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Golf Entertainment Venues as the Front Porch to Golf: Exploring the Experiences and Perceptions of Novice Golfers at Topgolf

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A recent trend in the golf industry is an increase in golf entertainment venues (e.g., Topgolf, Five Iron Golf, PuttShack), which blend sport participation and entertainment. The popularity of these venues provides a unique opportunity for the overarching sport to improve participation, public perception, sustainability, and profits. Historically, golf struggled with image-related issues, including barriers to access and participation. Golf entertainment venues are disrupting the way individuals, especially casual golfers, consume and perceive the sport. Topgolf was among the first successful entertainment venues and may impact the brand of golf. Therefore, this study focuses on novice golfers' experiences at Topgolf and their perception of golf. Data were collected via in-person interviews and free elicitation response methods (i.e., word association). Following the data analysis, four themes were constructed: (1) Importance of Social Experience, (2) Positive Sportscape, (3) Internal Reactions, and (4) Growing the Game: Using Topgolf as the "Front Porch." Theoretical implications for this work include providing a basis for future studies on sport participation and entertainment venues. Practical implications for this work should aid the sport industry, specifically the golf industry, in leveraging these products to improve the sport's public perception and overall participation.

Keywords: golf, sportscape, brand loyalty, sport branding, technology, Topgolf

Introduction

Historically, the sport of golf has faced an image problem due to its privatized nature, exclusionary practices, and financial burdens for participants (McGinnis

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et al., 2006, 2021; NGF, 2019). Despite these issues, the COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented opportunity for golf, as it was uniquely positioned as an outdoor activity allowed by social distancing measures (NGF, 2022). Post-pandemic golf participation is at an all-time high, as the sport is now being played by 47.2 million Americans (NGF, 2025). The increase in participation may serve as an opportunity to shift the brand image.

Though traditional golf still maintains many of the above-mentioned barriers and image problems, golf entertainment venues (GEVs; e.g., Drive Shack, Five Iron Golf, Topgolf) offer an entry point into the sport and have steadily grown in popularity (Beer, 2023). This is evidenced by 19.1 million Americans having consumed alternative golf products in 2024 (NGF, 2025). GEVs provide an entry or re-entry to golf for consumers who are new to the sport or those who enjoy the game without the investment in a private club or equipment. The industry leader in the GEV space, Topgolf, and its competitors, are creating a golf market that is distinct from traditional golf courses. This alternative golf boom presents golf products to the consumer in a palatable form, highlighted by the emphasis on entertainment, technology, and fun.

Research examining alternative golf consumers, especially Topgolf consumers, is sparse. It is assumed that these alternative golf options help the sport by providing a different avenue for consumers, especially those with limited golf skills or playing experience. However, these consumers have not been empirically examined. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of prominent alternative golf venues, specifically Topgolf.

Background

Golf entertainment venues (GEVs) are experiencing rapid growth in the consumer market. GEVs can be either indoor or outdoor venues that provide opportunities for golf play with advanced technology, along with food and beverage. Outdoor activities, such as Topgolf and Drive Shack, have a large physical footprint and encompass a driving range entertainment hybrid. These outdoor facilities use a combination of microchipped golf balls and high-speed cameras to track real-time shot data for participants. Meanwhile, indoor venues, such as Five Iron Golf and Virtually Golf, are centered on compact space, complete with a golf bay, launch monitor, projector, screen, and virtual golf features to choose from (e.g., indoor driving range, interactive games, and virtual courses). Both indoor and outdoor GEVs are reliant on technology to enhance experiences for their consumers (Choi et al., 2019, 2020; Han et al., 2014). Additionally, they each use technology to provide instantaneous shot data and feedback following every swing.

Topgolf was the first prominent GEV to achieve international success. The company boasts innovation through a technology-focused experience and a diversity-focused brand image. Topgolf's effort to include golfers and non-golfers shows its commitment to "growing the game" (Visit Orlando, 2024). Meanwhile, its use of microchipped golf balls, LED lights, and high-speed cameras to capture golf swing statistics highlight a commitment to a tech-focused experience. Topgolf has a strong growth history and welcomed 30 million rounds in 2023 (Metzidakis, 2024). Yet, little is known about how the brand is perceived by the broad set of consumers who visit. Topgolf aims to capture both golf archetypes without alienation like one may find in a traditional golf club setting.

