



## **SHORT-LIVED FANTASY OR LONG-TERM LEGACY? 2018 PYEONGCHANG WINTER OLYMPICS AND NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTH KOREA**

**Abstract** – It is argued theoretically and demonstrated empirically that mega-sporting events (MSEs) play a paramount role in promoting nation-building in the host countries. This study navigates the case of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics held in February 2018 in South Korea and examines the impact of this sporting event on nation-building. To this end, this article employed an online survey that was conducted three times at stated intervals in major Korean Web communities— January 2018 (one month before the Olympic Games), April 2018 (two months after the Olympic Games), and March 2019 (one year after the Olympic Games). This study suggests that, while the hosting of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics had truly accomplished nation-building effect, this was just a short-term fantasy rather than long-term legacy.

**Keywords:** Korea; Mega-sporting event; Nation-building; Pyeongchang Olympics.

## **FANTASIA DE CURTA DURAÇÃO OU LEGADO DE LONGO PRAZO? OS JOGOS OLÍMPICOS DE INVERNO DE PYEONGCHANG 2018 E A CONSTRUÇÃO NACIONAL NA COREIA DO SUL**

**Resumo** - É argumentado teoricamente e demonstrado empiricamente que os megaeventos esportivos desempenham um papel fundamental na promoção da construção de uma nação nos países anfitriões. Este estudo navega pelo caso dos Jogos Olímpicos de Inverno de Pyeongchang 2018, realizados em fevereiro de 2018 na Coreia do Sul, e examina o impacto desse evento esportivo na construção nacional. Para esse fim, este artigo empregou uma pesquisa online que foi realizada três vezes em intervalos determinados nas principais comunidades da web coreanas—janeiro de 2018 (um mês antes dos Jogos Olímpicos), abril de 2018 (dois meses após os Jogos Olímpicos) e março de 2019 (um ano após os Jogos Olímpicos). Este estudo sugere que, embora sediar os Olimpíadas de Pyeongchang 2018 tenha realmente alcançado o efeito de construção da nação, isso foi apenas uma fantasia de curta duração e não um legado de longo prazo.

**Palavras-chave:** Coreia; megaeventos esportivos; construção da nação; Jogos Olímpicos de Inverno de Pyeongchang 2018.

## **¿FANTASÍA DE CORTA DURACIÓN O LEGADO A LARGO PLAZO? LOS JUEGOS OLÍMPICOS DE INVIERNO DE PYEONGCHANG 2018 Y LA CONSTRUCCIÓN NACIONAL EN COREA DEL SUR**

**Resumen** - Se argumenta teóricamente y se demuestra empíricamente que los mega eventos deportivos desempeñan un papel clave en la promoción de la construcción nacional en los países anfitriones. Este estudio analiza el caso de los Juegos Olímpicos de Invierno de Pyeongchang 2018, celebrados en febrero de 2018 en Corea del Sur, y examina el impacto de este evento deportivo en la construcción nacional. Con ese fin, este artículo utilizó una encuesta en línea que se realizó tres veces a intervalos determinados en las principales comunidades web coreanas: enero de 2018 (un mes antes de los Juegos Olímpicos), abril de 2018 (dos meses después de los Juegos Olímpicos) y marzo 2019 (un año después de los Juegos Olímpicos). Este estudio sugiere que, si bien la celebración de los Juegos Olímpicos de Pyeongchang 2018 realmente ha logrado el efecto de construcción nacional, fue solo una fantasía a corto plazo no un legado a largo plazo.

**Palabras-clave:** Corea; mega eventos deportivos; construcción nacional; Juegos Olímpicos de Invierno de Pyeongchang 2018.

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*[http://dx.doi.org/  
10.30937/2526-  
6314.v5.id113](http://dx.doi.org/10.30937/2526-6314.v5.id113)*

*Received: Nov 09, 2020*

*Accepted: Jan 04, 2021*

*Published online:  
Jan 09, 2021*

## Introduction

Hargreaves<sup>1</sup> noted that, for some considerable time, political elites “tended to intervene in and to promote sport as an important instrument for the creation of a sense of national identity (p. 32)”. The quintessential example of this can be the hosting of mega-sporting events, which provide the host nation with effective and crucial opportunities to promote national pride<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, mega-sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, offer a legitimate platform to construct a powerful collective consciousness and enhance national unity<sup>3</sup>.

