



Traces of (dis)organised crime in sports gambling: a case study of the 2011 K-League match-fixing scandal

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Abstract

Gambling-related match-fixing is a form of corruption that has become a global issue particularly since the start of the new millennium. Research on match-fixing has often emphasised the involvement of mafia-like criminal groups in match-fixing arrangements. By incorporating an activity-centred view of organised crime, this paper examines how, and to what extent, organised crime is involved in betting-related match-fixing with particular focus on the 2011 Korean football scandal. Analysing data from 11 in-depth interviews with government, football and gambling officials and two convicted footballers, this paper traces the relative contributions of external criminal influences and internal vulnerabilities of the football league towards the occurrence of the K-League's match-fixing cases. The results suggest that illegal betting operators' exploitation of match-fixing to hedge risks demonstrates the influence of external criminal groups. However, risks were also observed within the football sector (e.g., financial and performance imbalances in the league, normalised betting and inside-trading amongst footballers, close social links with organised mobs, etc.) revealing that, at that time, K-football was not only susceptible to external criminal influences but facilitated the opportunistic structure for match-fixing. Overall, this study highlights that match-fixing is not solely instigated by organised crime groups, but can also be incubated within a sport whose culture, management and ethics are not ready to co-exist with gambling.

Keywords Match-fixing · Gambling · Sports betting · South Korea · K-League · Organised crime

Introduction

Despite its recurring presence in modern sport, gambling-motivated match-fixing has emerged as a global issue particularly since the 2000s with the rise of internet technologies (Forrest et al. 2008; Tak et al. 2018a). As part of an attempt to address the issue, research spanning various disciplines has identified a range of causal

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factors. For example, some scholars have stressed individuals' economic motivations and cost-benefit analysis behind the decision to engage in match-fixing, while also pointing towards risk factors within pre-existing sporting structures (Forrest and Simmons 2003; Forrest 2012). Others have given more weight to social norms (such as a code of brotherhood) within particular cultural settings as a factor that makes individuals vulnerable and willing to become involved in match-fixing (Lee 2017; Tzeng and Lee 2021). Still others have characterised match-fixing as an inescapable by-product of the contemporary political economy that legitimises and promotes gambling on sport (Tak 2018; Tak et al. 2018b, 2022).

In general, there appears to be agreement that all of these risk factors, in combination (albeit to differing degrees), influence the occurrence of match-fixing. However, one important point to consider is the influence of criminal elements on the rapid expansion of match-fixing over the last two decades, relative to those of internal corruption within the sport sector (see Spapens 2021). Indeed, as match-fixing literature has grown, the involvement of organised crime has been accentuated partially in an attempt to highlight the significance of the issue and draw attention from law enforcement agencies (e.g., emphasising mafia involvement in betting syndicates for the purpose of money laundering). In fact, there is evidence suggesting that many match-fixing cases have involved criminal groups (see Feltes 2013 for Interpol's four operations known as SOGA).

However, focusing on criminal activity, especially sensational, high-profile cases, runs the risk of diverting attention away from the corruptive environment of sport itself. For example, many football players partake in match-fixing without facing aggressive threats or tempting offers from fixing rings, while some entrepreneurial individuals organise match-fixing by themselves (Forrest 2013). Although athletes' direct involvement in match-fixing schemes has been partly explained by various socio-cultural factors, for example, social norms (Han 2020; Tzeng and Lee 2021), some other forms of match-fixing (e.g., cases of individual, entrepreneurial match-fixing by players) appear to require new perspectives. To this end, this paper aims to explore the social embeddedness of match-fixing within the football sector itself. More specifically, drawing upon two competing perspectives towards organised crime (actor-centred and activity-centred views), we examine how, and to what extent, criminal elements are involved in betting-related match-fixing in sport.

This study focuses on match-fixing in South Korea's K-League football as an in-depth case study. The K-League match-fixing scandal has been examined by several studies (e.g., Han 2020; Tak 2018; Tak et al. 2018b). Since the majority of bets on fixed matches were placed with the legal monopolist operator (via its offline shops), these studies have focused on the fundamental vulnerability of the sports betting regulatory regime (Tak 2018; Tak et al. 2018b) and its provision model (state monopoly) (Han 2020) in the country. As a result, the involvement of crime groups and illegal betting in the K-League scandal has remained relatively under-researched. Moreover, shifting attention towards non-Western cases, including the K-League, provides fertile ground for observing the social embeddedness of corruption given the distinctive social norms at work which differ from western-oriented sporting ethics (Lee 2022). Furthermore, Asia has "a special status" when it comes to sports betting and match-fixing (Han 2020: 99). As Han (2020) notes: "With the

largest population (60% of the entire world population), the continent has the largest betting market, and match-fixing has been normalized in several regions” (p. 99). Indeed, within South Korea, all four major professional sports, including football, have suffered match-fixing.

