2021). Similarly, gender showed no significant influence on the intention to watch the Sprint format (Figure 4). This finding implies that the Sprint format's appeal transcends gender boundaries at a lower level, which again would contradict previous research pointing to change as a driver of equity for a sport (Fletcher et al., 2024b).

Contrary to age and gender, the length of an individual's F1 fandom significantly influences the intention to watch the Sprint format (Figure 5). Put simply, this means that the longer someone has been a fan of F1 the less likely they are to have a strong intention to watch the Sprint format. This suggests a negative relationship, where newer fans are more open to format innovations compared to longer-term fans. This relationship is statistically significant and highlights a potential divide in preferences between newer and longer-term fans.

The significant effect of the length of fandom on the intention to watch the Sprint format can be interpreted within the wider discussion around novelty versus tradition in sport. Long-standing fans (who are fit within younger demographics) may exhibit a preference for the traditional format of the sport, valuing its history and established norms. In contrast, newer fans, who do not have a long-standing attachment to traditional formats, might be more receptive to innovations and changes within the sport, such as the Sprint format. This echoes the long-going discussions around 'authentic' fans who might reject anything new as 'non-authentic', in an effort to preserve their own conceptualisation of what a fan is (Crawford, 2004). A change is therefore seen as a threat to the traditional 'authentic' sport that makes a fan 'authentic'. This clearly connects back Maguire's (2011) work on how seeking excitement in sport and leisure becomes intricately connected with processes of self-realization and identity-formation. Newer fans who might not yet have acquired the privilege of being considered, and most importantly considering themselves, 'authentic', might be then more open to change since it does not pose the same level of threat to their identity.

Unlike the arguments put forth in other literature, the age of the F1 fans does not seem to be the main driver of their preference towards traditionalism (Gilal et al., 2021), (also bearing in mind the fact that only 4% of the respondents of our study were above 45 years old). Rather, it is the length of their fandom that influences their 'traditional' preferences and potential protectionism they might feel towards the sport and its traditions. This then raises a wider question on what a traditional or authentic fan is in regard to their consumption of leisure. Are traditional fans those who are willing to go through thick and thin to support their sport and fandom (Crawford, 2004), or those who are willing to consume any novel aspect of sport in order to reenforce their identity as fans (Manoli et al., 2024)?

If fans eventually not only accept but welcome the hyper-commodification of their favourite sport (Dixon, 2014; Manoli et al., 2024), and indeed sports themselves change in

line with the broader trends and pressures of our increasingly fast and digital society (Fletcher et al., 2024a; Gilal et al., 2021; Lawrence & Crawford, 2022; Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2023), then the change of the format itself is not surprising. After all, F1 is widely accepted as a mediatised sport (Sturm, 2023), producing sport spectacles that align - and feed on - the digital leisure culture of its fans, while being willing to transform themselves to better align with the intended spectacle (Sturm, 2020). The results of such changes, seeking to augment the much-desired quest for excitement (Maguire, 2017) for the sport, remain to be seen. Our study offers the first indication that fans might not be as excited as proclaimed for the changes ahead.

Conclusion, Limitations and Further Research

From the fandom and leisure consumption perspective in the digital era, the current study revealed that the excitement levels for F1's Sprint format significantly differ from Traditional format, with the Sprint format generating notably lower excitement among fans. Moreover, this research added to literature in another significant way; presenting novel empirical evidence that connects sociological theory, on the quest for excitement in sport and leisure, with generational differences in fandom (both inter- and *intra*- generational). We offered a novel, and statistically significant, insight on how fandom 'tenure' (i.e., the length of individuals self-identified F1 fandom), *within* the same nominal younger generation(s), can dramatically affect their receptivity to sport format changes. This is a critical insight for sport organisations that explicitly target young people as a key demographic they need to attract and excite. It is critical that researchers (and sport decisions makers) more explicitly parse out *intra*-generational differences in sport audiences, alongside the widely accepted focus on inter-generational difference (as demonstrated in the literature), if they are to understand fan excitement about sport format changes.