According to Duminy<sup>4</sup>, a purported chief motivation behind the efforts to host the mega-events is to take advantage of “the opportunity for host nations to build national unity and social cohesion (p. 49)”. Jarvie<sup>5</sup> also argues that mega-sporting events conventionally serve “a uniquely effective medium for inculcating national feelings; they provide a form of symbolic action which states the case for the nation itself (p. 74)”. These mega-sporting events are, in other words, a significant venue for the display of national symbols and the alignment of national allegiances and a paramount channel through which national cohesion is achieved, combined with national symbols<sup>6</sup>. However, the existing literature concerning this topic of research has to date failed to properly capture whether nation-building achieved through a mega-event is simply a short-lived illusion or a long-term “real” social legacy, a point which is highly crucial yet substantially understudied in the field.

Gangwon Province of South Korea lost the bids for both the 2010 and 2014 Winter Olympic Games. These consecutive failures rather contributed to accumulate know-how of the Olympic bidding processes. Finally, Pyeongchang won bid to host 2018 Winter Olympics on July 6, 2011. The result was valuable since the Winter Olympics was awarded South Korea over competitive bids from Annecy, France and Munich, Germany.

This study attempts to fill this gap through the case of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics held in February 2018 in South Korea (hereafter Korea) by examining the impact of this sporting event on nation-building. To achieve this research goal, this article took advantage of an online survey that was conducted three times at stated intervals in major Korean Web communities—January 2018 (one month before the Olympic Games), April 2018 (two months after the Olympic Games), and March 2019 (one year after the Olympic Games)—to measure, trace, and compare the trends in

national identity and nationalism provoked by the Olympic Games as time passes. I suggest that this preliminary case study contributes to examining the validity of conventionally taken-for-granted theoretical assumptions of MSEs and its impact on nation-building by illuminating the durability of such nation-building effect using empirical data and analysis.

## Research methods

Data for this research was gathered through an online survey. Specifically, the survey was conducted three times at stated intervals—January 2018 (one month before the Olympic Games), April 2018 (two months after the Olympic Games), and March 2019 (one year after the Olympic Games)—to measure and compare the trend in the national sense of belonging over time and to identify whether the impact of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics on Korean national identity is short-lived or long lasting. The target population included individuals of Korean nationality regardless of region, gender, and age. Respondents of the survey were comprised of 272, 298, and 253 Korean netizens, respectively. Specific respondent demographics per survey are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographics of Online Survey Respondents

|                   |          | Jan. 2018   | Apr. 2018   | Mar. 2019   |
|-------------------|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Total Respondents |          | 272         | 298         | 253         |
| Gender            | Male     | 161 (59.1%) | 218 (73.2%) | 178 (70.4%) |
|                   | Female   | 111 (40.9%) | 80 (26.8%)  | 75 (29.6%)  |
| Age Group         | Under 20 | 20 (7.3%)   | 4 (1.3%)    | 14 (5.5%)   |
|                   | 20s      | 122 (44.9%) | 101 (33.9%) | 102 (39.4%) |
|                   | 30s      | 92 (33.8%)  | 122 (40.9%) | 96 (37.8%)  |
|                   | 40s      | 9 (3.3%)    | 49 (16.4%)  | 24 (9.5%)   |
|                   | 50s      | 28 (10.3%)  | 15 (5.0%)   | 8 (3.2%)    |
|                   | Over 60  | 1 (0.4%)    | 7 (2.3%)    | 9 (3.6%)    |

Source: author

The survey questionnaire was repeatedly distributed throughout major Korean Web community sites. To secure a balanced sample, I attempted to post on as many sites as possible without distinguishing political biases and age groups of website users. However, given the inherent nature of the online survey, obtaining a balanced sample was difficult task, particularly in terms of age distribution. Each survey has a 95% confidence level and plus or minus 5.94%, 5.68%, and 6.16% as the margins of error, respectively. The questionnaire was composed of two main parts: 1) general questions on national identity; and 2) specific questions related to the Olympics and its impact on national pride and unity. The survey adopted a typical Likert five-point scale composed of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Some details of the questionnaire are as follows.

