Fast But Feminine? A Discourse Analysis of Women in Formula 1 Media

Julie Schneider-Reuter[1*]

[1]BSc. Sociology

[*]Corresponding author. Email: julie.schneider-reuter@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this article is to review the representation of female drivers within Formula 1 media, placing particular emphasis on how official reporting constructs gendered identities through language and tone. To contextualize this, the article begins by evaluating existing literature on the historical development of motorsport and the role of media in shaping today's narratives around female drivers. Implementing Pflugfelder's (2009) cyborg-like identity theory, the analysis interprets driver-car discourse as a negotiation of bodily legitimacy within a male-defined sporting environment. By conducting a comparative qualitative content analysis of Formula 1 and F1 Academy reporting, this study examines how linguistic framing shapes female driver visibility, agency, and authenticity. Three themes emerged from the analysis: masculinization of women, passive and active language, and provisional legitimacy. The first highlights how female athletes must adopt masculine-coded traits to be recognized as competent. The second concerns the subtle reduction of women to bodies, where achievement is softened, and mistakes are emphasized. The last theme investigates the persistent positioning of women as not yet fully legitimate competitors. The conclusion is that the official Formula 1 news website, despite appearing neutral, continues to reinforce gendered hierarchies in which female drivers are framed as provisional, exceptional, and outsiders rather than equals.

Keywords

Formula 1, Gender, Media representation, Cyborg-like identity theory, Comparative Content Analysis

1. Introduction

With millions of fans worldwide, Formula 1 (F1) is recognized as the most prestigious global championship for open-wheel single-seater racing. Each season, ten teams, each consisting of two drivers, compete for both the Constructors' Championship and the Drivers' Championship. But even though the sport is not explicitly gender segregated, only seven women have ever participated in an F1 weekend (Howe, 2022).

This ongoing gender imbalance can be credited to multiple interconnecting factors. To become an F1 driver, one needs money, time, and social support. Societal gender norms portray men as more interested in motorsport careers, which indirectly influences parental decisions about how and which of their children to support for early engagement (Kochanek et al., 2021). Once part of the sport, sponsorship dynamics reflect and reinforce this bias. Brands that provide financial backing tend to favor male drivers, who are perceived as more visible, marketable, and more likely to reach (and remain in) Formula 1.

In recent years, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the governing body responsible for F1, has increasingly emphasized the importance of promoting inclusivity and tried to actively encourage female involvement in motorsport. In 2022, the FIA launched the F1 Academy (F1A), a female-only racing series designed to develop talent and give women progressing from karting to single-seater racing more visibility. Its inaugural season took place in 2023, with only the season finale race being broadcasted. However, in 2024, the FIA expanded its efforts by broadcasting every race and creating stronger ties between the F1 Academy and other Formula series.

Despite the FIA's public commitment to support female drivers, many fans are skeptical about the sincerity behind these efforts. This skepticism stems mostly from the controversies surrounding the current FIA president, Mohammed Ben Sulayem, including accusations of misogynistic remarks, the introduction of regulations restricting drivers from making "political, religious, or personal statements," and his close alignment with countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which have been criticized for anti-homosexual and sexist legislation (Sport, 2023). It has been argued by fans that the FIA's promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment functions, at least in part, as a public relations strategy (Richards, 2023; Reddit, 2024).

To critically examine the motives behind the FIA's gender inclusivity initiatives, this study will analyze the official Formula 1 news website (Formula 1, 2024a) to assess how women in motorsport are represented during the 2024 season. By conducting a comparative content analysis, this article identifies three themes that reveal how Formula 1's official media coverage constructs female drivers in comparison to male drivers. These themes are: (1) Masculinization of Women, (2) Passive and Active Language, and (3) Provisional Legitimacy. The study addresses the following research question: *How does the official Formula 1 news website use language and tone to represent women in motorsport?*

2. Literature Review

Officially, F1 has never prohibited female drivers from participating, as it is considered a unisex sport. But since its establishment in 1950, only seven women have ever sat in an F1 racing car seat, only five have actually driven a race, and only one has scored points (Howe, 2022; Matthew & Pike, 2016). The last driver was Susie Wolff in 2012, who was a test driver for Williams Renault and participated during one of the practice sessions. Afterward, she decided to quit her Formula 1 career, since she believed it just wasn't "going to happen" (Matthew & Pike, 2016, p. 1534).