This study gathered data from in-depth interviews with 11 people, including personnel from the government, sport, gambling and media sectors, along with two convicted K-League players, all of whom were involved in the scandal, investigation, prevention and/or reporting of the K-League cases. The aim is to examine the way in which both criminal groups and the contextual conditions within the league itself contribute to match-fixing. According to Spapens (2021), “by viewing match-fixing solely as a problem dominated by ‘outsiders’, criminal or otherwise, we are not seeing the complete picture” (p. 147). Although in his work, match-fixing initiated by ‘insiders’ (athletes, referees, sponsors, officials, etc.) mainly refers to non-gambling-related match-fixing, focusing on the role of insiders is still crucial for obtaining a fuller understanding of gambling-related match-fixing. By comparing the external and internal influences, we conclude that gambling match-fixing is not solely caused by organised crime; rather, it can also be incubated within a sport whose culture, management and ethics are ill-prepared to safely co-exist with legal gambling.

Literature review: actor-centred and activity-centred perspectives

Research on betting-related match-fixing can be categorised into four different approaches: (1) rational choice approach; (2) investigative journalism approach; (3) socio-cultural approach; and (4) institutional approach (Tak 2022). First, rational-choice approaches (Forrest and Simmons 2003; Forrest et al. 2008) base their assessment of risky conditions (e.g., vulnerable leagues) on a cost-benefit model in which match-fixing participants are understood to maximise utility. Second, investigative journalistic approaches (Hill 2008, 2009, 2010, 2015), while also drawing upon elements of the rational-choice approach, concentrate on how organised fixing rings permeate football teams by dissecting the network of people directly involved in fixing schemes. Third, compared to the first two perspectives’ focus on rational-choice and the search for universal conditions that help explain match-fixing, socio-cultural research (Lee 2008, 2017; Tzeng and Lee 2021; Tzeng et al. 2020) explores the cultural norms that make certain regions more susceptible to match-fixing, for example, Confucius code of brotherhood within Asia (Tzeng et al. 2020). Fourth and finally, institutional approaches go beyond the individual and cultural levels in order to challenge and hold accountable the legal sports-betting regimes for match-fixing and to discuss the ‘blame-games’ around the issue (Moriconi 2018; Moriconi and Almeida 2019; Tak 2018; Tak et al. 2018a, b).

Originating from differing disciplinary backgrounds, these respective approaches have presented different foci (sport, gambling, law enforcement or political economy), sources of problems (e.g., an issue of sporting ethics, financial corruption or institutional failure) and solutions (e.g., education, monitoring of the betting market, etc.) (Tak 2022). In addition, they also provide various depictions of how organised crime promotes and intervenes in match-fixing. For instance, in Forrest’s (2013)

research, criminal groups (betting syndicates) are described as the ‘demand’ side of fixes while football players represent the ‘supply’ side. Hill’s (2009) analysis of the workable design of fixing rings (e.g., employing one key player within the team as the ‘project manager’) and their approaches (‘fast bucks’ approach and ‘pseudo-relationships’) show that the rings are highly organised groups. This is also confirmed by socio-cultural research (e.g., Lee 2017; Tzeng and Lee 2021; Tzeng et al. 2020) documenting the tactics of mafia groups in Taiwanese match-fixing in professional baseball (e.g., abducting players for match-fixing and operating a loan shark ring to bribe players to match-fix).

Paoli and Vander Beken (2014) suggest that there are two contrasting notions of organised crime, which can be referred to as: (1) an actor-centred view and (2) an activity-centred view respectively. The actor-centred view defines organised crime as “a set of stable organisations illegal per se or whose members systematically engage in crime” (Paoli and Vander Beken 2014: 14). As this perspective identifies mafia-type organisations with organised crime (Paoli and Vander Beken 2014), it basically focuses on ‘who’, that is, criminal offenders and organisations and what ‘they’ do. On the other hand, the activity-centred view explains organised crime as “a set of serious criminal activities mostly carried out for monetary gain” (Paoli and Vander Beken 2014: 14). This view puts more emphasis on activities per se, no matter who (be they criminal or not) undertakes the activities. Accordingly, this view focuses on the pursuit of profit, almost equating organised crime with ‘illegal enterprise’ (Hobbs 1994; Levi 2008, 2012; Smith 1975). Importantly from this perspective, whoever is involved in supplying “illegal products and services” can be considered a part of organised crime (Paoli and Vander Beken 2014: 18).

What then constitutes the particular organised crime element that is involved in gambling match-fixing? The two rival conceptualisations of organised crime might provide different answers regarding the question of ‘the extent to which organised crime is involved in match-fixing’ because of their differing views on organised crime itself. It appears that within the match-fixing literature, organised crime generally refers to the involvement of mafia-type gangs, for example, the Bochum gang in the 2009 European football scandal (Forrest 2012). Likewise, match-fixing has often been discussed as “an outlet for the activity of international organized crime” (e.g., money-laundering) (Di Ronco and Lavorgna 2015; Forrest 2012: 104). Although not all betting syndicates are (linked to) mafia-type criminal organisations, Hill (2012) similarly stresses, citing the murder case of a Chinese couple in Newcastle in the UK (Stevenson 2008), “some of the people running this illegal gambling market are vicious and blood-thirsty enough to torture and kill two of their operatives for double-crossing them” (p. 12). This mafia-centred representation of organised crime in match-fixing literature has arguably succeeded in shifting the issue beyond the world of sport to become a key regulatory agenda especially in Europe, leading to greater awareness, resourcing and policy development (Tak et al. 2018a).

