Ahn Hyun's Defection to Russia: The Influence of the Media and Impact on Sport Policy and Governance in South Korea

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Research Context Ahn Hyun Soo, now known as Viktor Ahn, is one of the best short track speed skaters that South Korea has ever produced (Choe, 2014). However, after becoming a citizen of Russia in 2011, Ahn Hyun Soo participated in the 2014 Olympics and won three gold medals, not for his home country, but for his newly selected country. The problematic situation that ended in Ahn’s defection occurred during the national team selection process in 2010. Although highly qualified to be a member of the national team in South Korea, Ahn was disqualified because of factionalism and favoritism in Korean sport governance (Bordan, 2014). Based on Magee and Sugden (2002) typology, which identifies six types of elite sport migrants—mercenary, settler, ambitionist, nomadic cosmopolitan, exile, and expelled—Ahn Hyun Soo can be classified as expelled. An expelled elite sport migrant is one who is forced to migrate due to environmental factors, such as factionalism and favoritism. Ahn’s case suggests that environmental factors (i.e., the negative impacts of sport governance) could be the most decisive factors that lead to sport migration.

In addition, researchers have examined the influence of sport migration on sport policy and the governance of donor and host nations (Horowitz & McDaniel, 2015; Maguire & Pearton, 2000). Maguire (2004) suggested that the immigration of talented elite sport athletes has the advantage of increasing the quality of performance because it not only improves the standards of existing players but also provides role models for younger players. On the other hand, Maguire (2008) also pointed out that emigrations of athletic labor from donor countries may cause the de-skilling of those countries as a result of the loss of players, which could lead to a negative impact on sport development in donor nations. In this regard, the emigration of Ahn Hyun Soo can be considered a great loss of a valuable resource for sport development in South Korea (Choe, 2014).

It is interesting to note that the South Korean media’s extensive coverage of the emigration of Ahn Hyun Soo has brought to the forefront diverse issues associated with Korean sport governance and policy. The media have discussed not only problems of sport governance and policy but also the negative influence of Ahn’s emigration on Korean sport development (Kim, 2014). That is, the Korean media have played an important role in setting the nation’s agenda, determining what the public pays attention to, and encouraging audiences to interpret public issues in a particular way (M. McCombs, 2014). Accordingly, considering the role of the media and the importance of Ahn’s case, exploring how the media described the issues associated with Ahn’s defection can provide significant insight into how sport governance and policy influence or are influenced by the migration of elite sport celebrities. Furthermore, a critical examination of the case will provide a better understanding of the role that the media can play in raising awareness of sport governance and policy related issues. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the agendas regarding sport governance and policy created by the South Korean media that covered Ahn’s case (e.g., transparency, elite sport development, and governance structure).

Theoretical Perspective
Agenda setting theory was used to guide this research investigation. This theory underscores the importance of media in setting a broad range of public issues based on the idea that repeated media coverage can cause the audience to deem the coverage essential to understanding reality (M. McCombs, 2005; M. E. McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting theory has been widely utilized in research to explore the relationship between the media and sport organizations, including the NFL, MLB, and the Olympic Games (Denham, 2004; Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014; Fortunato, 2008), and this theory can be useful in understanding how the media reporting of Ahn’s case has created a variety of agendas on sport governance and policy in South Korea.
Method
Textual analysis as a qualitative examination of media frames will be employed because it is an appropriate method for helping us understand themes and patterns that emerge from various forms of the media, such as newspapers and articles (Carley, 1993; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Five major South Korean newspapers were selected based on their wide circulation and influence (Cho, 2009): the Chosun Ilbo, the JoongAng Ilbo, the Donga Ilbo (considered conservative), the Hankyoreh, and the Hanguk Ilbo (considered liberal). Articles, feature stories, editorials, and all other written materials associated with Ahn’s case from these five newspapers were retrieved from March 2010 to September 2017 because the selected newspapers were the first to raise concerns about factionalism and favoritism in the South Korean Skating Union beginning in 2010. This study used the search term “Ahn Hyun Soo in Korean in the above newspapers and a total of 2,224 articles were collected for this research study.

Preliminary Results and Discussion
Preliminary results suggest that the media used the concepts of factionalism and favoritism repeatedly in relation to the defection of Ahn Hyun Soo and in the discussion of the Korean Skating Union. The media raised concerns not only about Ahn’s decision to leave his home country but also about governance and policy issues in the South Korean Skating Union, specifically in regard to transparency and governance structure in sport organizations. Other results point to migration issues and media influences on Ahn’s defection to Russia.

Overall, this paper will demonstrate how sport migration relates to governance and policy in sport organizations, a relationship which is evident in Ahn’s case. This paper also provides an opportunity to understand the significance of governance systems in sport organizations. Additionally, this paper may be useful in shedding light on the relationship between the role of the media and sport governance and policy, given the fact that repeated themes in the media attract the public’s attention.