With her experience in mind, Susie Wolff then launched the F1 Academy (F1A) in 2022, which began in 2023 as an all-female single-seater series. She states that the series was designed to help female drivers progress into Formula 3 (Leopold, 2023). But even though F1A is clearly defined to be a 'feeder' league like F2 and F3 (Brittle, 2022), except for the masculine-style reportage, these championships remain far from equal. The F1A uses lower-powered F4 cars, receives less monetary profits, and up until now, none of the graduating drivers have gotten the higher tiers.

So even though this support exists, F1 is still considered an inherently masculine environment. This is evident from the fact that men are still over-represented in motorsport, from drivers to mechanics and team owners (Kochanek et al., 2021; Musto et al.,2017). The implication that women cannot drive as fast and/or good as a man

is subliminally reinforced by multiple reasons. Special focus is set on three causes: historical background, financial challenges, and media representation and visibility.

2.1.1 Historical Background

Historically, when cars were first introduced to society, they were made by and for men. With the first affordable cars emerging in 1908, the automobile was invented within a society shaped by class, race, gender, and sexuality, all expressed through a social discourse (Sloop, 2005). So, from day one, having been marketed exclusively to men, the car carried a gendered dimension. Motoring and motorsport were viewed as inherently masculine and incompatible with feminine traits. The cultural belief that only men could drive cars was reinforced through a market system in which popular norms generated favorable economic outcomes (Sloop, 2005). Because cars were symbolically associated with masculinity, women were often seen as out of place within car culture.

Although women have participated in motor racing since 1888 in Britain (Ferguson et al., 2019), motorsport was first organized by elitist and exclusive gentlemen's clubs, who actively worked against women's participation (Howe, 2022). This pattern persists today, as most drivers enter the sport through family, with parents (typically fathers) more likely to encourage sons than daughters. Even when entering the field, a study by Kochanek et al. (2021) who did interviews with professional female drivers revealed that, women are often underestimated and not taken seriously in the field and therefore have fewer chances to climb up the motorsport career ladder.

2.1.2 Financial challenges

Having private capital available is often the only way for drivers of any gender to get into motorsport, especially single-seaters. Later, when proven their worth, drivers must network for themselves to attract sponsors. But while their male counterparts receive sponsors due to merit, female drivers often were "strung along" (Matthew & Pike, 2021, p. 5). If a woman is good, but not pretty enough, sponsors would not look at her. But if a female driver is too pretty, she "calls for attention" (Matthew & Pike, 2021, p.8). Female drivers, therefore, must constantly manage how they are perceived by those in power.

The motorsport field is mostly (not all) upper-class, and people with fewer options for social mobility need to work harder. In Kochanek et al.'s (2021) study, the female drivers talked about having to use their femininity to gain financial resources. They highlighted the fear of becoming a "token" driver, having to secure sponsors while avoiding being seen as merely fulfilling a quota or marketed as the next Danica Patrick (famous female IndyCar driver). This, in turn, often led to them not being taken seriously and having their merit questioned.

If women in F1 are denied equal opportunities, the notion that they are inferior drivers persists. This belief will only begin to change when a female driver is given the chance to succeed and performs well. However, simply performing well will not shift public perceptions of female drivers without media attention.

2.1.3 Media representation and visibility

There is still significant media inequality within sports in relation to gender. Whether in the questions journalists ask female athletes, assumptions about female fans, or the limited airtime they receive (Kissane & Winslow, 2016). In a study on televised sport, Musto et al. (2017) found that women's sport stories are about 50 percent shorter than those of men. Having a look at F1TV, the official broadcaster of the Formula championships, an F1 weekend includes roughly 4 to 5 hours of broadcasted racing (plus additional formats, such as press

conferences and interviews) compared to about 2.5 hours for F1A. Not only that, but the F1 season is currently 24 races long, while the F1A season has only 7 races. This is partly due to financial constraints, but most importantly, it should be mentioned that F1A is a "feeder" series, supposedly leading drivers to F3. This means a direct comparison with F1 is unfair since they are simply different leagues. Nevertheless, it has significant implications for driver exposure and development.