It is worth acknowledging nonetheless, that despite our efforts to collect data from a wide range of participants, only 4% of respondents were above 45 years of age and only 6.1% overall identified as female. Both these percentages are smaller than what the F1 fan survey (F1FS) suggests their fan base consists of (GPDA, 2021), raising thus a question on the representativeness of our sample. Indeed, the use of an online survey which was also promoted by a popular male Youtuber might have influenced the makeup of the sample of our study. While these choices assisted us in securing a high number of responses (and delve into **the previously unknown** *intra*-generational differences in fandom), future research should utilise different data collection methods to better target F1 fans that were not captured in our study and access their excitement towards the proposed formats. Collecting qualitative data through interviews and focus groups could also assist in exploring the underlying reasons for this resistance among long-term fans and identify ways to effectively introduce new formats that can cater to all new and long-term fans.

Additionally, qualitative research might provide deeper insights into the values and expectations that long-term fans hold, which influences their reticence toward the Sprint format. Understanding fans' predispositions to change and their proclaimed excitement (and any influential underlying factors) can also be researched in different sporting and leisure contexts, that are more or less modern and mediatised than F1. Further studies could also explore fans' underlying reasons for their resistance or acceptance of new formats using longitudinal studies to see their changing perceptions and acceptance levels over time, **as well as any changing patterns in attention spans and likelihood for shorter formats to be preferred over longer ones**. After all, in our increasingly changing consumption of leisure in digital times (Lawrence & Crawford, 2022; Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2023), such research can help us see how changes designed to increase excitement and engagement in sport are actually perceived by its own fans (Fletcher et al., 2024a).