### **General questions on national identity**

General questions on national identity as a Korean were first asked to examine how ordinary Korean citizens feel about their sense of belonging to the nation in the context of their everyday lives. The following three basic questions were asked.

1. Do you strongly feel a sense of belonging to Korea as a Korean?
2. Are you proud to be a Korean?
3. Do you think that Korea is a better country than others?

These three basic yet representative questions were carefully selected based on the reference to other various survey studies and polls on national identity. Although these questions are highly useful to measure Korean national identity and identify the changing patterns of national identity over time, concluding that these survey results can be solely explained as an outcome of the impact of hosting Olympic Games may be misleading. In other words, measuring Korean national identity based on such basic questions is prone to the intervention of other variables because a significant number of factors in everyday life might affect national identity. This vulnerability can be effectively supplemented by asking respondents more specific questions about their sense of national pride and national bonds in the context of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. These questionnaires are shown in the following section.

### **Questions on 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and national identity**

Apart from the general questions on national identity, as previously stated, specific questions concerning the impact of the Olympic Games on the Korean people's national sense were also asked. These questions included the following:

4. Are/were you proud of Korea's hosting of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics?
5. Do you think that Korean players' good performance will make/made you proud to be a Korean?
6. Do you think that hosting the Pyeongchang Olympics will play/played a significant role in national unity and the promotion of national pride?

In questionnaire number four, respondents were asked to provide their sense of national pride in the context of Korea's hosting of the Olympics. In particular, because the good performance of a so-called sport celebrity or sport hero in an international sporting event has also conventionally played a paramount role in promoting national pride, I also added the relevant question in the fifth questionnaire. Respondents were also asked the final question, which was about a direct relationship between hosting of MSEs and national unity, in expectation of understanding how Korean citizens tangibly sense the explicit impact of the Games on nation-building.

### **Survey result**

#### **General questions on national identity**

Firstly, the results of the survey conducted in January 2018—one month before the Olympic Games—indicated that Koreans had a relatively positive national feeling. With respect to the first question of “do you strongly feel a sense of belonging to Korea as a Korean?” 48.9% of Koreans felt a strong sense of belonging to Korea (strongly agree plus agree), outstripping the negative answers that totaled 23.2% (disagree plus strongly disagree). The second survey conducted in April 2018 evidently proved that the level of Korean national sense had been fortified after the event. Surprisingly, “agree” (hereafter, “agree” is used for strongly agree and agree together) answers represented 64.1% of the total, whereas “disagree” (hereafter, “disagree” is used for both strongly disagree and

disagree together) answers represented only 16.1%. However, the March 2019 survey suggested that the sense of belonging retrogressed to approximately the similar standard as that of the survey in January 2018 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Result of Questionnaire 1

| <b>1. Do you strongly feel a sense of belonging to Korea as a Korean?</b> |            |            |            |
|---|------------|------------|------------|
|   | Jan. 2018  | Apr. 2018  | Mar. 2019  |
| Strongly Agree  | 43 (15.8%) | 95 (31.9%) | 53 (20.9%) |
| Agree   | 90 (33.1%) | 96 (32.2%) | 79 (31.2%) |
| Neutral   | 76 (27.9%) | 59 (19.8%) | 66 (26.1%) |
| Disagree  | 34 (12.5%) | 26 (8.7%)  | 28 (11.1%) |
| Strongly Disagree   | 29 (10.7%) | 22 (7.4%)  | 27 (10.7%) |