When the media adequately represents women, they become visible, and visibility brings relevance. Especially, the lack of culturally relevant role models is significant, since without such inspiration, young girls in karting lack the encouragement to pursue a professional motorsport career (Meier, 2015; Howe, 2020). Matthews and Pike (2016) found that participants believed that "a woman participating in the 'pinnacle' of motor-racing, F1, would help challenge societal assumptions regarding women motor-racing drivers" (p. 1546). Achieving equal opportunities for women drivers depends on having prominent female leaders and role models in the media.

Unfortunately, the efforts to achieve equal representation can sometimes backfire and reinforce the perception that women's participation is based on reaching a gender quota rather than on merit. Krane (2001) notes that female drivers find themselves in a no-win situation. They must showcase their skills and capabilities like their 'masculine' colleagues to not be judged as weak and inferior. But at the same time, they must avoid being criticized for displaying overly masculine behavior. To appeal to both sponsors and fans, they must balance their career ambitions while displaying heterosexual femininity (Howe, 2022).

However, merely increasing the number of female drivers does not guarantee greater representation or a shift in gender dynamics. Being present does not necessarily make them visible. Long-term progress in gender equality also depends on the presence of high-quality role models (Meier, 2015). After all, even when people retreat from the sport since they do not feel like they will succeed, they are still part of the community. Looking at Susie Wolff's focus on promoting female drivers, it becomes clear that the importance of a female-only championship lies in demonstrating that women can compete, challenging societal assumptions about their abilities (Kissane & Winslow, 2016; Matthew & Pike, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Although driving is theoretically a gender-neutral skill, it has long been tied to masculinity and heteronormative ideas of power, control, and identity. Drivers are never truly neutral. Their actions are interpreted through social meanings attached to their bodies. A male driver may be read as embodying control and dominance, while female drivers are often seen as challenging masculine norms (Sloop, 2005). Simply performing well does not negate these gendered interpretations; women are judged both on skill and on whether they conform to social expectations of femininity.

Pflugfelder (2009) draws on Haraway's cyborg metaphor when he uses the term "cyborg-like identities" to describe the way motorsport discourse merges a driver's body with the race car, presenting them as a single hybrid organism. This is rhetorically constructed through discourse as fans and media often talk about drivers as if the vehicle were an extension of the person's skin, personality, and cognition. While male drivers are granted full techno-agency (the embodied ability to use technology for action), female drivers are portrayed as emotional or aspiring and thus denied full cyborg legitimacy. Howe (2022)

extends Pflugfelder's (2009) theory by showing how female drivers in elite motorsport must perform masculinity and suppress bodily difference to access partial legitimacy within a male-defined cyborg framework. Pflugfelder (2009) analyzes the female body in relation to the vehicle in three phases: *the body beyond the vehicle*, *the body with the vehicle*, and *the body in the vehicle*.

The first phase of Pflugfelder's (2009) analysis focuses on the social and cultural meanings attached to women drivers outside the actual driving experience. Cultural narratives shape how female drivers are perceived even before they enter the car, from their presence in a male-dominated sport to the marketing of femininity and assumptions about skill. This reflects a social constructivist view, which holds that our ideas of what is "masculine" or "feminine" are continually produced through social discourse, norms, and everyday interactions (Kochanek et al., 2021). Gender is not something a person simply 'has', but it is assigned and imposed upon from birth as individuals learn which gendered behaviors are considered socially (un)acceptable. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of perception, the body does not exist as a passive object within pre-existing coordinates but actively creates and organizes space through movement and engagement with the world (Young, 1990; Pflugfelder, 2009). Accordingly, a woman's bodily presence in motorsport is inseparable from gendered interpretations, as her orientation, posture, and actions are immediately read through social expectations, making her gender highly visible before any performance occurs.

Pflugfelder (2009) argues that the driver's body is not erased by the machine. Even though the vehicle is central, observers do not just see the car, but also the race and gender of the driver. Because athleticism is culturally equated with masculinity and positioned as the opposite of femininity, the female body becomes a site where femininity is judged against the 'natural' masculine sport model. As a result, the female driver is often not taken seriously, viewed as less marketable, and made to feel out of place. F1A attempts to disrupt this dynamic by creating a space where the female body can act according to its own standards.