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Figures

Figure 1: Comparison of Excitement Across F1 Formats

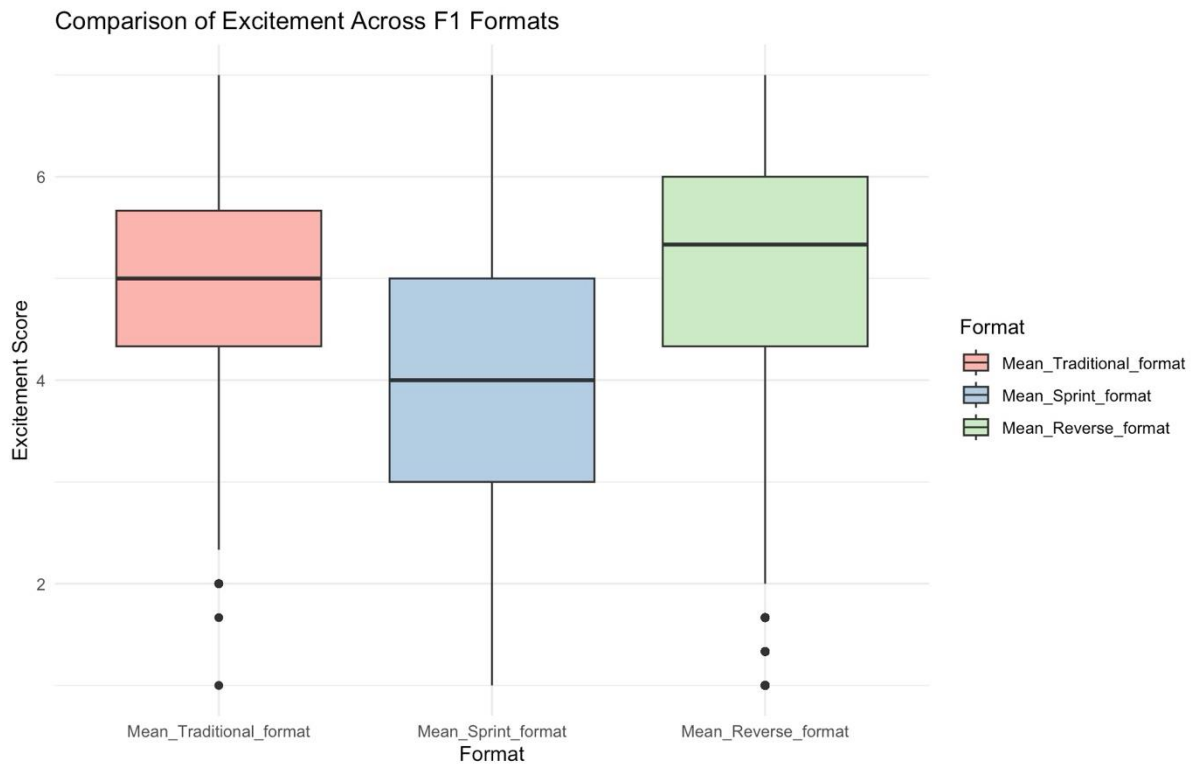


Figure 2: Comparison of Excitement Across F1 Formats – Tukey's Post-Hoc Test

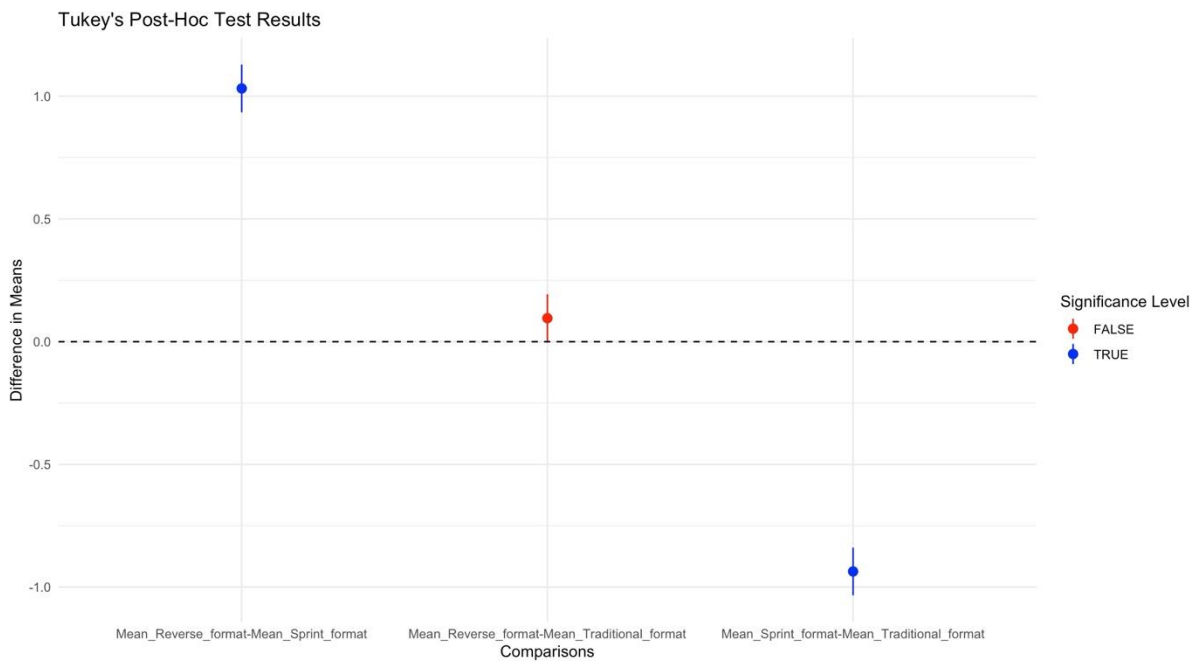