However, it is not only criminals or their organisations that arrange match-fixing. Often athletes themselves act as masterminds of fixing schemes (Forrest 2013). In this sense, the activity-centred view provides considerable flexibility for understanding how match-fixing is related to organised crime. Since this conception considers any arrangements to make unlawful profits as organised crime, it can encompass a

wider range of actors, organisations and endeavours in relation to betting and match-fixing, such as players betting on themselves, mobilising other players, or investing in and designing fixing schemes. That is, this ‘illegal enterprise’ perspective, as opposed to the ‘mafia’ perspective, pays more attention to the similarities between legal and illegal activities (e.g., legal and illegal betting), thus potentially explaining why demand exists beyond legal provision, and why the illegal activities are pursued as an enterprise by “normal, rational, profit-oriented” people (Kleemans 2014: 35).

In sum, too much emphasis on external criminal groups as the cause of match-fixing runs the danger of ignoring the role of insiders and how sport itself facilitates the opportunistic structure for match-fixing (Moriconi 2023; Moriconi and Almeida 2019). Indeed, if and when sport itself provides fertile ground for corruption, including match-fixing, it is difficult to attribute the issue entirely to criminal influences. In those environments, there needs to be a more flexible approach in order to analyse match-fixing as an illegal enterprise. As seen in the social embeddedness of organised crime (Van de Bunt et al. 2014), match-fixing does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, match-fixing might be constructed as something that is normatively permissible through athletes’ pre-established social relations (with criminals and fans/punters), betting practices, the leagues’ competition and compensation structures and the sporting culture in which players develop.

Next, this paper outlines the context of the case study and methods in order to explore the extent to which the external criminal influences and internally embedded risks within the K-League contributed to the occurrence of match-fixing.

Case context and methods

According to Kingma’s (2008) classification of governance models of gambling (Risk, Alibi and Prohibition models), South Korea’s state monopoly takes the form of an alibi model. While some western liberal countries (e.g., Australia and the UK) have shifted towards a risk model where gambling is accepted as a commercial enterprise that brings additional tax revenue and employment (Cosgrave and Klassen 2009), countries with an alibi model still treat gambling as a “vice” despite it being legalised, and justify its legal provision as a means of driving out illegal markets and contributing to the public good including: healthcare, culture and sport (Kingma 2008: 447). Hence, the risk model tends to be susceptible to problem gambling, due to more aggressive marketing and supply in the deregulated, competitive, free market, whereas the alibi model is more exposed to illegal gambling because limited supply and tight regulations provide less competitive products than those available in the illegal market. This is evident in the annual numbers of reported illegal betting websites in South Korea (30,000 to 70,000) and the United Kingdom (31) (see Tak 2021 for detailed comparison). As Kleemans (2014) says, “Restrictions on supply do not eradicate demand; instead, they only alter market conditions for illegal entrepreneurs” (p. 35). Sport gambling is no exception. Indeed, the scale of South Korea’s illegal sports betting market (about USD 17 billion) was estimated to be four times larger than the legal market in 2022 (National Gambling Control Commission 2019).

South Korea introduced sports betting with a view to raising funds for the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Its state monopoly programme was originally limited to pools betting but later expanded to offer fixed-odds products in 2006 (Tak et al. 2018b). However, due to the principle (or pretext) of the state project (raising funds for public projects) and the concern over problem gambling, the state only allowed conservative products (i.e., no live betting or spot betting) with low payout rates (i.e., uncompetitive odds), which inevitably enlarged illegal markets (Han 2020; Tak 2021). The ever-growing illegal betting market, and the ease of access to it, might have led to the match-fixing scandals in all four major professional leagues in South Korea (see Han 2020 for more details).

The 2011 K-League scandal is the largest match-fixing case in the history of South Korea. In total, 21 matches (15 League matches and six cup matches) during the 2010 and 2011 seasons were found to be fixed, resulting in 59 players across eight clubs (9% of the total registered players) being banned (some received jail sentences) (Han 2020). A total of 22 more people were found guilty of organising match-fixing. According to Han (2020), the nature and vulnerability of the state monopoly's protectionist betting model made it a target and required large numbers of players. He suggested that the match-fixers bet with the legal monopolist operator because of its stable payout, compared to illegal operators that often take the money and disappear (Han 2020). Also, large numbers of players were recruited because the monopolistic provider only offered 'combination bets' where punters were required to predict the results of at least two matches (Han 2020 for more details on the K-League scandal).

Notably, organised crime groups existed behind some of the match-fixing schemes in the K-League. Specifically, the key figures of a major line of match-fixing scheme included five members of *Buk-Masan-Pa* ('Pa' means a group in Korean), an organised crime group based in the Southern part of the country, which was being monitored by the state prosecution due to its involvement in other illegal activities (Dong-A 2011; Yoon 2011). Several other organised crime groups were also investigated and some of their members prosecuted, including one in *Suwon Nammoon-Pa* (KBS 2011).

