In 2002, South Korea and Japan were the first countries to co-host the FIFA World Cup. The two nations shared a problematic political history, and at the time the event was awarded to them, their relationship was fair at best. Recognizing the problematic political relationship between the two nations, and understanding the dire consequences of picking one of these nations above the other, the FIFA ultimately decided in 1996 to let the two nations co-host the event. Because this event was forced upon them, rather than the co-hosting being the result of an already improving political relationship, this event serves as a unique case to study the power of sport as a catalyst for societal change. Politics and sport have a longstanding relationship and on many occasions, and it has long been argued that sport has played a positive role as a strong symbol for change and diplomacy, as in the case of the use of the Ping Pong diplomacy by the Nixon administration (Hong & Sun, 2000) and the boycott of South African sport teams barring them from competition. However, strong empirical support for sport as a catalyst behind societal change is lacking within the field of sport management. For example, Thibault (2009) uses the co-hosting of the World Cup by South Korea and Japan as such an example, thereby ignoring that this event wasn’t necessarily evidence of an improving relationship, but rather the result of a complicated political compromise by an international sport federation. Throughout the preparation of the mega event, the two countries bickered over many issues, ranging from the order of the names of the countries in the tournament name, ticket revenue, the use of a single versus multiple mascot(s), and visa arrangements for Korean visitors in Japan. Despite conflicts and the arduous negotiations, the event itself was considered to be a success. Nevertheless, based on the challenges that this co-hosting offered to both the nations and the FIFA, the FIFA has stated publicly that they will not consider co-hosting again, as long as there is a viable single country bid.

The appointment of both South Korea as well as Japan as co-hosts of the World Cup tournament is a unique case study, because the dual hosting was not a result of an already improving relationship, but the event was awarded to both countries because two countries have the hostile relationship and the FIFA did not want to choose one over the other. In light of this background, this event is a unique case in which we are able to explore the true power of a sport event to change and alter the societies in which they operate. Although some research has been published on World Cup 2002, the extent of this research has been limited and has focused on either the economic or socio-cultural impact of the event on either one of the host countries (Lee & Taylor, 2005; Yamada, 2006; Yoo, 2007). One of the few attempts to examine the event as a medium to improve the bilateral relationship was written by two Western academics and was published in the same year as the event (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2002). However, even though sport management scholars never touched on these issues in-depth, the consequences of the joint hosting of the event on the relationship between the two nations were noticed politically, culturally, as well as economically. There is evidence of increased political dialogue that was initiated as a direct consequence of the joint hosting of the event, and significant increase in the total trade volume among nations between 2000-2003 (the Korean Overseas Information Services, 2004). Lee (2006) reported on the greater interest of Japanese consumers in Korean culture, such as movies, TV series and books, as was apparent during the so-called “Korean wave” in the years after World Cup 2002. A similar “Japanese wave” was apparent in Korea. These findings suggest that the World Cup, despite not having been leveraged as a tool to improve the bilateral relationship, did have at least a temporary positive effect on the relationship between the two nations. However, the extent of this effect remains unclear.

In order to gain a full perspective on the possible impact of the World Cup on the relationship between South Korea and Japan, we used a mixed method research design. During the first stage we collected secondary longitudinal data from different areas to gain insight on the economic, (import, export, Foreign direct investment, traffic between
nations) political (meetings, treaties, agreements), and cultural impact (movie sales, book sales) of the relationship between the two nations. In the second stage of data collection, we focused on gaining a psychological perspective on the relationship between the nations, by conducting semi-structured interviews in both nations. Respondents were noticed that we wanted to know about their perception of the other nation. There was no mention of our interest in the World Cup. The interview consisted of three sets of questions to see 1) the general perception of the respondent on the other nation, 2) whether or not the respondents’ perception had changed over time, and if so, what caused this change, and 3) the impact of the World Cup 2002 on their perception to the other nation. We chose this interview design to provide the respondents the opportunity to bring up the World Cup without us triggering that thought. This was deemed especially important, as it would tell us the importance of the event within the bigger picture. Adult participants aged over 20 were selected using snowball sampling and the personal networks of researchers from each country. Interviewees were chosen based on a balance of gender, geographical location, education, and profession. 15 interviews in each nation were conducted face-to-face in the different cities across the two nations from June to October 2009. The audio-filed interviews were transcribed and translated from both Korean and Japanese into English by the researchers individually. The translated interview data was examined multiple times to investigate the impact of the event on the perception to the other nation. The translated interview files were coded and analyzed accordingly by 5 researchers through discussion to avoid any biased interpretation.

Preliminary results from stage 1 indicated that although the economic relationship between South Korea and Japan is dynamic, any effect that the World Cup might have had is drowning within the larger economic picture of East Asia, in which the economic relationship between the two nations is strongly influenced by the emerging Chinese economy, and the financial crises of both Japan (early nineties) and Korea (late nineties). However, we did find empirical evidence that the World Cup did open up a political dialogue between the nations, further opened up cross-nation travel, and allowing for a stronger cultural exchange between the two nations (e.g. the Korean & Japanese wave). The interviews with the Korean and Japanese citizens should provide more insight on the current perception of the citizens’ perception on the other nation, thereby giving us a psychological indicator of the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan and the impact of World Cup 2002 thereof.

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