The Internet serves as a tantalizing communications option for businesses interested in achieving high levels of interactivity with publics (Chan-Olmsted & Park, 2000; Scott, 2007). A growing amount of research in the business literature over the last decade considers the use of various forms of Internet-based virtual communities (Shen, Huang, Chu, & Liao, 2010). Virtual communities are “dynamic and meaningful systems in which languages, actions, cultures, and norms fuse into a discursive process and product” (Yu & Young, 2007, p. 87). The utilization of virtual groups (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003), virtual Internet communities (Dennis, Pootheri, & Natarajan, 1998; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002; Rothenmerl & Sugiyma, 2001), online social networks (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon 2010), and Internet-based social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) by organizations in the business world is becoming commonplace.

Sport managers noticed these trends and focused considerable effort on application to the industry in recent years. However, the majority of previous work related to sport practitioners revolves entirely around online marketing efforts of sport organizations (Beech, Chadwick, & Tapp, 2000; Brown, 2003; Gillentine & Schulz, 2001; Kahle, 1999; Mason, 1999; Milne, 1999). Such emphasis on marketing has left a considerable gap between the research considering virtual communities in the industries related to general business and those related specifically to sport management. For example, the business literature evolved to discuss several other uses for virtual communities. These include, but are not limited to, online learning (Lin, Chiu, Joe, & Tsai, 2010), creation of effective work environments (Chen & Nath, 2008), affects on work team performance (De Pillis & Furumo, 2007; Turel & Zhang, 2010), and development of social identity from the employee perspective.

No prior research could be found discussing these aforementioned issues in relation to a sport organization. A problem exists as this gap continues to widen because the business literature demonstrates a need to consider virtual communities as tools capable of achieving more than simply marketing to consumers. This information is increasingly important as current economic hardships make it difficult for sport organizations to hire a full-time staff capable of meeting in person on a regular basis. This is particularly true among niche sport organizations attempting to operate at a professional level. Many sport organizations found within professional niche sport leagues such as the Professional Arena Soccer League (PASL), Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS), and North American Lacrosse League (NALL) must utilize the internet for purposes other than marketing in order to adequately maintain team operations typically conducted within the workplace.

Therefore, the current research seeks to extend sport management theory and practice related to the use of virtual communities in order to understand how a professional niche sport team is utilizing online communication among members of its staff. The study utilizes a case study approach to expand sport management theory and research through exploration of issues related to virtual communities, dealing with issues outside of more common sport marketing pursuits. More specifically, the case study approach provides insightful knowledge regarding one professional niche sport organization’s use of virtual communities for purposes other than marketing directly to consumers or achieving higher sales and sponsorship revenue. Examining the issue of virtual communities from the perspective of a professional niche sport team also provides an entirely unique view regarding the application of virtual communities.

The research provides an empirical exploratory review of a professional niche sport team located in the United States. A three-step process for constructing case studies (Patton, 2002) directed the methodology for the current research. In step 1, raw case data was assembled. During this phase, a thorough understanding of a professional niche sport team was developed over the course of a three year time period. A multitude of data sources were considered during this portion of the case. Observations of organizational functions, events, and corresponding e-mails were monitored on a daily basis. Informal participant interviews were also conducted in order to assess perceptions and effectiveness of online content and usage. Multiple staff members were interviewed, including the General Manager, the digital media coordinator, and 5 interns who utilized the various forms of online content.
produced by the organization on a weekly basis during the 2010-2011 season.

Step 2 condensed and organized the raw case study data into manageable sub sections using content analysis. Inductive analysis assisted with the discovery of patterns and themes within the data. Development of these themes were guided by those mentioned above, found within relevant business literature, to determine how virtual communities are used in sport (if at all) to (a) develop online learning, (b) create effective work environments, (c) affect work team performance, and (d) develop social identity from the employee perspective. Deductive analysis helped create hypotheses and theories for other niche sport organizations to consider in the future (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Finally, step 3 created a readable, descriptive illustration about the organization and its use of virtual communities. The findings were discussed with a Professor of Sport Management who is well-practiced in qualitative research. Small adjustments were made based on recommendations and findings were discussed further with owners and administrators of the niche sport team.

The current presentation offers many important recommendations for researchers and practitioners. First, future researchers should seek to continue filling the gap between the business and sport literature. More specifically, while using virtual communities to market professional sport teams is important, the business literature has clearly shown an interest and need to research other applications. The findings of the current study suggest similar applications deserve attention among sport managers. Second, virtual communities are particularly appealing to professional niche sport franchises because they assist with communication to internal and external publics, reduce costs, and may increase levels of organizational identification. Last of all, the case study reveals there is much confusion regarding differences and similarities among the use of terms such as virtual communities, virtual groups, virtual Internet communities, online social networks, and Internet-based social media. Future researchers should continue to define and evaluate these terms while exploring the benefits they can provide sport organizations.