The second phase focuses on the driver's relationship to the car as an object and tool. Here, Pflugfelder (2009) argues that *the vehicle* implies an intimate interaction, in which control and trust are negotiated between human and technology. Female drivers are then disrupting the idea of a neutral, unified driver-machine identity. Their presence makes gender distinctions visible, and the car itself becomes a gendered extension of the body (he calls it a *prosthetic*), carrying cultural meanings beyond its mechanical function.

It is often spoken of a driver's driving style as 'driving identity'. For example, Max Verstappen (four-time F1 champion) is widely described as a 'ruthless' driver. Fans see his aggressive overtakes and forceful defense as extensions of his personality, so that his public identity on track blends smoothly into perceptions of him off-track as a confronting, and sometimes even hostile, figure. His Red Bull car and its movements fuse with his persona, forming a unified cyborg identity in which driver and machine are perceived as one. In motorsport discourse, this identity is inseparable from the machine's appearance, movement, and performance. Although the car may allow equal physical performance, social and cultural norms attach preexisting gendered expectations to drivers, shaping how their skills and actions are perceived.

For male drivers like Verstappen, this cyborg identity appears seamless. For female drivers, however, gendered discourse interrupts this union. The racing community often assumes women are weaker or less capable, which can lead to female drivers internalizing these beliefs and interpreting their effort as a sign of weakness

(Kochanek et al., 2021). This shows how social discourse shapes the lived experience of the body, linking cultural meaning to physical performance. Women drivers' heightened symbolism further destabilizes their driver-car identity in a male-dominated sport. Initiatives such as female 'feeder' leagues are therefore crucial, as they demonstrate that women are not merely passive victims of discrimination but can actively navigate, negotiate, and challenge the structures that marginalize them.

The third phase focuses on the first-person experience of driving, the pure moment of 'embodied subjectivity' in racing. Yet, even in this intensely personal state, cultural narratives intrude. Since the beginning, women's presence in cars has drawn attention. Merely being seen inside a car made women highly visible, while actually driving one provoked controversy for defying social expectations (Scharff, 1991, cited in Pflugfelder, 2009). Women's bodies are always noticed and interpreted through gendered meanings, caught between two contradictory views: one claims they become gender-neutral when driving, judged purely on skill, the other insists they remain essentially feminine.

Dominant cultural ideas construct what it means to be a woman in motorsport. When female drivers are read as embodying femininity, they reinforce these narratives, solidifying their position within a gendered discourse. As a result, fans and media often frame their performance through a cultural lens that assumes a specifically feminine (and often inferior) way of driving, even when their physical techniques match those of male drivers.

The creation of an exclusively women's championship, such as F1A, complicates this dynamic. Running separately from F1 may reinforce perceptions of female drivers as 'Others' (Beauvoir, 2011, as cited by Howe, 2022), granting them a status of 'separate but equal' while masking deeper inequalities. Despite potential criticisms of marginalization or being "just a women's race," the series provides an important platform for female drivers, offering opportunities to advance into F1 and challenge the gendered structures of motorsport.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a comparative qualitative content analysis to examine x The analysis focuses on two related news channels, the Formula 1 news channel and the F1 Academy news channel. This website was selected because it is F1's primary news platform and therefore influential in shaping the public perception of the sport. This comparative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of possible differences or similarities in representation across the two championships in connection to gender perceptions.

The analysis focuses on two main dimensions. First, the language used. This includes identifying descriptive terms used for female drivers and assessing whether the narrative emphasized drivers' achievements, personality traits, or physical appearance. Second, attention was given to the tone of the coverage, evaluating whether it is praising, dismissive, or neutral. Especially focusing on whether coverage portrayed female drivers as empowering or exceptional.