In order to explore the links to organised crime in the 2011 K-League scandal, this study relied on two data sources: documents and in-depth interviews. Document analysis was conducted around policy documents, media articles, written law court sentencing, etc. which were produced from the time of the scandal up until 2022. Media articles and sentencing were searched through online archives: BigKinds for newspapers and CaseNote for sentencing documents. In total 260 news articles and six sentencing documents were accessed (with keywords: match-fixing & football & K-league in Korean). Policy documents were obtained via relevant organisations' websites as well as from interviewees. These included consulting reports, internal reports, press releases and public relations material of the organisations involved. These documents were reviewed at the outset to gain a general sense of the empirical setting, which also informed the study's data collection strategy (e.g., selecting interviewees and developing interview guides) (Bowen 2009; Merriam 1988).

In-depth interviews were carried out with 11 people who were involved in the investigation, reporting and processing of the incidents, including: government

and K-League officials, personnel associated with two implicated K-League clubs, the state-sanctioned betting provider and a newspaper company. In addition, interviews were conducted with a person involved in illegal betting provision and two convicted players (one financed fixing schemes, the other was bribed to fix matches) (see Table 1 for the list of interviewees). Interview participants were purposely recruited and contacted mainly via gatekeepers (and through the lead author's personal connections) in the football industry and later snowballed to include people with more diverse experiences and perspectives (Patton 2015). Given the controversial nature of the study, great care was taken in approaching and interviewing participants. For example, initial contact with the two convicted players required a particularly careful approach given the sensitive nature of the scandal and their concerns over how their stories might be exposed to the public. Here, it is important to note that the gatekeepers provided introductions to players who had little intention to return to football and thus, there was less reluctance to share their experiences. Early rapport with the players was established through the mutual contacts (gatekeepers) while the introductory part of the interview focused on the players' career and personal life which helped put them at ease.

Interview questions for the organisational actors were centred on their respective roles and observations of the K-League match-fixing cases. Convicted players were mainly asked about their motivations for participation in match-fixing and specific processes, while the former illegal betting operator was asked about the operation of the illegal enterprise and its potential involvement in match-fixing. The interview with a journalist was intended to capture an alternative, third-person's perspective on the scandal and corroborate details of the case. All of the interview participants were informed of the purpose of the study and signed consent forms. Interviews were conducted in Korean by the lead author and lasted one to two hours. In addition, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, excerpts of which were later translated into English for presentation.

Table 1 List of interviewees

Organisation	Position/Pseudonym
Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism's Sport Policy Department	MCST Department Head
KFA	KFA Official
K-League	K-League Department Head
A K-League Club involved in match-fixing	Club Executive Director
Another K-League Club involved in match-fixing	Club Staff
State monopolist provider	State Provider Officer 1
State monopolist provider	State Provider Officer 2
A media company	Journalist
An illegal betting operation	Former Member of an illegal betting operation
Formerly a K-League club	Convicted Player 1
Formerly a K-League club	Convicted Player 2

A theory informed, thematic analysis was conducted via repetitive inductive and deductive processes (Braun and Clarke 2019; Kvale 2007; Terry and Hayfield 2020). The documentary data offered an overall picture of the K-League scandal, the details of which were augmented with interview data. With an initial rough sketch completed, the next step was to investigate, compare and contrast the K-League cases with respect to the two conceptualisations of organised crime – i.e., external instigations relative to internal vulnerabilities to match-fixing. This process generated several interrelated points of discussion: (1) traditional forms of organised crime's exploitation of football, (2) differing motives of what Hill (2009) refers to as internal "project managers", and the players that they recruit, and (3) the risky conditions within the League itself that make it vulnerable to criminals seeking to promote match-fixing. Each of these points is presented in more detail in the following sections.

Match-fixing by organised crime groups linked to illegal betting

Interview data suggest that illegal betting enterprises necessitate risky practices and thus, require organised crime groups. This is because running a business "without the benefit of the state" or even "against the state" (Bouchard and Morselli 2014: 289) incurs significant transaction costs, for example, distrust and the challenge of enforcing contracts (Kleemans 2014). As a result, the business practices of illegal betting operators appear to have developed in a way that minimises these costs. However, this also helps explain how and why organised crime groups are able to penetrate and ultimately influence illegal betting operations.

First, according to the former member of an illegal betting operation (Former Member), illegal operators develop their own internet sites or buy exclusive distribution rights from foreign operators with a 4–7% royalty. In turn, these operators, using a form of multi-level marketing, recruit agencies (or downline distributors) that distribute their 'websites' and recruit 'customers'. When contracting out to agencies, a key factor in setting fee rates is whether an agency runs a call centre to deal with customers' enquiries and complaints. Agencies with a call centre secure higher rates (70% compared to 35% for those without a call centre) because they need to have an office (physical spaces) and a bank account, which raises the likelihood of being caught. Because of the increased chances of being caught and arrested, as well as the need for a systematic operation to prevent defection, organised crime groups become involved in the business (personal communication with Former Member). The Former Member further noted that "delivery accidents are frequent" when staff are sent to withdraw or exchange cash due to the substantial size of financial transactions. Consequently, gang members eat, sleep and travel with employees 24/7 in order to monitor their work and protect their 'investment'.

