Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a prevalent topic in numerous companies across the globe (Aquilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007). Over the last decade, a growing body of literature has examined CSR in sport (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). While CSR practices have become a taken-for-granted concept within the European and North American contexts, it is still a relatively new idea in Asian countries. Indeed, according to the survey of the Korea Enterprise Institute (KOREI, 2005), 79.4% of employees in South Korean companies are not aware of the notion of CSR. Also, Choi and Aguilera (2009) argue that CSR is merely perceived as an extension of “community involvement” and “social contribution” in South Korea (p. 130). Further, some contend that South Korean professional sport leagues generally adopt CSR practices in a relatively unsophisticated way compared to North American sport organizations that have strategically employed a variety of CSR initiatives (Lee & Fleischman, 2013).

Studies regarding the utility and effectiveness of CSR initiatives, such as cause-related marketing (CRM), in South Korea have produced ambiguous results. For example, in one of the earlier cross-cultural comparative studies regarding consumer attitudes toward CRM, Lavack and Kropp (2003) concluded that CRM programs may not be as effective in South Korea, and warned international marketers who wish to adopt CRM in South Korea may have to understand the risks associated with the lower level of recognition of CRM. However, Lavack and Kropp (2003) proposed that well-established CRM might help global marketers be distinct in a crowded marketing place in South Korea. Indeed, in a recent CRM research in a sport context, Kim, Kwak, and Kim (2010) suggested that modern South Korean consumers, to some extent, appear to favorably embrace the notion of CRM as a marketing tactic. In addition, a growing body of CSR in sport literature has reported that CSR practices of professional sport organizations in South Korea were appreciated by fans (Park, Moon, & Won, 2012) had a positive impact on brand awareness and brand equity (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2010), and fan loyalty (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2006). Thus, the purpose of this study was two-fold. Using institutional theory and institutional isomorphism as a guide, we examined how South Korean professional sport leagues’ CSR practices are implemented. Further, we sought to understand the various forms of CSR initiatives and the strategic aims of such programs to elucidate patterns specific to South Korea. In particular, we focused on whether CSR practices in professional sport organizations in South Korea have been institutionalized, and if so, how and what pressures would be most salient to explain the institutionalization of their CSR practices.

To answer our research questions, the current study will adopt our interpretation on institutionalized CSR practices in sport based on Washington and Patterson (2011) that embraces a broader approach of an institution noting “Institutions can also be represented through ideologies or states that represent a social order or pattern that is perceived as stable through chronological repetition” (p. 3). In particular, DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) institutional isomorphism, coercive pressures, and mimetic pressures appear to be useful tools for understanding institutionalized CSR practices in sport organizations in South Korea. Institutional isomorphism has been widely adopted to explain the likeness of organizational practices in the same institutional domain (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). The basic notion of institutional isomorphism is that just as people behave in similar ways as the characters and expectations of significant others, organizations tend to mimic other organizations in a same domain to obtain legitimacy or authorization, and are likely to become similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Accordingly, these tendencies are illustrated in regulative, normative, and cognitive processes resulting in gradually identical and justified practices in organizations within the same territory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2008). Just like other social institutions, sport organizations also heavily depend on resources, customers, legitimacy, and institutional authority in an effort to
gain social and financial congruence in the sport industry. As such, it would be appropriate to argue that institutional mechanisms forming CSR in sport may also follow the notion of isomorphism of institutional environments where managers eagerly seek widely-accepted CSR exemplars they can readily imitate.

Based on the abovementioned discussion, in the current study, we argue that an exploration of CSR practices within South Korean professional sport leagues may enable us to gain insights regarding some of the basic beliefs of institutional theory and institutional isomorphism, particularly because these initiatives are relatively recent phenomena in South Korea. The examination may provide evidence of the existence of an institution of CSR in the sport industry, how it formed, and how it has been practiced by some of its most influential actors (i.e., professional sport leagues) in South Korea.

Semi-structured interviews (N=9) will be conducted with representatives of the three major professional sport leagues in South Korea (Korean Professional Football (soccer) League; K-League (N=3), Korean Baseball Organization; KBO (N=3), and Korean Basketball League; KBL (N=3)). Purposive sampling and snowball sampling will be used as a method to obtain participants best able to provide perspectives regarding the topic. Based on continuing coding process and method of agreement, the researchers will thoroughly analyze the transcriptions separately (Miles & Huberman, 1991) in order to discover emerging themes and patterns from the qualitative data. However, we will be careful not to disregard any pivotal exceptions. Themes will be obtained based on past literature but the researchers will remain open in an attempt to pursue additional thoughts raised by the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Once transcriptions are completed, findings will be analyzed until agreement among the researchers is reached.

Our preliminary study findings suggest that the notion of DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional isomorphism appears to be a useful tool for understanding CSR practices of the professional sport organizations in South Korea. Indeed, institutional isomorphism, coercive and mimetic pressures of professional sport leagues in South Korea seem to push one organization in a similar sphere to look like other sport organizations and lead to standardization of their respective environments within a sport industry in South Korea. More specifically, their CSR practices seem to be institutionalized based on expectations of society and various stakeholders (e.g., government, fans, etc.) as a means of “social contribution”. Also, professional sport leagues appear to copy well-known CSR practices to gain legitimacy and enhance their survival amongst competing sport organizations because of the anxiety of uncertainty about their actions. Further, the notion of CSR that has been established within western culture, has gradually spread to and became entrenched within different cultures such as South Korea, can be indeed seen as an institutional innovation that may give sport organizations a unique status in a crowded marketing place (Lavack & Kropp, 2003).

The final presentation will include completed results, conclusive themes, unique aspects or approaches in CSR strategies in the three major South Korean professional sport leagues including their motives and constraints/challenges. Theoretical and practical implications will be fully discussed.