A total of 10 articles were selected for analysis, five from the F1 news channel and five from the F1 Academy news channel. The selection was based on ensuring a balanced distribution across the 2024 season, with one article from the early season, capturing introductory coverage; two articles from the mid-season period, reflecting potential escalation as competition rises; and two articles from the late season, focusing on championship

achievements. Only articles published during the 2024 season were included, excluding off-season material. The analysis focused solely on 'report' articles, as their longer narrative format centers on race events and driver performance.

Frist, reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to identify recurring patterns, and then Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), a subtype of Discourse Analysis (DA), was applied to uncover deeper meanings. This combination allowed linking patterned meanings in the data with their broader socio-political construction. Following Braun and Clarke (2022), TA was treated as the identification of shared meanings organized around central concepts. Recurring patterns such as 'active language' and 'passive language' or other stylistic devices were identified as initial codes. But TA's dependency on thematic coherence can lead to overlooking contradictions or variability, therefore drawing boundaries between themes can involve subjectivity and therefore biases.

Subsequently, applying Discourse Analysis, as discussed by Gill (2000), means paying close attention to how language functions in context: how it performs actions, negotiates identities, constructs norms, and sustains power relations. The initial codes were therefore further developed as it was analyzed not just *what* was said about F1/F1A, but *how* and *why* it was said, within institutional, historical, and cultural settings. Using FCDA (Lazar, 2005) was particularly useful in examining how rhetorical strategies such as a 'neutral tone' and 'subtle undermining of dominance' revealed the reinforcement of a masculine narrative.

3.1 Positionality

When doing qualitative analysis, in this case specifically FCDA, it is important to put oneself in relation to the project. Questioning and reflecting your positionality as a researcher can help reduce subjectivity and biases. I came up with specifically 2 character attributes of mine that could and did influence my interaction with the data.

Firstly, I identify as female, a positionality that is inherently relevant to a gender-focused research question. This identification makes me more aware of gender norms and sensitizes me to issues of underrepresentation and marginalization within motorsport, thereby motivating me to analyze the representation of women in Formula 1 media. However, this embodied feminism also presents the potential risk of over-interpreting gender-related dynamics or approaching the data with preconceived expectations of bias.

Secondly, my engagement with Formula 1 has been both long-lasting and intensive. I possess a considerable degree of knowledge about the sport and am aware of the public discourses and popular opinions surrounding the sport. This puts me in a dual position. On the one hand, my extensive knowledge allows me to interpret the subjective meanings embedded within media representations with greater nuance and sensitivity. On the other hand, my personal investment and interest in the sport may introduce biases and blind spots, potentially affecting my analytical objectivity.

It is therefore essential to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process to minimize these risks and keep critical distance. This methodology aims to provide a systematic understanding of how women in motorsport are represented on the official Formula 1 news website throughout 2024. By comparing language and tone across the F1 and F1A news channels, the study seeks to reveal whether coverage reflects genuine support for female drivers or sustains universal gendered opinions.

4. Body

4.1 Masculinization of Women

At first glance, the Formula 1 (F1) and Formula 1 Academy (F1A) articles appear linguistically neutral. Apart from the length and depth of the articles there is not much of a difference. The language seems neutral, and the tone has no underlying meaning. But when looking closer, this neutral language reflects something that is not there: a recognition of femineity within motorsport.

The authors of F1TV seem to try their best to be unbiased towards both genders and report objectively about the happenings on track. But the linguistic uniformity reflects the dominance of masculine norms that shape Formula 1 and, by extension, its female counterpart. Because F1 Academy was established later, it therefore had to adapt to pre-existing masculine standards. Even though the FIA stated the aim to support women's inclusion, structural disparities remain. This discrepancy between rhetoric and reality reveals how 'neutrality' itself can reproduce inequality.

As Howe (2022) notes, women-centered leagues risk slipping into Beauvoir's notion of "*Otherness*," where women are defined primarily in relation to men and positioned in opposition. In the F1A context, female drivers must balance conformity to masculine-coded performance norms with the expectations of femininity. For example, the following sentence shows agency, speed, and decisiveness: *"Tasked with getting racing back underway into Lap 5, Pin slowed the pack right down, catching Pulling unawares, as she bolted down the main straight to start building a seven-tenths gap"* (F1® Academy, 2024a). The author(s) use words like "*bolted*" to associate dominant racing terms with female identities. The phrase "*catching Pulling unawares*" implies a strategic outmaneuvering of another female driver. While it emphasizes competition and tactical thinking, it constructs Pin as a "cyborg-like" driver (in line with Pflugfelder, 2009), showing mastery over machine and strategy, a portrayal that grants her partial inclusion in the masculine-coded world of F1.