Source: author

Second and third questions asked about Korean national pride, which can also help measure the level of national identity because, similar to other social identities, national identity produces positive emotions in the form of national pride. The result of questionnaire 2, which was conducted in January 2018, shows that Koreans tend to be proud to be Korean, with 41.2% indicating strongly agree and agree and 28.7% indicating strongly disagree and disagree. The level of national pride was positive at approximately 13.8%, and was 55% two months after the Olympics relative to January of that year. This figure declined to 44.3% in March 2019 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Result of Questionnaire 2

| <b>2. Are you proud to be a Korean?</b> |            |            |            |
|---|------------|------------|------------|
|   | Jan. 2018  | Apr. 2018  | Mar. 2019  |
| Strongly Agree                          | 35 (12.9%) | 88 (29.5%) | 46 (18.2%) |
| Agree                                   | 77 (28.3%) | 76 (25.5%) | 66 (26.1%) |
| Neutral                                 | 82 (30.1%) | 76 (25.5%) | 75 (29.6%) |
| Disagree                                | 43 (15.8%) | 37 (12.4%) | 35 (13.8%) |

|                   |            |           |            |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 35 (12.9%) | 21 (7.1%) | 31 (12.3%) |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|------------|

Source: author

Questionnaire 3 also suggests a similar pattern as previous survey results: in January 2018, 43% of Koreans felt that Korea is a better country than others; whereas the April 2018 survey noted 47.6% of Koreans felt that Korea is a better country than others, which is a slight but not impressive increase. However, the latest survey indicated even a higher rate than in the past two surveys, a unique result that reflects a continuous ascent (see Table 4).

Table 4. Result of Questionnaire 3

| <b>3. Do you think that Korea is a better country than others?</b> |            |            |             |
|--|------------|------------|-------------|
|  | Jan. 2018  | Apr. 2018  | Mar. 2019   |
| Strongly Agree   | 31 (11.4%) | 46 (15.4%) | 28 (11.1%)  |
| Agree  | 86 (31.6%) | 96 (32.2%) | 104 (41.1%) |
| Neutral  | 65 (23.9%) | 92 (30.9%) | 71 (28.1%)  |
| Disagree   | 65 (23.9%) | 42 (14.1%) | 29 (11.4%)  |
| Strongly Disagree  | 25 (9.2%)  | 22 (7.4%)  | 21 (8.3%)   |

Source: author

### Questions on 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and national identity

The results of questionnaires 4, 5, and 6 suggested evident changes in figures relative to the previous general questions on national identity. In questionnaire 4, respondents were asked whether people feel/felt national pride owing to Korea's hosting of the Olympic Games. In January 2018, only 32.3% strongly or generally agreed with the corresponding questions. However, in April 2018, 70.8% of people prided themselves on the event, whereas the final survey showed a significant decline to 49.4%, which is still at a higher level than the first survey results (see Table 5).

Table 5. Result of Questionnaire 4

| <b>4. Are/Were you proud of Korea's hosting of the Pyeongchang Olympics?</b> |            |             |            |
|--|------------|-------------|------------|
|  | Jan. 2018  | Apr. 2018   | Mar. 2019  |
| Strongly Agree   | 27 (9.9%)  | 129 (43.3%) | 62 (24.5%) |
| Agree  | 61 (22.4%) | 82 (27.5%)  | 63 (24.9%) |
| Neutral  | 89 (32.7%) | 36 (12.1%)  | 47 (18.6%) |
| Disagree   | 56 (20.6%) | 22 (7.4%)   | 32 (12.6%) |
| Strongly Disagree  | 39 (14.4%) | 29 (9.7%)   | 49 (19.4%) |

Source: author

Questionnaire 5 asked about the role of the good performance of Korean players in their national pride. Before the Olympic Games in January 2018, 50.4% of Koreans “agreed” with the question: “Do you think that Korean players’ good performance will make you proud as a Korean?” Two months after the event in April 2018, 63.1% of participants responded that Korean players made people proud to be Korean, whereas only 54.9% of people answered “agree” in the March 2019 survey (see Table 6).

