Fan Reactions to the Unified North/South Korean Olympic Women’s Ice Hockey Team

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The North and South Korean governments agreed to create a unified women’s ice hockey team to compete in the 2018 Winter Olympic Games. Although the unified team was seen by many as a symbol of peace between the two nations, other observers voiced concern about the fact that some South Korean players would be excluded in order to accommodate North Korean players on the team. The South Korean government justified the decision as a necessary sacrifice for the greater cause of diplomacy with North Korea. Given the situation, the current study examined how the controversial issue was framed by social media users in South Korea. Specifically, we draw upon framing theory (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) in considering the ways in which people presented and discussed certain aspects of the story to interpret how the issue was framed in South Korean social media.

Data were collected from Twitter between January 1, 2018 and February 28, 2018 via a Twitter data crawling method. This timeframe encompassed the period in which the unified hockey team was first announced and then competed in the Olympics. For data analysis, the authors employed two approaches: (a) sentiment analysis and (b) topic analysis. First, a sentiment dictionary was used to analyze the positive or negative attitudes expressed by Twitter users toward the unified team. Second, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was used to identify groups of tweets with common topics. The investigators then analyzed the text of the tweets in each group to determine meanings and frames present in the group.

A total of 36,610 tweets were collected. Less than 200 tweets about this topic had appeared before the unification of the women’s ice hockey team was officially confirmed on January 17. The number of tweets then increased to 2,389 on the day of the announcement, as media in South Korea began to frame the issue with discussions of injustice and concerns related to player selection. The sentiment analysis showed that the average overall sentiment of Twitter users toward the team was slightly positive with an index score of .0093, and the number of tweets expressing positive emotions outnumbered those of tweets expressing negative reactions. However, when examining day-by-day trends, increased negative attitudes were observed between January 17-20, when concerns of injustice were prominent in the media and when the team was defeated. Moreover, the most common topics related to the unified team overall were “north and south,” “peace,” “problem,” “objection,” and “women’s ice hockey.” However, during the week of January 17-23, the topics “North Korea,” “objection,” and “problem” appeared more frequently.

Ultimately, results revealed that attitudes toward the unified team varied over time, as people became more likely to frame the issue negatively when concerns about injustice were highlighted in the media and when the team performed poorly. The study has relevant implications for understanding fan reactions when issues of politics and sport collide in the context of international sport.