Studies examining GEVs note that the product is revolutionary due to its advances in accessibility and technology (Franken, 2023; Hahm et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2022). Multiple scholars argue that the GEV business model invites more people into the sport of golf than ever (Franken, 2023; Hahm et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2022). Franken (2023) performed an ethnography of technology at a Topgolf highlighting its many technological features and impact on behavior. While other key GEV studies used survey-based methods to test models related to consumption (Hahm et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2022), no existing literature has utilized interview-based methods to examine consumer experiences at GEVs nor has any study focused specifically of novice golfers' experiences, a target market for many marketers, as they show interest but have not moved up the escalator to loyal consumers.

The increased accessibility of GEVs is due largely in part to their structures. For example, Topgolf reduces constraints that typically prevent beginners from taking up golf. Secondly, the technological aspects of Topgolf are attractive to the people that visit, often having a direct positive impact on their access to the product (Franken, 2023), perceived value and involvement (Kang et al., 2022), and satisfaction and behavioral intention (Hahm et al., 2023). Beyond technology's impact, scholars have found that GEV consumption can play a significant role in influencing individuals to play traditional golf (Kang et al., 2022). This finding is impactful for beginners and existing golfers. For beginners, this helps golf grow to reach new consumers. For existing golfers, this brings previous golf participants back into the marketplace after a hiatus.

Others argue for similar golf companies to integrate a more customized experience to maximize a person's self-efficacy levels during their consumption of the product (Chung & Welty-Peachey, 2020). Hahm, Kwun, and Kang (2023) used structural equation modeling and found that service quality and characteristics in the physical environment of the venue had significant impact on consumer satisfaction within a GEV (Hahm et al., 2023). Additionally, perceived value significantly impacts satisfaction with GEVs, traditional golf behavioral intention (Kang et al., 2022), and may be a potential catalyst for new and returning consumption of traditional golf products.

Brand Association Literature

GEVs may serve as an innovative opportunity to change or improve brand associations with the sport. Brand associations include any perceptions and/or thoughts in the mind of the consumer linked from an experience or interaction with a particular brand (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). When compiled, these various associations create a brand's image. Brand associations are a conceptual way to describe how a given organization is viewed in the marketplace by consumers. Brand associations are important within the context of determining a company's brand equity in the mind of a consumer (Gladden et al., 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Walsh et al., 2015). Watkins and Lee (2016) assert that brand identity, brand association, and brand personality each comprise a brand's overall equity

Though the brand evaluation process is ongoing, a consumer's first impressions of a new brand are of paramount importance. Therefore, when a newer organization seeks to establish a brand identity, it must be intentional in its marketing efforts (Wear & Heere, 2020). As a consumer forms brand associations for Topgolf over time, these associations are important as this is how loyalty is built. Because strong brands with good brand equity are built upon the consumer perceptions of their brand associations, scholars must investigate how new consumers at Topgolf are evaluating its brand (Gordon & James, 2017).

For a sport like golf, which has barriers to participation and historical brand challenges, consumers' experiences at a GEV like Topgolf could influence consumers' brand perceptions of the sport of golf. This study focuses on novice golfers and their perceptions of Topgolf and golf. This audience is critical for the golf industry, as these are individuals who have an interest in golf but are not regular consumers. As a result, the study explored the experiences and perceptions of novice golfers at Topgolf to understand the brand perceptions and associations of golf, professional golf, and Topgolf.

Methods

A qualitative research design was used for this study, which featured semi-structured in-person interviews, which were followed by free elicitation response questions and a short survey. This design allowed the research team to garner a range of information.

Participants and Procedures

After IRB approval, participants were recruited via a public U.S. university, in classes and posted fliers on campus. Inclusion criteria included being 18 or older and having been to Topgolf in the past 12 months. Novice golfers were considered those who play 1-2 rounds per year. Participants received a $10 gift card as remuneration. Six participants averaged 27.3 years in age and identified as four male and two female participants; three participants identified their race as white and three as black. After reviewing the data of six participant interviews, the research team concluded that data saturation was reached. In other words, at this time, we determined that little new significant information was being collected through the interviews. At this point, data collection was halted, and the formal analysis could begin.

The lead researcher conducted the interviews, which averaged approximately 45 minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed by members of the research team. The interview protocol included a semi-structured approach in which participants were asked about their experience with visits to Topgolf and their consumption history (e.g., frequency and recency of visiting Topgolf), as well as their views of traditional golf, professional golf, and times at golf courses or driving ranges.

