In service environments fashioned by marketers, Yalch and Spangenberg (1990) note “music is one of the most frequently used atmospheric factors to enhance the delivery of services to customers” (p. 32). Of the ambient variables influencing consumer evaluation of a service environment (e.g., crowding and lighting), studies focused on atmospheric music are still at the forefront (Turley & Milliman, 2000). Kotler (1973) defined atmospherics as the designing of service environments to produce specific emotional effects in the consumer that may enhance satisfaction with an experience and lead to purchase probability. In this regard, service environments consist of various atmospheric variables designed to capture the attention of consumers and influence their moods and behaviors (Kumar & Karande, 2000; Lam, 2001). These dynamics point to the primacy of focusing on atmospherics to ensure that environmental features serve a role complementary to that of service principles and overall marketing strategies (Kotler, 1973; Lam, 2001).

The theoretical paradigm that is most widely used in research involving atmospherics comes from environmental psychologists. Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) theoretical model (the Mehrabian-Russell model) posits that mood states mediate the relationship between the physical environment and human behavior. The model was developed under the conventional Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, which proposes that an active organism intervenes between stimulus and response. The model asserts that a nonspecific measure of stimulation (S) in the environment directly impacts the degree of emotions induced by the environment on the organism (O) and, as a result, causes behavioral responses (R). In this study, we assess the impact of the music stimulus in the service environment of the sports stadium.

The affinity people have for music is quite remarkable. Current studies in the field of consumer research indicate that music is the form of media people would least like to live without (Lusensky, 2010). In terms of marketing strategy, music is the peripheral aspect of marketing people view most positively (Treasure, 2011). Hence, the possibilities for music to influence a wide array of behaviors are quite high. To this end, scholars demonstrate the use of music to convey messages in abstract fashion (Scott, 1990), frame perceptions in advertising (Hung, 2001), prime desired beliefs about the brand (Lavack, Thakur, & Bottausci, 2008), and influence behavior in service environments (Herrington, 1997).

The ubiquitous nature of music holds vast potential for creating unique and lasting impressions in the minds and hearts of consumers (Zander, 2006). Much like a visual image, an audio fragment has the unique ability to elicit recall (Wallace, 1991; Hecker, 1984), induce emotions (Alpert & Alpert, 1990; Bruner, 1990), and influence attitudes and behaviors (Beverland, Lim, Morrison, & Terziowski, 2006; Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990; Milliman, 1982, 1986). Because transmitted visual and audio stimuli appear to share the same ability for affecting people’s behavior, managers often employ both types of cues in tandem in the expression of brand identities across various marketing channels. Until recently, however, extant literature in consumer research has almost exclusively relied on the visual domain (Kellaris, 2008). However, more current research indicates that visual brand impressions are “under attack from all sides, and the need to find a new way of building a consistent approach to brand communications has become increasingly urgent” (Fulberg, 2003 p. 198). As such, organizations have adopted audio brand designs to help fill the gap where visual designs are seemingly lacking.

One area in which sports marketers have long used music as a stimulus to impact the consumer experience is that of the sports stadium. Sports marketers have traditionally employed the use of popular music in sports stadiums as a means of increasing consumers’ satisfaction and involvement with a sporting event. Generally, music is selected based on having a positive message, upbeat tempo, and sing-along chorus (Sports Illustrated, 2011). However, music is oftentimes considered only as a peripheral or secondary aspect of the game day experience, and its potential for impacting game day behavior is rarely given the same attention as that of other marketing strategies. As such, the main purpose of this research was to examine the impact of music on consumer behavior in sports stadiums.
Descriptive statistics were assessed in this research as a means to investigate how music played in sports stadiums affects the experience of sports consumers during a sporting event. An online questionnaire was developed by researchers using Qualtrics survey software. The online questionnaire was administered to current undergraduate and graduate students, as well as former students of five universities located in the Southwestern region of the United States. Researchers gained access to current students at fellow institutions by way of personal communication with various colleagues in the field. In addition, former students were contacted using alumni records provided by each university. By diversifying the sample both by age and geographic location, the researchers were better able to generalize the results of the study to a larger population.

A total of 573 individuals responded to the questionnaire. However, only 516 (N=516) questionnaires were included during data analysis due to the fact that 57 participants reported having not attended a sporting event over the course of the last three years. The remaining 516 participants each reported having attended at least one sporting event during this span of time. The sample was mostly Caucasian (n = 347, 67%), although Hispanics (n = 83, 16%), African Americans (n = 10, 10%), Asians (n = 26, 5%), and “other” races (n = 8, 2%) were represented. The sample was comprised of a relatively even mix of male (n = 284, 55%) and female (n = 232, 45%) participants. The mean age of the participants was 29.64 years (SD = 2.23).

Survey results revealed music with a “right fit” relative to other atmospheric variables in a sports stadium leads study participants to stay longer (45%), re-visit (41%), and purchase more (18%). In addition, 65% of study participants believed that music played in sports stadiums should match the brand personality of the sport team. Next to having the right volume (87%), participants believed that matching the sport team profile was more important than the music being popular and easily recognized from the radio (10%), as well as the music corresponding with their own personal taste (28%). Further, participants believed that sports stadiums do an inadequate job in creating a positive atmosphere and experience through music. Twenty four percent of the sample rated stadiums as doing a "poor" job in this regard, while only 20% of the sample believed stadiums as doing “very well.” Perhaps most important is the fact that 17-24 year old respondents demonstrated much stronger opinions on each of the above measures. ANOVA analysis of the responses provided by these participants was significantly stronger than that of 25-61 year olds on each measure, reinforcing popular opinion that music is of specific importance to younger generations. This difference among age demographics is quite important in the context of college athletics, where 17-24 year olds represent a large percentage of spectators attending sport events. The results of this survey will be presented as a set of propositions for sports marketers in charge of constructing the sports stadium environment. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research will also be forwarded.