Second, recruiting customers also requires 'organised' efforts. In a media interview, one former illegal operator said that because "it was very difficult to secure entrants", "I thought it would be hard without [the help of] an organised crime group". He added:

Organised crime groups have networks across the nation in a pyramid shape. When there appears to be a money-spinning business, they can make a move on the same day, so they are fit for this business. (Jung 2013)

However, the biggest weakness of illegal operators is their limited liquidity. Unlike government-sanctioned monopolists and licensed operators that mostly take the form of limited companies, illegal operators have insufficient financial resources. According to the Former Member, most illegal betting sites have a maximum upper limit of about KRW 3 million (USD 2,400). To explain this, State Betting Provider's Officer 2 stated that: "they [illegal operators] advertise that a punter can bet as much money as they want, but if KRW two million (USD 1,600) or KRW three million (USD 2,400) is coming in ... they don't take it [the bet]. Otherwise, they take it and run away [if the punter wins the bet]". For that reason, the main lines of match-fixing schemes in the K-League scandal targeted the legal monopolist company (Han 2020).

From the perspective of illegal operators, "sports betting is not a very profitable business" because the bets are small, there is a risk for bookies to lose, and market competition is fierce due to the low entry barriers (Former Member). According to the Former Member, "sports betting is not the core business". Rather, he suggests that sports betting serves as 'bait' to lure punters into more lucrative online gambling that the operator offers, such as casino games. He illustrated the limited profitability of sports betting compared to casino games, noting that: "To maintain sales of KRW 100 million (USD 80,000), sports betting needs 100 customers while online casino needs only 30".

If it is true that sports betting is utilised as a 'promotional' vehicle for more serious forms of gambling in the illegal market, why do some illegal operators try to fix matches? The Former Member answered as follows: "think about single bets [betting on a single match]. Illegal betting sites can make a loss if it's too obvious to guess which side is going to win because of the performance gap. In this case, a draw can save you the loss or even make a lot of profits". That is why, according to the Former Member, illegal operators often hire players for fixing. He dropped the names of a few football players and described them as "obedient", emphasising that "it's not common in the first division, but quite common in the second and third." In this view, match-fixing by illegal operators seems to be a way to keep the balance in the black in their small, promotional business unit.

This form of match-fixing clearly indicates the problem is initiated by the illegal betting enterprises who mobilise and corrupt athletes, supporting the perspective that corrupt outside influences are a major contributing factor to match-fixing. As such, liberalising the monopolistic betting market of South Korea could potentially lower such motivations by absorbing illegal enterprises into the legal boundaries under close supervision (Preston and Szymanski 2003). However, illegal operators' fixing was just one of the routes of match-fixing in the K-League scandal. In reality, most of the bets were placed with the legal monopolist provider. Also, behind the large-scale mobilisation of players lay the normalisation of betting amongst K-League players. The next section further looks into the main line of the fixing schemes.

Is it all from external criminals? Socially embedded dangers of match-fixing

Hill's (2009) investigative journalism approach provides a clear map of how fixing rings are constituted, from betting syndicates to brokers and players. The K-League match-fixing scandal also emerged through those who connect the world of sport to the world of gambling (be it legal or illegal). While these structures of fixing rings refer to external influences (from betting syndicates), the standard of integrity within a sport league can work as resistance against such corrupt influences. The K-League seemed acutely vulnerable in this respect for the following reasons: (1) significant financial and accordant performance differences between clubs; (2) players' naivety about match-fixing; (3) normalised betting practices amongst players; and (4) organised crime groups in the vicinity of players. This section examines the potential impact of these four vulnerable conditions within the K-League at the time of the scandal.

Financial and performance gaps between clubs

The structural layout of the K-League per se had a built-in risk for match-fixing. There were three different types of teams (corporate-owned, regional government-owned and a military team) in the League and their vastly differing financial status and performance levels generated predictable matches which made some players think "we're going to lose anyway" (Convicted player 1). In addition, some players facing financial difficulty were exposed to the temptation of match-fixing. Convicted Player 1 described which teams and players were in more vulnerable circumstances:

You know the regional government-owned teams with little salaries and low winning rates. Seoul [owned by LG], Suwon [owned by Samsung], players in those teams didn't do that, did they? They've got good bonuses and they're always winning ... they might lose their place in the starting squad [if participating in match-fixing]. (Convicted Player 1)