Researchers also asked free-elicitation questions about golf. Free-elicitation response techniques are commonly used in branding literature as a method to extract the most prominent brand associations within a consumer's mind, which may reflect strengths, weaknesses, or other brand attributes (Ross et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2015). When given a term—Topgolf, Professional Golf, and Traditional Golf—participants were instructed to say the first three words that came to mind.

Following each interview, participants were given a short survey to collect their demographics (e.g., age, race gender, major) and their involvement with the sport of golf ("When I think about traditional golf, I consider myself a…*1 - Casual Golfer – 7 - Hard-Core Golfer*") and with Topgolf (*1. Casual – 7. Hard-Core*). These one-item scales were adapted from the self-perceived fandom measure (Kunkel et al., 2022) and used for descriptive purposes.

Data Analysis

We organized the data in NVivo 14 software and conducted a thematic analysis. Empirical material coding methods, as they are set forth in Saldaña's (2021) work, were used in the data analysis. Both members of the research team independently coded the data and gathered to agree on a set of codes (i.e., codebook), which was used to code the entire dataset. This process was followed by axial coding. Axial coding allowed the research to connect codes that were related to one another and subsequently separate them into higher-order categories. Lastly, the research team used selective coding to sort the higher-order categories into a set of four final themes. With this hybrid analysis technique, less confirmation bias occurs (Blair, 2015). The positionality of the researchers is important to acknowledge, as their background provides context for how they interpret the data. The lead researcher is a sport marketing scholar and golf fan, which provided the impetus for the study, and the second author is a sport branding scholar.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the current study's thematic analysis included four themes that were constructed from the interview data. The four themes were (1) Importance of Social Experience, (2) Positive Sportscape, (3) Internal Reactions, and (4) Growing the Game – Using Topgolf as the "Front Porch."

Theme 1: Importance of Social Experience

The novice golfers frequently discussed the importance of the social aspects of their Topgolf experience. Social experience refers to the interactions that one has with the individuals around them at Topgolf (Wood & Danylchuk, 2011). Typically, this includes the friends, family, colleagues, or acquaintances that meet up to consume Topgolf's product with one another. For example, when asked about the Topgolf experience, one participant compared Topgolf to traditional golf and stated, "It [Topgolf] definitely is a lot more social interaction. It's more of a social environment at Topgolf." This quote illustrates the connection that the novice Topgolf consumer is making to traditional golf and reflects the focus of respondents on Topgolf's social aspects as "welcoming" compared to traditional golf's less social, less welcoming appearance (Stenner et al., 2019). All participants discussed being accompanied by both friends and/or family. Regardless, participants clearly viewed Topgolf as a product that is meant to be consumed with others in a social setting. The importance of social experience is reflected in other Topgolf research that frequently mentions the social aspects of Topgolf as a perceived strong suit in the mind of the consumer (Hahm et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2022).

Another participant provided more context into how the social experience of Topgolf can lead to a friendly competition among friends. This participant stated, "I had a really good time and I do think it's a fun way to just bond with people, competitive but not too competitive." This participant noted how Topgolf's product itself creates fun and exciting social interaction while implementing competitive elements as well. This finding is similar to Shim and colleagues' (2017) work examining driving range golf consumers, who were similarly motivated by the competition and achievement aspects of GEVs. However, unlike other sports, Topgolf as a brand and product does not take itself quite as serious. To some, it may even signal that the social aspects of the activity supersede the actual activity (i.e., golf) itself.

The free elicitation responses from participants showcased their top-of-mind thoughts about Topgolf, professional golf, and golf in general. When asked for word associations related to the term "Topgolf," participants responded with "social" or a synonym of social (e.g., friends, gathering) most frequently. Secondly, "fun" (e.g., exciting, entertainment) was another common attribute. Another key brand association among the sample of respondents was "challenge" (e.g., self-improvement), which is reflected in this theme as participants stated that despite the difficulty and steep learning curve of the sport of golf, there is still a desire to improve and get better with others (Shim et al., 2017). The challenge of improving one's skills via practice and challenging one another is a key component of the Topgolf experience and is captured in the first theme.

