A Qualitative Case Study Analysis of the Impact of Atmospheric Music on Sport Consumer Attitudes and Behaviors

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The effects of background, or atmospheric, music has long been the focus of study in the marketing and psychology literature. The effect background music can have on consumer attitudes, emotional responses and behaviors have been of particular interest. Although there has been much research regarding the effects of music within consumer settings, such as bars (Guegen, Jacob, Le Guellec, Morineau, & Lourel, 2008; Guegen, Le Guellec, & Jacob, 2004), malls (Morrin & Chebat, 2005), wine stores (North, Hargreaves, & McKendrick, 1999), restaurants (North, Shilcock, & Hargreaves, 2003), and banks (Chebat, Gelinas-Chebat, & Filiatrault, 1993), to name a few, there is a gap in the literature where sport is concerned. As such, the present research fills this gap by focusing on the effect of atmospheric music on sport consumers, or game attendees. The purpose of the present research is to determine the impact and role of atmospheric music in the construction of sport consumer attitudes and behaviors while in attendance of a men's professional basketball game.

According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), arousal is "a measure of how wide awake the organism is, of how ready it is to react" (p. 287). In other words, it is a measure of how engaged an individual is in his/her surroundings; how stimulated they are by their surroundings. Individuals have disparate reactions to their environment, as well as the stimuli present within it. This includes the presence of background music. The emotional arousal response to music therefore is likely to differ among a group of consumers. According to Chebat, Vaillant, and Gelinas-Chebat (2000) background music can either distract the listener from the message or help the consumer focus on the message being sent. Therefore, if background music is congruent with the context within which it is being sent, as well as the message being relayed to the consumer, it is less likely to have a distracting effect.

Atmospheric cues in the consumptive environment are taken in and interpreted by consumers; the resultant assessment results in consumers’ decision to either approach or avoid any given environment. According to Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) approach-avoidance model, physical reactions to the environment are either approach or avoidance behaviors and “it is essential to identify those responses that are the immediate result of stimulation and which occur in varying degrees in all environments” (p.283). Approach behaviors are associated with attraction or physically moving in the direction of something and also encompass actions that characterize association or affiliation with the environment, as well as those who are within the environment (Magnini & Parker, 2009). Conversely avoidance behaviors are those where the individual seeks to move away or steer clear of a given environment, eluding interaction and contact with others, and inactivity within a given environment. Soothing, as opposed to intense, music has been shown to best stimulate interactions in a consumer setting (Dube, Chebat, & Morin, 1995).

The present study followed a bounded system qualitative case study methodological framework. Typical case studies focus on a specific case, or cases, over the course of time. The bounded system approach, however, is "bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied—a program, an event, an activity, or individuals” (Creswell, 1998, p.61). In both instances the most important and fundamental element of the approach is the case; “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p.27). The present research is a bounded system case study that focuses on one professional men's basketball game (event) and the attitudes and behaviors of the individuals in attendance of the particular game. Multiple sources of data collection were employed, in line with the tenets of the case study methodological approach (Creswell). Data were collected during the event through both audio-recorded semi-structured interviews, that were later transcribed, and observations, that were recorded in the researcher's field notes, in order to help substantiate the findings and themes that emerged from the interviews (Merriam).

Data were collected during a men's professional basketball game, during the 2008-2009 season. 10 volunteer participants attended the same game and sat in the same section and row within the arena. All participants were observed by the researcher throughout the entirety of the game and 9 participants were interviewed by the researcher during the second half of the game. Data were analyzed using a content analysis approach; as such the
semistructured interviews and observational field notes were transcribed and analyzed respectively to reveal emergent themes. The content analysis method of data analysis according to Merriam (1998) “involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics” (p. 160). Therefore the strength and frequency of words and actions were used to gauge and identify relevant themes. Based on the analysis four themes emerged: arousal, distraction, congruency and involvement.

The level of an attendee’s involvement with professional basketball was revealed to be related to the liking of the music being played. Liking of environmental music was directly related to lower levels of involvement. Further, increased levels of involvement were accompanied by a dislike for the type and frequency of music within the sport environment. This was the case principally when the music was perceived as being a distraction; in particular a distraction from the game itself. Additionally, environmental music being was perceived as being incongruent with the image of the league, as well as the game of basketball, it was deemed to be a further distraction and annoyance to the highly involved consumer.

The current research will contribute to the sport management and marketing literature, as well as aid professional organizations as they seek to attract and retain diverse populations, as it identifies constraints to satisfaction and retention of their divergent fan base. The research also works to identify consumer attitude regarding a key component of professional basketball’s game-day environment, in music, and the impact these impressions may have in attitudes regarding their overall consumptive sport experience. Further evidence supporting the emergent themes will be presented. In addition, suggestions for future research on the topic will be introduced.