The creation of an only-women championship creates a 'separate-but-equal' status (Howe, 2022) and therefore a subordinate of the original. As mentioned before, these championships are factually not equal. F1 Academy drivers drive cars, that are slower than F4 cars. Even Max Verstappen, 4-time world champion, argues, "there is no next step for [the F1A drivers] now. For example, the gap to a Formula 4 car is already too big" (Mountford, 2024). He and others have argued that female drivers need better machinery to showcase their abilities, as advancing to higher levels becomes increasingly difficult due to the limited number of available seats. The slower cars make the technology itself a visible marker of difference, contradicting the claim that the vehicle is neutral and reinforcing the narrative that women need "better" machines to prove competence.

This shows how the car is infused within the driver's ability. Female drivers are only legitimized when they adopt the masculine-coded cyborg attributes of dominance, machine logic, and emotional detachment that the mainstream discourse valorizes. In the language of F1 TV, this is reflected in descriptions of drivers "wrestling" (F1® Academy, 2024a) or "dominating" (F1® Academy, 2024b). In Pflugfelder's terms, the women-only series does not create a new, gender-neutral cyborg identity; it sustains the existing gendered assemblage by positioning women as a subordinate, technologically-mediated "other", having to conform to masculine characteristics.

And this 'masculinization' is, in return, reproduced by the drivers themselves. Female drivers often deliberately adopt a more 'tomboyish'-appearance to be legitimized within the male-dominated environment

(Matthew & Pike, 2016). In Kochanek et al.'s (2021) study on the agency of professional women racecar drivers, the participants talked about a "masculine […] switch" (p. 7) and adapting a "'just-a-driver mentality" (p.7), emphasizing their identity as drivers rather than *female* drivers. Becoming one with a car, an inherently masculine space, can diminish the driver's femininity and render her symbolically masculine. While this mindset can be empowering, allowing women to focus on skill and performance and thereby gain legitimacy, it also can be seen as disempowering, because it requires them to adapt to a masculine norm. This shows a paradox of seemingly exercising agency and choice, yet their agency remains restricted by the deeply gendered structure of the sport.

Ultimately, female drivers face two choices: to distance themselves from femininity and the traditional idea of being 'a woman', or to embrace womanhood, thereby reproducing stereotypes. On the one hand, rejecting the feminine framework may help women gain acceptance within the sport, but it also reinforces media-driven stereotypes that associate femininity with incompetence. On the other hand, when womanhood is embraced, it can show that femininity and success can coexist, although this still reproduces heteronormativity as women then act 'masculine' (Kochanek et al., 2021; Kissane & Winslow, 2016).

4.2 Passive and Active Language

Another pattern that emerged in my comparison of F1 and F1A articles is the strategic use of passive and active language. In the F1 articles, male drivers are frequently represented through active constructions when they perform well, reinforcing their agency and control ("*Max Verstappen set the fastest time […]"* (Formula 1, 2024d)). However, when male drivers make mistakes, the language often shifts toward passive or softened phrasing, thereby minimizing personal fault and preserving their legitimacy as elite competitors (*"Yuki Tsunoda found himself out of Q2 […]*" (Formula 1, 2024f)).

In contrast, the F1 Academy coverage shows the opposite tendency. Female drivers' successes are commonly framed in passive or reflexive voice, for example in lines like *"Pin found herself quickest once again"* (F1® Academy, 2024b). This wording distances the driver from their own achievement, presenting progress as something that happens to them rather than something they actively produce. When it comes to mistakes or setbacks, however, the discourse surrounding female drivers becomes noticeably more active. Phrases like *"Bianca Bustamante losing the rear of her McLaren […]"* (F1® Academy, 2024d) place clear emphasis on action and responsibility, subtly implying that female drivers lack control or fail to master the vehicle.

