Various scholars have documented the proliferation of social media utilization in sport (Clavio, & Kian, 2010; Kassing, & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Social media platforms are often referred to as Web 2.0 technologies. Unlike their Web 1.0 predecessor, Web 2.0 technologies afford greater levels of interaction while also fostering ongoing dialogue among their various constituents. With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, the Internet has now become participatory, conversational, social, and decentralized (Weinburg, 2009). Through the use of social media, “User-generated content is the norm, and individuals can now interact and generate and share multimedia content seamlessly” (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 502).

One such social media platform that has been examined by sport management scholars is Twitter (Hambrick et al., Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2010). Twitter is a microblogging service (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007), which allows users to post 140 character messages called ‘tweets’ on a feed that is distributed to a network of followers (Kassing, & Sanderson, 2010; Marwick, & Boyd; 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). According to Nielson Company (2009), Twitter usage multiplied by 1,448% between 2008 and 2009. More recent reports claim that Twitter users are now above 200 million (Shiels, 2011). In sports, Twitter use has increased as the online social network allows connections between teams, athletes, and fans (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Wertheim (2011) furthered this point by saying, “It is good a time as any to acknowledge that Twitter is a permanent part of the sports firmament” (p. 1).

Research has been conducted on both athlete (e.g., Sanderson, 2008b; Sanderson, 2009) and fan (e.g. Kassing & Sanderson, 2010) usage trends of Twitter. However, utilization of Twitter by sport leagues and organizations for the promotion of a major sporting event has not been explored. One such way that sport leagues and organizations can engage in promotion of an event through social media is by using a hashtag. Through the use of hashtags or #, which are used to develop “trending” topics worldwide, and for event planners or conferences (Parr, 2009), major sporting events can drive users’ to a conversation on Twitter. Previous sport organizations and leagues that have employed the hashtag approach to event promotion include FIFA during the 2010 Men’s (Agrawal, 2010) and 2011 Women’s World Cups and the NFL during the Super Bowl. For the 2011 World Series, Major League Baseball engaged in promotion of the postseason through the utilization of the hashtag #WorldSeries. Due to the increase of hashtag usage by sport leagues and organizations, and the lack of understanding regarding the implications of their use for event promotion, empirical investigation is needed. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how a hashtag was utilized on Twitter during a major professional sporting event. This is one of the first known attempts to conduct such an examination.

Uses and gratifications was selected as the theoretical framework for this study as it shifts focus from a direct effects perspective to assessing how individuals use the media to fulfill certain needs (Fisher, 1978). According to Morris and Ogan, (1996) and Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996), the uses and gratifications perspective is traditionally thought of as the proper lens through which to examine Internet communication. Ruggiero (2000) echoed this point by suggesting that the uses and gratifications perspective could be used in the early stages of new media. As such, since uses and gratification is concerned with the “how” behind media use, two exploratory research questions were developed to guide this study.

1. Who is using the WorldSeries hashtag?
2. How is the WorldSeries hashtag being used?

Utilizing a content analysis, Tweets during the 2011 World Series using the hashtag, #WorldSeries were examined. A content analysis methodology was selected as it allows for a replicable and systematic analysis of content (Wimmer, & Dominick, 2006). Using a purposive, consecutive day sample (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2008) tweets (N=17,574) using the #WorldSeries hashtag were collected from October 19 to October 28, 2011, using a website known as DiscoverText. DiscoverText is a text analytic software that allows the researcher to "catch" and import Tweets during a specified timeframe, and was utilized to address potential coding issues relating to dynamic web content and coding (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2008). The data import schedule began five minutes prior to first pitch and ended ten minutes after the final out. This ensured collection of all tweets including the #WorldSeries hashtag in tweet content. A random sampling strategy was used to create a purposive, random sample of the total population (n =1,000) for data analysis.

Each tweet was coded independently by three trained coders to ensure intercoder reliability. To establish intercoder reliability, a 20% subsample of data was randomly selected and provided to each coder for analysis. The 20% subsample included 200 tweets and satisfied the 10-20% subsample requirement by Wimmer and Dominick (2006) to establish intercoder reliability. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2006) a kappa coefficient of .75 or higher between the three coders indicates an acceptable level of intercoder reliability.

To address research question one, six coding categories were used including athlete, media/celebrity, coach, league personnel/team, product/company, and lay person. These categories were developed specifically for the purpose of this exploratory study. The coding categories used to answer research question two were developed in previous research (Clavio, 2008; Funk, Mahoney, & Ridinger, 2002; Seo & Green, 2008). The six coding categories used in this study included interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fandom, and promotional.

The World Series commenced on October 28, 2011. All data has been collected and is currently being analyzed. The data is being analyzed with SPSS 19. The investigators plan to report primarily descriptive statistics and correlations. Clavio and Kian (2010) suggested that investigation of various types of Twitter feeds, such as those of a coach or team, is necessary in order to understand the breadth of usage of the medium. Thus, this study examined the hashtag #WorldSeries, which was specifically created by Major League Baseball. Examination of this hashtag will elucidate gratifications obtained from users, thereby illuminating methods in which major sport properties can better engage their fan base during marquee sporting events. Furthermore, from a social media management perspective, sport leagues and organizations could benefit from understanding these interactions, which could lead to them becoming better facilitators within the fan/organizational conservation. This could contribute to increased awareness, promotional potential, and image management.