Women’s Ice Hockey Unites the Two Koreas at the 2018 Winter Olympics Games: A Comparative Framing Analysis

Sehwan Kim, University of Georgia
Jepkorir Rose Chepyator Thomson (Advisor), University of Georgia
Kyu Ha Choi, University of Georgia
Panpan Jiang, University of Georgia

Abstract 2020-020

Less than a month away from the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics, the International Olympic Committee announced a unified women’s ice hockey team between North and South Korea despite escalated political and military tensions on the Korean peninsula (Carlin & Wit, 2018). Media scholars suggest that how an issue is framed can have an impact on an individual’s understanding, perception, and interpretation of that issue (Druckman, 2001; Entman, 1991). Previous studies have explained that geopolitical contexts can shape the process through which the creation or modification of frames can be applied by journalists (Dai & Hyun, 2010; Liu, Chen, & Newman, 2019). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine media coverage of the women’s ice hockey team at the 2018 Winter Olympics using media outlets from South Korea, the United States, and China. Guiding research questions were 1) What popular frames did the three countries use to report the unified team? 2) How did these frames vary across the countries? 3) To what extent were geopolitical contexts reflected in the construction of media frames used to describe the unified team?

Drawing upon framing theory, a qualitative content analysis was employed to investigate the unified team at the 2018 Winter Olympics using online news coverage by three countries. News articles (116, 45, and 27) were collected from mainstream media outlets across three countries were selected based on their wide circulation and influence using specific timeline (ca. December 9, 2017, to May 28, 2018). An inductive approach was adopted for data analyses, meaning that each data set was read and analyzed separately by four independent coders who were fluent in Korean, English, and Chinese to ensure intercoder reliability, avoid cross-contamination, and assist in the discussion of the findings (Santos et al., 2013).

The findings of the study identified four major media frames in reporting the unified team across three countries by comparing the coverage: two Koreas in one team, political charade, and the contradiction between North Korea and the U.S., and a milestone for the Koreas. While mainstream media outlets across three countries greatly domesticated the coverage of the unified according to different geopolitical stances in terms of the unified team and the Korean peninsula, they shared ‘a milestone for the Koreas’ frame that represented a mutual understanding of the power of sports that could promote a peace-building relationship among different countries.

Further, the findings of the study revealed how the unified team was of great geopolitical importance in relation to the Korean peninsula, and North Korea in international relations, which was reflected in the media frames. This study sheds light on global media practices in sport communication and provides ways to understand geopolitics in the context of sport. It can be concluded that media frames cut across countries to influence people’s understanding, interpretation, and perception of sport participation.