Musto et al. (2017) found similar description in their study, showing that this phenomenon is nothing new. By giving men agentic, powerful descriptions and giving women flat, bland descriptions, commentators covertly uphold the idea that male athletes are inherently stronger and more impressive. Male drivers are discursively positioned as naturalized cyborgs: in control, efficient, and technologically competent (Pflugfelder, 2009). The machine becomes an extension of their body, and their identity as high-performing techno-subjects is reinforced. Female drivers, on the other hand, are represented as partial or unstable cyborgs, whose relationship with the machine is tentative or conditional. This reveals a misunderstood societal understanding. Men are judged as individuals, meaning if a male driver makes a mistake, it is *he* who is at fault. Female drivers are instead judged as a group. If a woman drives badly, it is not just her who made a mistake, but it is understood as a *natural* female characteristic (Howe, 2022). When women's performance is not seen as individual ability but as the automatic result of their biological sex, they lose their subjectivity and are transformed into a generalized type. This is also understood as objectification.

Combined with 'bland' language, this normalizes a hierarchy between men's and women's sport (Musto et al., 2017). While this might avoid being called a sexist, it frames inequality as a natural evaluation of merit or talent. The disguise of overt sexism as individual assessment makes the bias appear reasonable rather than discriminatory, and it is harder to challenge. Given the substantial time and financial investment, the FIA has put into the F1A to support female drivers and challenge gendered narratives in the sport, they are fully aware that overt sexism is no longer publicly acceptable. Practices such as excluding women entirely from the sport, making medical claims about female drivers, or openly trivializing and sexualizing them are now widely recognized as offensive. People today understand the consequences (including the damage to the FIA's public image) of expressing explicit sexism. However, rather than fully reflecting on these issues or acknowledging them, sexism does not disappear; it simply becomes more indirect.

Their perceived lack of control, highlighted through language, suggests that they have not fully achieved techno-agency. This gendered asymmetry in narrative voice and attribution of agency reflects deeper structural inequalities in motorsport discourse. Covering women's sports in a 'just the facts' style makes them appear less exciting and emotionally engaging. Even when women perform at a high level, the absence of enthusiastic or powerful language diminishes the perceived significance of their achievements. This undermines the goal of F1 Academy, which aims to show that female drivers can compete with male drivers and deserve a place in the top league. Subtle grammatical choices reaffirm gendered power dynamics, with female drivers continually having to prove their right to belong in the motorsport space.

4.3 Provisional Legitimacy

This construction of the male drivers being framed as already-legitimate cyborg-athletes and female drivers as aspiring, not fully "*cyborged*"-athletes, can also be seen by the strategic use of euphemisms. This stylistic device diminishes female agency as it downplays potential negative or weak realities. For example, women drivers are "*trying to progress*" (F1® Academy, 2024e), "*attempting*" (F1® Academy, 2024c), or "*gave it their best*" (F1® Academy, 2024d). Such phrasing praises effort rather than achievement, aligning with FCDA's observation that women's actions are often discursively softened or diminished, reinforcing traditional gender norms that celebrate commitment over power.

Howe (2022) notes that women in male-dominated technical arenas are often portrayed as 'still arriving', as if their belonging is always conditional and under evaluation. This framing displays their participation as provisional, denying them the full status given to their male counterparts. The emphasis on them *having to achieve something* shifts responsibility onto the individual woman, reinforcing the notion that their progress depends solely on personal resilience. Even when F1TV expresses support for female drivers, their linguistic choices often show underlying skepticism. The rhetoric of support appears on the surface, while at the same time reinforcing the idea that women's place in the sport remains exceptional and uncertain.

To appear supportive without seeming biased, the media often downplays differences, praising female drivers for 'trying' rather than fully recognizing their achievements. By ignoring the gendered presence of women in the race car, the author(s) are rhetorically legitimizing women within the ideology of technology and merit-based competition. However, this offers little real encouragement, due to the tension between the aspirational identity women are expected to perform and the social pressures to conform (Pflugfelder, 2009). Women are thus caught

between demonstrating competence to achieve legitimacy and navigating societal expectations that their success remain exceptional rather than normalized.