Table 6. Result of Questionnaire 5

| <b>5. Do you think that Korean players’ good performance will make/made you proud to be Korean?</b> |            |             |            |
|---|------------|-------------|------------|
|   | Jan. 2018  | Apr. 2018   | Mar. 2019  |
| Strongly Agree  | 45 (16.6%) | 103 (34.6%) | 57 (22.5%) |
| Agree   | 92 (33.8%) | 85 (28.5%)  | 82 (32.4%) |
| Neutral   | 69 (25.4%) | 62 (20.8%)  | 57 (22.5%) |
| Disagree  | 39 (14.3%) | 22 (7.4%)   | 31 (12.3%) |
| Strongly Disagree   | 27 (9.9%)  | 26 (8.7%)   | 26 (10.3%) |

Source: author



The final questionnaire of the survey was fairly direct. To the question: “Do you think that the hosting of the Pyeongchang Olympics will play/played a significant role in national unity and the promotion of national pride?” exclusively 29% of Koreans in the first survey responded positively before the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, this figure was more than double (69.1%) the previous survey. In the final survey in March 2019, 40.7% of Koreans agreed with this question, for a 28.4% decline relative to the former figure (see Table 7).

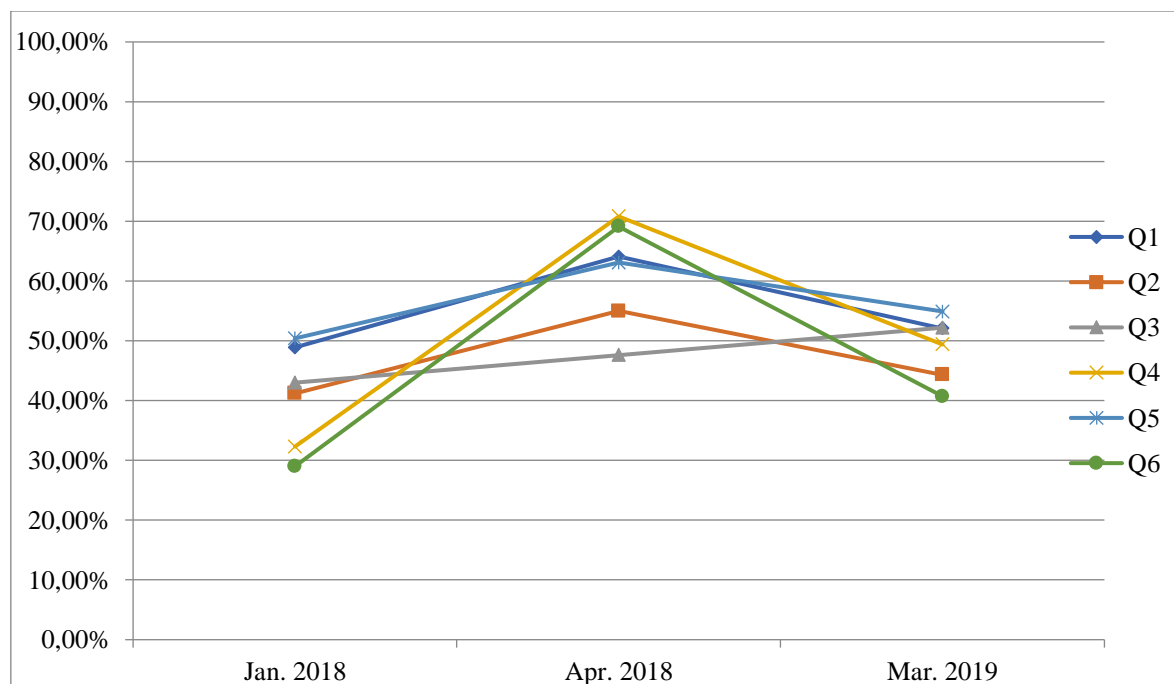
Table 7. Result of Questionnaire 6

| <b>6. Do you think that the hosting of Pyeongchang Olympics will play/played a significant role in national unity and the promotion of national pride?</b> |            |             |            |
|--|------------|-------------|------------|
|  | Jan. 2018  | Apr. 2018   | Mar. 2019  |
| Strongly Agree   | 21 (7.7%)  | 101 (33.9%) | 41 (16.2%) |
| Agree  | 58 (21.3%) | 105 (35.2%) | 62 (24.5%) |
| Neutral  | 90 (33.1%) | 39 (13.1%)  | 61 (24.1%) |
| Disagree   | 55 (20.2%) | 25 (8.4%)   | 36 (14.2%) |
| Strongly Disagree  | 48 (17.7%) | 28 (9.4%)   | 53 (21.0%) |

Source: author

Figure 1 that presents a comparison of all surveys helps to best capture the trends in national identity over time, and how national identity varied before and immediately after the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and approximately one year later.