Figure 3: Effect of Age on Intention to Watch Sprint

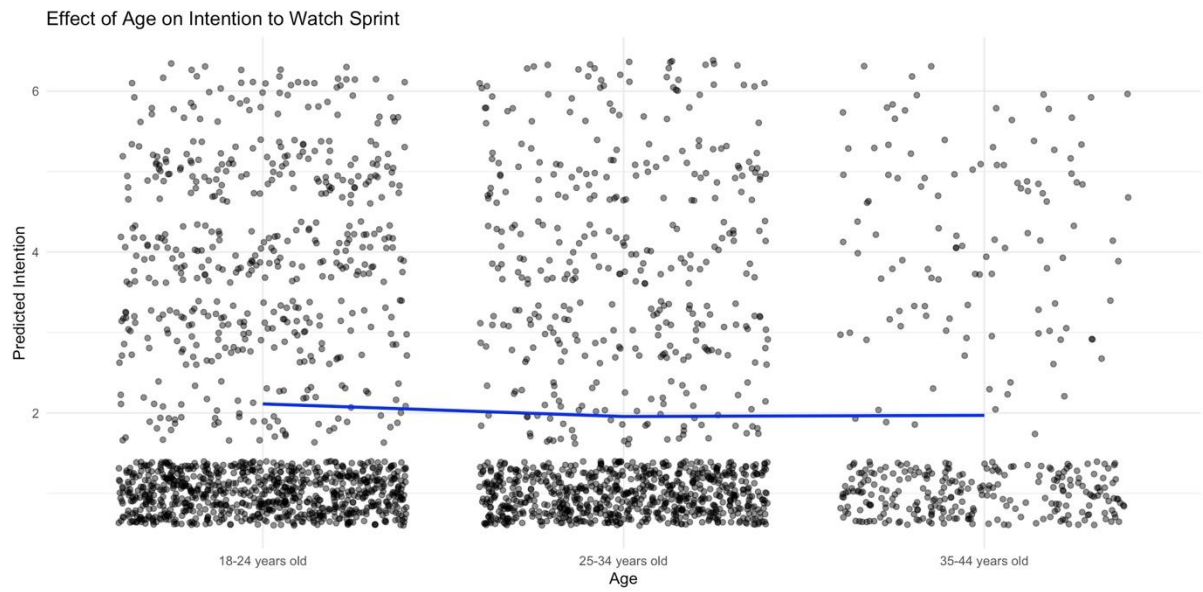


Figure 4: Effect of Gender on Intention to Watch Sprint

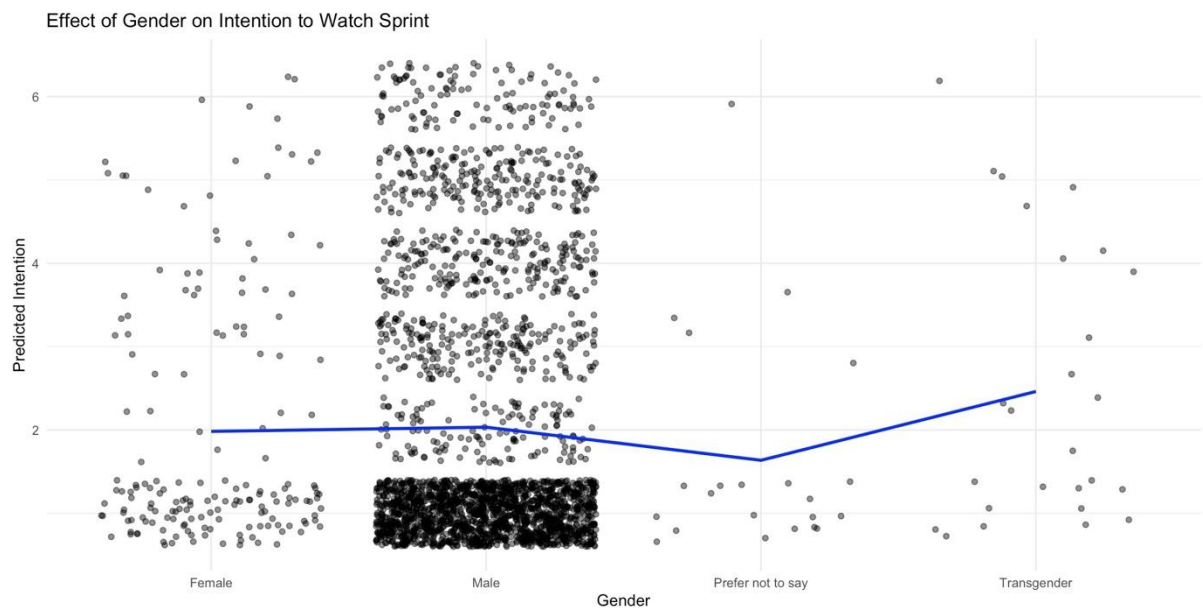


Figure 5: Effect of Length of Fandom on Intention to Watch Sprint