Theme 2: Positive Sportscape

The second theme that was generated in the analysis is the positive sportscape. The sportscape is comprised by the many physical elements and service-based elements of a sport venue experience (Byon et al., 2019; Wakefield et al., 1996). Though originally used to describe stadiums and arenas, the sportscape is relevant to GEVs as they include many similar features (e.g., technology, parking, food, service, drink, lights). Participants in the study were quick to recall aspects of the sportscape upon reflecting Topgolf. Specifically, participants remembered the golf launch monitor technology itself. When asked about the technology, one participant remarked, "I like that they could track the distance. Like, that's pretty cool that you can hit the ball and like real time show you where the ball goes," while another noted, "I believe the technology worked extremely well … I don't remember any time where we hit a ball, and the score was not recorded." Based on these quotes, Topgolf's brand positioning as technologically advanced is supported by novice users of its product. Future work should investigate how non-novice golfers perceive the presence of golf-related technology (e.g., launch monitors) and other aspects of the sportscape at GEVs.

Another person commented on the user-friendly nature of the experience, stating, "It's actually very user-friendly. Very simple. Get there, get in and get out. It just makes sense." This finding is supported by Hahm and colleagues' (2023) work on GEVs, as they found that ease of use plays a key role in one's satisfaction and intention to return to a GEV. Past research on acceptance of new technology notes that perceived ease of use is a key factor in a consumer accepting and implementing any new technology. For Topgolf, this is especially important as its product differentiates itself from traditional golf products through technological differences.

Other facets of the sportscape noted by participants included comments referencing the technology, equipment, and the venue itself. One participant stated, "And the lights, when it's dark outside, they light up the field and it's so pretty," while another participant added, "They have their LED lights on, so it makes it brighter and makes it seem like fun." Topgolf's emphasis on blending technology with entertainment is captured in these comments about the venue's excitingly interactive atmosphere.

Ultimately, the positive sportscape theme highlights that consumers are noticing and recognizing the many aspects of the sportscape when they visit a GEV. This represents an opportunity for other GEVs and even professional golf tournaments to present their product with the sportscape in mind, as it could be critical to satisfaction and customer retention.

Theme 3: Internal Reactions

The third theme of internal reactions refers to the affective response that participants experienced while consuming Topgolf's product. For example, one participant stated, "It was just fun … doesn't matter who I've been with or when or where." This participant's sentiment was echoed by other respondents in the study, as all six of the participants mentioned how Topgolf itself is simply a "fun-producing" experience. This quote illustrates the positive affect that this participant holds toward the Topgolf experience and the Topgolf brand. These positive internal reactions are likely to influence one's satisfaction with the product itself. This satisfaction usually results in future behavioral intentions according to past research, which has direct implications for alternative golf and traditional golf organizations (Hahm et al., 2023).

Some sentiments were in juxtaposition to the fun, as many novice participants expressed frustration and determination to improve their golf skills. One participant noted internal frustration by their inability to quickly pick up the game, stating, "I do wish it was a little more tutorial based … some instruction on what strategy is going to help you hit the ball. So that part of the experience is always a little tricky for me." Another reported frustration due to lack of understanding of each club's purpose, stating, "When I went up, I had to have my friend explain it to me like which club I was supposed to use." Both reactions show their novice skill sets creating frustration. Despite the frustration, one participant remained hopeful and determined, stating, "It made me want to go back to watch other people and learn, how do they do this [sport]."

This perspective has implications for both academics and industry. For academics, the themes generated from this study may inform research questions related to alternative golf consumption. From an industry standpoint, this theme suggests that Topgolf could better cater to novice golfers by diversifying its products to offer clinics (which some locations already do) and lessons. These efforts may lead to novice alternative golf consumers making the transition to become novice traditional golf consumers.

Theme 4: Growing the Game: Using Topgolf as the "Front Porch"

The fourth theme was Growing the Game: Using Topgolf as the "Front Porch." This theme refers to novice golfers' view of Topgolf as a means to make the sport of golf more accessible than traditional golf at golf courses. The notion that traditional golf is exclusionary to many from lower socioeconomic status is noted throughout the interview data. One participant stated, "Topgolf feels more friendly and accessible … than regular golf does." While another participant said, "I think it's way more easily accessible than an actual golf course." This is reinforced by another who said, "At Topgolf … I have at least the impression that I can be more relaxed, I can be wearing whatever clothes I'm wearing that day. I can talk to my friends, as loud as I want." Each of these statements suggest that, despite sport marketers in the traditional golf industry's best efforts, golf may still be viewed as unapproachable and exclusionary. These findings are consistent with past research that examines the barriers to golf consumption (Gray et al., 2025; Rosselli & Singer, 2015). These barriers may range from high equipment costs to facility access, to outsiders' perception that golfers are generally unwelcoming to newcomers.