This provisional framing echoes broader patterns of feminine embodiment. Young (1990) argues that women are often underestimated; they come to believe these judgments and eventually internalize them. They learn to inhabit space as limited, internalize others' underestimation of their capacities, and experience their bodies as both subject and object. In her essay, Young (1990) writes that the body is the primary site where the world is given and where one can act toward it and that "the most primordial intentional act is the motion of the body orienting itself with respect to…its surroundings" (p.35). In other words, women learn to inhabit the world under constraints, such as restricted space, internalized self-limitation, objectification, and split bodily awareness. Their movement is therefore constricted, careful, and hesitant. A woman does not act entirely freely; she is also vigilant of her surroundings. This double awareness prevents full absorption in the activity itself, splitting her engagement between perceiving the world as it is and negotiating her place within it. Media discourse mirrors this structure: by praising effort over achievement and depicting women as continually aspiring, it reproduces the gendered assumption that female competence is exceptional, fragile, and always under evaluation.

In sum, the construction of legitimacy for women drivers is inseparable from their aspirational identity: their efforts and presence are continuously measured against male norms, while their achievements are discursively softened, producing a provisional legitimacy that must constantly be earned. F1 Academy aims to present female drivers as fully capable and ready for progression; however, by framing them as "not ready yet," this discourse weakens the claim that they belong in higher tiers such as F4 or F3. As a result, drivers are positioned as perpetually aspiring, limiting the series' ability to function as a credible pathway to higher levels of motorsport.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how the official F1/ F1A news website represents women in motorsport through its use of language and tone during the 2024 season in comparison to male drivers. While readers would not see much of a difference at first glance, further confrontation shows that, despite the FIA's public emphasis on inclusivity, the media coverage continues to discursively position female drivers as peripheral, provisional, and aspirational. Three themes were developed: masculinization of women, passive and active language, and provisional legitimacy, highlighting how gendered power dynamics are reproduced even in seemingly neutral or supportive narratives.

Gender in sport is a much talked about topic. But instead of ignoring the aspect altogether, it is important to look at the intersectional personal experience of athletes. By participating in such a masculine environment, women work hard on mental and physical skills to succeed in races and to push against traditional male dominance in the sport. At the same time, they are expected to meet higher standards than male drivers, which can be socially and emotionally demanding. Dismissing the issue ignores lived realities and continues to reinforce unfair gender roles, keeping women in a marginalized position (Kochanek et al., 2021; Howe, 2022).

By combining Pflugfelder's (2009) theory of the cyborg-like identity and the application of FCDA, it was possible to unpack the ideological functions of tone, word choice, and grammatical framing, revealing the extent to which language contributes to the symbolic marginalization of female athletes. Female drivers navigate a

paradoxical space: they must adopt masculine-coded behaviors and identities to gain legitimacy while simultaneously managing societal expectations of femininity. Overt forms of sexism in media outlets further invisibilizes the challenges female drivers face (Musto et al., 2017). Women in motorsport are still judged by male standards, showing that equality needs more than just access; it also requires changing the culture and ideas of what counts as skill and value in the sport.

It is important to note that the Formula 1 Academy was only established three years ago, and social change and acceptance take time. Also, comparing the Academy directly to Formula 1 may be misleading, as it is not intended to be a female version of F1. Rather, it aligns more closely with F4 or F3 and is officially considered a "feeder" series. Future research comparing it to other feeder leagues could therefore offer a more accurate assessment of the FIA's efforts to promote female talent. Formula 1 is understood as a relatively newer sport, with popularity only rising increasingly. Analyzing other media channels and/or analyzing TV broadcasts could enhance the spectrum and reachability of portrayed perspectives.

Finally, should the F1 Academy persist, future research could explore how participation has impacted the drivers who have so far become champions. Once the point arrives where it is normal for women to be part of F1, this analysis could look very different. The more female drivers gain experience in the sport, the more they improve their performances, further strengthening the perception of female drivers as legitimate.

Ultimately, this study shows that the representation of women in elite motorsport is not simply a matter of visibility, but of *how* that visibility is constructed. Even when female drivers are praised or celebrated, the underlying narrative often reinforces their outsider status. As the F1 Academy continues fostering its goal, it will be crucial to assess whether discursive patterns are change over time.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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