Many agree that money was the main motivation of the players who acted as brokers (player-brokers) directly interacting with the fixing rings. However, as Hill (2015) says, "The precise motivation for acquiring that money varies" (p. 220) (e.g., deprivation, debt, extravagance, etc.). In the K-League cases, it seemed to be related to 'relative or rapid reductions in income' because the two most active player-brokers were playing for Sangmu FC which was involved in a total of eight fixed matches. Sangmu FC was a military team through which selected professional footballers serve their military duties. Given that Sangmu FC players earned very low salaries (about USD 80 a month) and had less motivation to win (they were basically fulfilling their military duties), the League was carrying endogenous risks for match-fixing. As the KFA Official observed, "there is no bonus even if they win the league title". Notably, most of the research

participants in this study, including players, pointed to the ‘size of expenditure’ of the highly-paid professional footballers. Consider the comments of one interviewee, a convicted player:

You used to earn a lot, but not anymore in there [in Sangmu FC] ... You may spend what you’ve saved up for the first year, but soon, you’ll feel stressed out because of money. As we go out weekly or biweekly, there is a lot to spend on ... So, just KRW one million [USD 800] or two million [USD 1,600] can be [tempting]. (Convicted Player 1)

The ‘size of expenditure’ played a part on the other side of the League as well. Those who had a large ‘size of expenditure’ not only took part in match-fixing, but some of them even ran an illegal betting website. In another club, two other convicted players who were running an illegal betting website and organised match-fixing “liked drinking” according to the K-League Club Officer, and that contributed to their financial problems:

They were those who go to a room salon (hostess bar) and spend several thousands ... both took home KRW 20 million (USD 16,000) as win bonuses, but spent a lot ... They had debts and always talked about money. (Club Officer)

As such, it was mainly financial reasons behind the players who were directly ordered and bribed by fixing rings or organising match-fixing themselves. However, what activated these financial motives was the unique league structure that made some of its matches fairly insignificant and vulnerable to corrupt influences.

Players’ naivety about match-fixing

The motivation of other athletes who went along with the fix and who were mobilised by the player-brokers, is very difficult to explain by a simple ‘desire for money’ (Hill 2015). Hence, multiple informants described the need to separate their motivations to participate in match-fixing, which generally fell into one of two categories. As the ‘Journalist’ said, the frontline players [player-brokers] were “obviously tempted by money”, but “players underneath them” in the second line “came to do that as they were asked to”. The ‘K-League Official’ emphasised the small amount of money some received: “If he had won the match, he would have got a win bonus of KRW 3 million [USD 2,400] but he [lost and] got KRW 1.5 million [USD 1,200] from match-fixers. It’s not a monetary reason, is it?” (KFA Official). That is, most of the secondary group players were persuaded into fixing schemes, due to their relationship with the player-brokers who requested help.

Because the legal betting system in South Korea only offered combination bets on two or more matches, match-fixing attempts had to fix at least two matches at the same time. But players in one of the games often failed to underperform and therefore could not deliver the expected result. In such cases, the fixing rings, which had already bet a large amount of money on the expected result, made a loss and requested compensation from player-brokers. Player-brokers who were not able to pay back had to fix another match to make amends for the loss – often under duress.

As seen in other cases elsewhere, when “the manipulators fail to deliver the desired outcome or do not want to continue manipulating matches”, “threats of violence” were often used (Spapens 2021: 137). Interviews revealed that this quandary for player-brokers impacted and drew sympathy from fellow players. For example, Convicted Player 2 describes a situation where he heard about a fixing plan and a colleague (player-broker) who was under the threat of criminal gang members:

I heard that when Sangmu FC team went to a match, you know they stay in a hotel before the match-day. And the gangs got a room in the same hotel and brought him (player-broker) to the room and beat him. (Convicted Player 2)

When asked if it was scary to consider partaking in the fixing scheme, Convicted Player 2 answered: “rather than it being scary, the only thought I had was helping him” (Convicted Player 2). He added: “[I thought] even if we did this one match, would it be a big deal? We are not even in the play-offs”. This echoes what Tzeng and Lee (2021) highlighted in their interpretation of the Taiwanese baseball cases where the focus of the players involved in “‘helping match-fixing’ is the *helping*, rather than the *fixing*” (p. 567, emphasis in original).

In this sense, it appears that while initially player-brokers were the minority, more players eventually became implicated in match-fixing, not only because of criminal gangs’ threats and bribes (monetary reasons), but more so because of the “fostered comradeship” (Tzeng and Lee 2021: 567) and their loose (or lack of) understanding of match-fixing. The tight bonding between footballers may be explained by the social-cultural approach to match-fixing (e.g., Confucius brotherhood in Taiwanese baseball cases) (Tzeng and Lee 2021; Tzeng et al. 2020). However, the players’ naïve understanding of match-fixing needs additional explanation. Why did the players perceive that match-fixing was not “a big deal”?

Normalised betting and inside trading amongst players

Another risk factor ingrained in the K-League was players’ widespread participation in betting. Two convicted players reported that many football players frequently bet on the K-League in the mid-to-late 2000s:

Yes, everyone used to bet, everyone. I can’t name them, but those who are still playing now used to bet together back then (Convicted Player 2).
Before matches, [we bet] just KRW 10,000 (USD 8) or more ... As we went to internet cafes during a break ... fellas did that in convenience stores ... it was about 2008? (Convicted Player 1)

The players interviewed told us that sharing inside information was common and word got around about match-fixing in 2009. They said that since many players bet, sought information and became involved in fixing games, more players were attracted into the habit of betting. Convicted Player 2 conveyed the atmosphere of that time: “if you’ve got close friends in other teams, you tell them, ‘Hey, today this team and that team have it (a fixing arrangement). Bet if you have some money’”.

