In competitive marketing environments, the importance of the experience economy has been widely recognized in consumer behavior (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Consumers experience products and brands via five senses, and also evaluate them via five senses (see Ackerman, 1990; Gobe, 2001; Hocking, 1982; Holt, 1995; Lindstrom, 2005; Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006; Schmitt, 1999). According to Gobe (2001), consumers’ experience satisfaction is the most important predictor for retaining consumers. In professional spectator sports, motor sport is known for stimulating the senses of spectators (e.g., speed, smog, fire, crashes, blasting sounds, & burning smells). The sensory experience of the event through all five senses (i.e., sight, smell, sound, touch, & taste) can generate excitement, which can attract new fans, create more involved fans, and deepen the commitment of core fans (see Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). One would expect that the visceral experience of attending a live sport event would be a powerful form of marketing leverage to increase (or create) fanship. This would be particularly true for sports for which fans have had little prior exposure or have been exposed only through mediated forms of event coverage (i.e., television, internet, newspaper, & magazine). Motor sport is a prime example of this effect.

Motor sports, such as NASCAR and Formula-One (F1) racing, have been able to attract television audiences and a large fan base, suggesting that it is possible to become a fan without experiencing a live event. In fact, researchers found that an important factor in motor sport fanship was the bond between driver and fan (Spinda, Earnheardt, & Hugenberg, 2009). This bond is an example of parasocial interaction, that is the relationship by which people create one-way bonds with mediated personalities in a manner similar to the development of real interpersonal relationships (Cohen, 2001; Horton & Wohl, 1956). In a study of collegiate student’s perceptions of NASCAR (Ogura, Chung, & Green, 2009), one of main barriers to developing NASCAR fanship was a lack of any bonding with a driver. Interest in NASCAR was extremely low in this population, which was attributed to a lack of understanding of the sport and lack of excitement of televised broadcasts of NASCAR events. However, attending the live event and experiencing the sensory components of car racing per se provided them with a new perspective that helped them to understand NASCAR culture and ignited their interest in the sport. The challenge lies in getting a potential fan to commit to attending a live experience in the first place and to transform their introduction to the sport via the event into continued fanship. Thus, this study examined the impact of sensory experiences (measured via five senses) on the development of F1 fanship. Specifically, it explored the components of attendees’ sensory experiences at the inaugural F1 event held in Young-am, South Korea, and examined the influences of those sensory experiences on parasocial interaction and F1 fanship. It is hypothesized that sensory experience at the event will moderate the relationship between parasocial interaction and F1 fanship.

Due to the scarcity of studies examining visceral experiences of motor sport, focus-group interviews were conducted to know which components of five senses spectators experienced at motor sport events. Four different sessions were performed with trained moderators. Themes were confirmed through peer verification (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989); also, previous studies supported the experience of the five senses at motor sport events (e.g., Chung, Ji, & Kim, 2005; Howell, 1997; Wright, 2002). The experience via sight was composed of the racing car’s design and speed, drivers’ outfit style, skid marks on the track, car crashes, and pit crews’ cooperative movement (six items). Aural experiences consisted of spectator noise, event announcements, the blasting of engine sounds, and explosive sounds at crash (four items). The olfactory experience included track’s asphalt, burning oil, burning tire, and food smells (four items). The experience via the sense of touch contained comfortable seating, spatial arrangement of the aisles and seats, physical contact with other spectators, racing car’s body, and blasting air flows at racing (five items). Finally, the experience via taste was composed of variety of food and beverage choices, taste quality, and psychological taste (three items). In addition, a measure of parasocial interaction was adopted from Spinda et al. (2009), and F1 fanship was assessed using a modified version of Wann’s Sport Fandom Questionnaire (2002). A seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) was used for all items. Demographic information was also collected.

The data were collected in the circuit stand at the 2010 F1 Korean Grand Prix using a translated version of original questionnaire. Back-translating technique was employed to maintain linguistic equivalence between English and Korean.
Korea, F1 has had little exposure before this event, and that exposure has been only through mediated sources; therefore, sampling Koreans provided a contextual validity in studying the first sensory experience to developing fanship. Six hundred surveys were collected at the event (October 22–24). Confirmatory factor analysis will be performed to confirm the five factor structure of the Sensory Sport Experience Scale. Hierarchical regression modeling will be applied to examine the hypothesized relationship among sensory experiences, parasocial interaction, and F1 fanship. It is expected that more positive sensory experiences will facilitate more fanship.

Live sport events assault the senses of event attendees. However, the sights, smells, sounds, and overall feeling of live sporting events are difficult to experience via mediated forms of event coverage; the sensuality of the real-event experience is presented in a sanitized way. This is particularly challenging for sports in which potential fans have little prior experience or have only indirect experience through mediated sources. Understanding the potential impact of sensory experiences is a first step in creating marketing strategies and tactics that incorporate the five senses. Some sport organizations, such as Boston Red Sox, are creating sensory experiences for their fans outside of the venue through live broadcasts at movie theaters which incorporate crowd noise, the smell (and sale) of hotdogs and other ballpark foods, and big screen visuals. It is expected that this study will provide further insight into the types of sensory experiences that directly impact fanship.