The 2018 Winter Olympic Games in the News: The Legacy of North and South Korea Participating in the Olympics Under One Flag

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In February 2018, for the first time, North and South Korea participated under one flag in the 2018 Pyeong Chang Winter Olympic Games. This development was the result of the IOC intervening to bring the two countries together to discuss their joint participation potentially creating positive geopolitical legacy for the two countries. However, before this happened, news outlets in the United States were discussing the potential implications of such development. Agenda setting theory suggests that the media will create hype about extensively covered topics that could result in support toward the host country (Kim, Moon & Kaplanidou, 2013; Li & Kaplanidou, 2013). Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the influence of news about North and South Korea’s joint Olympic participation on the image of the Olympic Games and the destination image of the host country, South Korea.

In January 2018, just three weeks before the start of the 2018 Winter Olympics, an online survey was conducted on the topic of North and South Korea relations. The survey was designed to specifically identify reactions in the news about the two countries sending a joint delegation to the Olympics after years of “cold” relationships. Two hundred respondents were recruited from a U.S.-based online consumer panel called Amazon Mechanical Turk. The respondents were mostly male (55.5%), white (80%), and the majority was between the ages of 31-50 (57.5%). Fifty-four percent (54%) had income between $20,000 and $60,000, 50% had a college degree, and the majority (72.5%) was employed.

In order to explore how much influence the perceived favorability of the news had on respondents’ image perceptions of the Olympic Games and of South Korea, multiple regression tests were estimated. The results showed a significant and positive influence of the perceived news’ favorability on the overall Olympic Games’ image ($\beta=.33$, $p<.05$) and the image of South Korea as a tourism destination ($\beta=.17$, $p<.05$). In other words, the more favorable the perceptions about the news the two countries met to send jointly athletes to the Games, the higher the perceptions about the overall image of the Olympic Games and the host country. When it came to specific destination image attributes such as safety, the level of favorability of the news positively influenced the expected level of safety of South Korea during the Olympic Games ($\beta=.31$, $p<.05$). News favorability also significantly influenced respondents’ perceptions that the Olympic Games promote peace ($\beta=.32$, $p<.05$) and bring nations closer ($\beta=.35$, $p<.05$). One more test was performed to examine the impact of perceptions tied to the image of the Olympic Games’ as an event that is offering peace opportunities on the image of South Korea. The results showed a significant positive impact ($\beta=.16$, $p<.05$). The results suggest that the legacy of the Olympic Movement and the host country image can be boosted temporally by news related to opportunities for countries to work together in peace. Since the two countries actually did participate united under one flag, the legacy for the Olympic movement could be long lasting.