The Club Executive Director likened players' betting practices of that time to sharing tips among stock investors:

You know when people invest in stocks, they ask, 'where to invest money' ... It was like that ... they didn't have a sense of guilt or something like that [as they did not know its seriousness]. It was like, 'let me know if there is anywhere to put money' when we invest in stocks. (Club Executive Director).

According to the KFA Official, it is not that players did not know match-fixing was wrong; it is just that they "were unaware of the gravity of the issue. They thought of what they were doing as something that is a little worse than drinking or something like that" (KFA Official). Han (2020) also reports that the prosecutors of the scandal noted that players had got involved in match-fixing without an awareness of the issue.

The MCST Department Head who was in charge of the investigation and countermeasure development confirms that players did not recognise the extent of "the social repercussions match-fixing could create" (MCST Department Head). However, naivety was not just an issue with football players. The MCST Department Head acknowledges that not only players, but "our MCST, especially the Sport Policy Department was not interested at all in guarding players and coaches from this". He suggested that despite a new, fixed-odds betting product having been introduced in 2006, the sport, gambling and government sectors have not been adequately prepared for its accompanying risks. In other words, although the League has become the product for gambling, its structure, operational systems, culture and ethics have not been sufficiently updated to transform football into a betting sport. Perhaps, the transformation might have only occurred as a consequence of the shocking 2011 match-fixing scandal.

Organised criminals at close range

Mafia-type organised crime groups were deeply involved in a few key aspects of the K-League scandal as financiers, main fixers and brokers. For instance, the members of *Buk-Masan-Pa* not only designed initial plans by interacting and collaborating with (former) football players, but bet their own money, the rumours of which were also used as tips for other gang members' betting (Dong-A 2011; Yoon 2011). As revealed in Hill's (2008, 2009) cases, in these groups, former players played a key role in recruiting participating players given that they were very familiar with team circumstances and in close contact with current players. It should be noted that former players were not only recruited by organised crime groups, but some were part of the groups, which in effect meant that the football world was only one step away from the influence of criminal groups. Convicted Player 1 confirmed this by stating: "We know some gang members and other sports players, so when we meet and drink together, some may go 'you do that, then I'll give you money'. As the Club Executive Director highlights, "a minority of dropouts of the football pathways entered the underworld" which allegedly requires similar physical capital, and "[if your] friends are gang members", they are just "friends" [to you], rather than "gang members".

The planning of match-fixing seems to have been conceived mostly through these pre-established personal relationships with gang members. Of course, these close relations could also end with threats when things did not go as planned. However, given the potential risks already deep-seated within the pre-existing relationships, the organised crime groups' ad hoc approach appears to have been different from the Taiwanese mafia's "long-term investment strategy" (Tzeng and Lee 2021: 561) or other intentional approaches, such as employing prostitutes (Hill 2009).

Moreover, K-League fixing schemes were not as well-designed as those featured in Hill's (2009) cases. It is hard to find particular efforts to "promote secrecy and protect members from possible detection" (Hill 2009: 418). Without clear designated roles, gang members individually bet on fixed results while brokers shared fixing information with people around them. Compared to well-organised fixing schemes guarding information inside the core members in order to maximise profits and minimise detection, the K-League fixers were quite amateurish. In the end, the launch of the prosecutor's investigation was sparked by such a disorganised arrangement. According to several interview participants and news reports, one gang member in charge of recruiting players bet so much money as an individual with other rings that the legal betting operator shut down bets on the arranged matches. This made the original fixing ring's betting plan impossible and they turned themselves into the police with the aim of securing the arrest of the recruiting member and having his profits confiscated (Ahn 2011; Hwang and Wi 2011).

Furthermore, those in the middle ground between the fixing rings and the football world (e.g., brokers, player brokers) played mixed roles (e.g., gang members, financiers, illegal betting operators and current players). As betting and match-fixing have become perceived to be profitable jobs, people in respective positions have become involved themselves and expanded their roles accordingly. Although there were some strategic attempts to fix matches by organised crime groups on one side of the scandal, there appears to have been as many people within the football sector who exploited the fixing information for their own bets or organised fixing schemes at a more local level. Also, countering the moniker of 'organised crime', the criminal groups approached players based on pre-established relationships, rather than devising strategic approaches with well-thought-out tactics. Such endogenous corruption might have burst into match-fixing not only because of the external threats or temptations from fixing rings, but because of the embedded risks discussed in this section.

These risks, including structural vulnerability, normalised betting practices and close relationships with organised crime groups, indicate that match-fixing is not an entirely exogenous problem, instigated by corrupt, external influences. Although there were operations and influences of illegal bookmakers and organised crime groups in particular instances, it seems more appropriate to surmise that the K-League had implemented rather naïve regulations on betting. This, combined with a complacent culture where players themselves engaged in organised fixing, enabled them to directly run illegal betting websites, mobilise peer-players and invest money on arranged matches.