While traditional golf's image around accessibility continue, Topgolf's brand image continues to thrive. If leveraged correctly, traditional golf entities (e.g., golf courses, LPGA Tour, media companies, PGA Tour) could utilize Topgolf's (and other GEVs') widespread popularity as a tool to help rebrand traditional golf by making it appear more accessible and approachable. The interview data shows that there is promise with this as well. One participant stated, "Almost anybody has access to [Topgolf]. Like almost anyone can walk in there and be like, hey, I want to play around." Coincidentally, Topgolf ran a major advertising campaign in 2022 that featured the phrase "Come Play Around" and encouraged golfers and non-golfers regardless of skill level to try the product at Topgolf. The campaign itself positioned the brand as inclusive and fun, both of which were heavily supported by the study's transcripts data across participants.

As part of the free elicitation, participants were also asked to respond with words that come to mind when they hear the term "traditional golf." Participants responded with "elitist" associations (e.g., connections, corporate, old men, dollar bills, serious). This was the predominant response across the six participants in the study as they all viewed traditional golf as restricted to a "certain type of crowd." Existing research notes that a common critique of golf's accessibility exacerbate the racial and gender disparities of sport (Gray et al., 2025; Rosselli & Singer, 2015; Stenner et al., 2019; Wood & Danylchuk, 2011). This further highlights key areas of growth for the golf industry that GEVs like Topgolf are able to capture. Despite some of the overt negativity toward "traditional golf," when asked for associations related to the term "professional golf," the sentiment was mixed. Key associations for "professional golf" were "admiration" and synonyms (e.g., admire, impressed, amazed), which was a nod to the skill of the players. Yet, there were also negative/hostile emotive words about professional golfers (e.g., boring, not a fan, overpaid), venue-related words (e.g., outdoors, course), and competitiveness (e.g., competition, challenge, tournament). The mixed associations toward "professional golf" and "traditional golf" in this analysis highlight a clear opportunity for the sport to utilize Topgolf's welcoming and positive reputation to grow the game to larger audiences.

Conclusion

GEVs are a potentially revolutionary product for the sport of golf. Because GEVs position their products as welcoming to all people, not just people who golf, there is a great opportunity to expand traditional golf's reach to new segments of consumers. The current study's findings support the increased attractiveness of GEVs—specifically Topgolf—to the novice golfer. Similar to how an athletic program is considered a "front porch" to the university, GEVs can become a "front porch" to the sport of golf due to the accessibility and widespread consumer base. Establishing our understanding of this unique golf-related experience can inform possible directions for next steps within golf consumption and possibly "grow the game."

The findings of this study are consistent with previous scholars' work in alternative golf (Kang et al., 2022). The current study notes that consumers are drawn to the innovative, technological, and social properties of Topgolf that are less common in traditional golf. The novice golf consumers in the current study found traditional golf unwelcoming, antiquated, and boring. Meanwhile, the same participants spoke about Topgolf as a product that was innovative, exciting, welcoming, and fun. This suggests that that sport marketers in the golf industry should implement messaging that targets novice golf consumers, which positions the sport as an accessible, social, technologically advanced, and welcoming activity for all. This will achieve the attraction of a broader customer base for golf and create an opportunity for a crossover to traditional golf. Further, the findings of the study signal that Topgolf and other GEVs have found new consumers that traditional golf cannot access because of traditional golf's image issues. Traditional golf courses and industry should adapt their marketing strategy to fit the modern golf consumer. Technology in tandem with a welcoming atmosphere is likely a more impactful image that will attract more consumers to golf products than a traditional, more exclusionary model.

Because scholarship examining the GEV consumer experience is limited at this point, there is an opportunity to study the product and its consumers from all angles. The blending of technology, socializing, and fun makes GEVs some of the most unique and innovative products in the sport industry. Two primary limitations for the study are worth noting. First, the study had a small number of participants. Second, the study only included a sample of one-time visitors to one chain of GEV. Future research should continue to study how GEVs' innovative attributes impact consumer behavior in alternative and traditional golf. Scholars should also develop research studies that feature an experimental design in this area. For example, randomized studies using professional instruction/tips from a golf pro versus the usual experience of playing golf at a GEV without a coach would guide optimizing the experience for the novice golfer and give "tips" for the experienced golfer. Longitudinal designs would allow for closer examination of the crossover effects on participation from GEVs to traditional golf.

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