Figure 1. Comparison of Survey Results: Trends in National Identity over Time



Source: author

## Discussion

As previously examined, many scholars in the field have affirmed the thesis of nation-building as a taken-for-granted outcome of hosting MSEs without properly addressing how long the effects last. If this is simply a short-term effect, such as a flash, stating that such mega-events have truly yielded a social legacy which is represented as the consolidation of national identity would be a mere exaggeration.

In terms of the general questionnaire, as the previous survey results show, the level of national identity and national pride were explicitly exalted right after the event. The Olympic Games, combined with the overflow of a national narrative in the media coverage represented by the *Pyeongchang syndrome*, likely had a significant impact on this phenomenon, as conventional theory suggests. Nonetheless, the latest survey indicates the return to a similar level as the first survey within a margin of error. This finding seems to argue that, based on the survey results of the general questions on national identity the social impact of the event has not persisted for a lengthier period than expected. However, it is worth noting that a large number of variables exist in people's everyday lives that might affect the rise and fall of the sense of both belonging

and national pride, including but not limited to the Olympic Games. In this context, it would be impetuous based exclusively on an interpretation of the survey results of the general questions on national identity to reason that the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics did not generate a long-term legacy of nation-building.

This could be effectively complemented by the other questionnaire that asked respondents' experiences of a national sense of belonging as a Korean in relation to the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. Questionnaires 4, 5, and 6 showed a similar pattern as well. Relative to the pre-event survey, the second survey clearly demonstrated that the consolidation of national identity was substantially achieved through the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. However, one year after the event, these figures retrogressed again.

Overall, this study suggests that the event successfully intensified Korean national pride and national identity for the short-term period of time. This impact is noted as not having been sustained for a long period given that it has gradually decreased post-event. While arguing that nation-building through the Pyeongchang Olympics lasted a short time, this study suggests that examining what makes the nation-building effect as a consequence of hosting Pyeongchang Olympic Games to be ultimately short-lived would be the realm of further research.

## **Conclusion**

This article examined the durability of the nation-building effect through the hosting of MSEs to shed light on a traditionally understudied topic of research in the field based on the case study of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics held in Korea. To this end, this study capitalized on an online survey that was conducted three times in January 2018, April 2018 and in March to illuminate whether the Olympics' social impact of nation-building was short-termed or long-sustained by tracing how Koreans' sense of national identity and national pride was achieved through changes in the Olympics over time. Based on the interpretation of the survey results, this study argues that, although the hosting of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics truly accomplished explicit nation-building, the phenomenon was only a short-term fantasy rather than a long-term legacy.

This preliminary study attempted to fill the gap on existing MSE and nation-building literature by shedding light through the Korean case on how long this nation-

building effect is sustained. To be specific, I suggest that this case study contributes to examining the validity of conventionally taken-for-granted theoretical assumptions of MSEs and its impact on nation-building by illuminating the durability of such nation-building effect using preliminary empirical data and analysis.

This study also presents some future methodological implications, which also can be a clear-cut limitation of this research note. Simple and fragmentary survey research information does not allow us to properly figure out what caused the nation-building in Korea through the event to be ultimately short-lived. The results are suggested in this study as descriptive statistics, but researchers should follow more sensitivity or multivariate regression analysis. At the very least, future research agenda on this issues need t-tests to ensure that differences between the time period are statistically significant. Analysis should also consider employing difference in differences (DID) analysis to explore the role that different samples in each survey iteration had on the results, and how explanatory variables, such as demographics about gender and age, affect the results. Apart from quantitative method sophistication, researchers can also employ in-depth qualitative methods, such as an interview, ethnographic observations, or comparisons with other cases. These qualitative methods will be highly useful to determine the factors that shorten or lengthen the nation-building effect depending on cases used in future studies.

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