Conclusion

Given the increasing cultural and financial value of sport along with expanding state and private betting enterprises associated with it, there should be little surprise that criminal elements seek to exploit opportunities. In terms of how organised crime was involved, the K-League match-fixing cases show three different pathways: (1) illegal betting-related organised crime groups fixing matches to hedge financial risks; (2) organised crime groups fixing matches to make profits; and (3) football players themselves fixing matches as illegal betting operators or getting involved in the first two types as brokers or financiers. While the first two types reflect the traditional notion of organised crime (mafia-like crime groups' expansion into new opportunities, such as illegal betting and match-fixing), the third type appears to be better explained by the activity-centred view of organised crime in that non-traditional criminal actors (players) tried to engage in illegal activities (match-fixing) created by the loopholes of regulation and monitoring.

The K-League cases reveal a mixture of the three types, alluding to a combination of both the criminal groups' influences and the internally corrupt practices as joint contributors to the 2011 scandal. However, even where criminal groups were involved, their influence appears less organised and less centralised as the actor-centred view might suggest with respect to forms of match-fixing. Although it is true that organised crime groups recruited players for fixing, their betting strategies fell short of what can be considered a strategic investment. There was also an occasion where fixing plans were leaked widely so that the original fixer failed to place bets. Based on abundant information on arranged matches, players bet or acted as financiers for fixing schemes. Many of the mobilised players naively thought they 'helped' their teammates in a predicament, and often failed to underperform to fix matches on field. The crudeness found from the initial planning to subsequent investment, recruitment and on-field execution processes made it possible to interpret the K-League scandal as a loose, *disorganised*, short-term illegal enterprise, pursued jointly and separately by organised crime groups and corrupt football players. This is somewhat different from the careful planning and thorough organisation of fixing schemes observed in the most match-fixing literature.

In this respect, we argue that in the K-League cases, despite the involvement of the external crime groups, the embedded risks within the football industry played a critical part in the emergence of match-fixing problems. These risks relate to the question of whether corruption is 'a normalised act that makes integrity in sport the deviation from public expectations or a repercussion of the infiltration of organised crime'. In some sense, the potential for match-fixing in South Korea had already been established endogenously when players' normalised betting participation led to frequent sharing of inside information (insider trading per se is considered match-fixing in many countries). On the other hand, the proposals of match-fixing could have just as easily been made by people inside the football sector had there been no criminal groups. Therefore, despite the influence of organised crime which can be explained by the actor-centred view, it seems more

persuasive to apply the activity-centred view where the K-League match-fixing morphed into organised crime through many non-traditional criminal actors.

This perspective enables us to critically reassess the influence of organised crime on match-fixing depending on the specific sporting contexts under study. A more flexible understanding of organised crime from the activity-centred perspective could help to capture more diverse forms of match-fixing attempts made by non-criminals. Also, this study's emphasis on the internal risk factors entrenched in sport per se points towards the need to cultivate a new environment and code of ethics for contemporary sports that seemingly have no choice but to co-exist with gambling. In retrospect, the K-League scandal (and ensuing cases in other professional sports in the nation) occurred fundamentally because of the imbalance between the universalised betting practices on sports and the sport's sector's myopia towards potential consequences. When sports become subject to gambling, there needs to be a transition in culture and ethics to resist against any risks that come with gambling on the sports, including match-fixing. The K-League might have had to confront this transition in a shocking and rapid way due to a delay in making the necessary changes. Hence, the K-League cases show that when a sport is not fully equipped with appropriate and sufficient betting-related regulations, practices and ethics, organised crime not only targets, infiltrates and corrupts the vulnerable sport, but pre-existing internal risk factors can contribute to ordinary, profit-oriented members of the sport sector becoming a serious threat to the sport and the wider society.

Although it has provided unique insights, this study has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. Given the nature of the study focusing on a single country case (South Korea) with a distinctive mode of offering sports betting, our interpretation of the relative influences of the outsider criminal components and insiders may not be widely generalisable or applicable. Indeed, the evidence offered in case studies is necessarily contingent. However, as Simons (1996) emphasised, the indefinite evidence may enable people to think differently, "to reconstruct [their] own understanding" of the contexts where they are located (p. 230). In this respect, our actor/activity-centred inquiry of the K-League match-fixing cases could provide a useful angle to be tested in other contexts for alternative interpretations of match-fixing. Another limitation of this study derives from its main framework of contrasting the actor-centred and activity-centred perspectives. Although this served the purpose of examining the comparative contributions of insiders and outsiders towards match-fixing cases, it inevitably distracted our attention from other important aspects of the scandal. Future research, therefore, might consider employing other key theories and concepts available in criminology and beyond (e.g., opportunity, network, strain, neutralisation theories, and the notions of corporate and occupational crime) in order to offer not only a more complete picture of the scandal empirically, but also to advance our understanding of various social mechanisms behind gambling-related match-fixing.

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