In September 2017, Arsenal Football Club opened the doors to a new sensory room, a space specifically designed to give “fans with profound special needs the opportunity to enjoy matches with their families and carers at Emirates Stadium - in some cases for the first time” (Arsenal.com, 2017). Other teams in the English Premier League (EPL), including Sunderland, Liverpool and Southampton, also provide calming environments for fans with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) that would otherwise prevent them, and as a result their families, from attending sporting events. For most on the spectrum, large crowds and noise, and the resulting overstimulation, make attending sporting events very difficult. In the US, 15 NBA and NHL arenas have this kind of designated space for fans with these challenges, while only one NFL team offers this same provision. With much of the existing literature about disabled access to sporting arenas and events focusing on physical disabilities (Pate & Waller, 2012; McArdle, 2009; Carlson, 1997), there is a paucity of academic research about those diagnosed with ASD and other sensory processing disorders and sporting event attendance.

In not providing sensory spaces for fans with ASD and other what are deemed as ‘invisible disabilities’, defined as “a physical, mental or neurological condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities that is invisible to the onlooker” (ida.com, 2018) and can include disorders like PDD-NOS and PTSD, teams are missing out on the opportunity to not only reach a whole new fan base but also, selfishly, make some positive CSR decisions. It is currently estimated that 1 in 59 children in the United States is diagnosed with ASD – in 2000, this number stood at 1 in 150 (cdc.gov, 2014). This then becomes a potentially huge new market that teams could attract to games IF they provided the facilities to support their attendance.

The purpose of this study, as part of a much larger research project, is threefold – first, to find out why those NBA, NHL and NFL stadia made the decision to offer ASD-friendly spaces and the resources utilized to accomplish this; second, to investigate what friends and family of individuals diagnosed with ASD and other sensory processing disorders would like to see stadia provide that would enable them to go to sporting events together; and third, to evaluate why a large number of stadia in the US do not offer such provision and what might be able to encourage them to do so. Interviews with stadia executives from both the UK (those EPL teams who have these spaces) and the US (with and without ASD spaces) are being conducted as well as a nationwide survey with friends and family to evaluate needs and desires that could lead to sporting event attendance. The findings and implications of this study will be presented, as well as a series of recommendations for stadia and event centers to present a safe and accommodating atmosphere for ALL of a team’s fan base, including those ‘hidden’ fans.