OFF-COURSE

Understanding the popularity of alternative golf experiences

Alternative golf is a nascent leisure product category that is growing in popularity. However, little is known as to why, its potential impact on traditional golf, and whether it will encourage more and diverse people to play traditional golf. Drs. Juhee Kang, David Kwun, and Jeeyeon Jeannie Hahm at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management investigated the relationship between consumers' value perceptions, satisfaction, and involvement at golf entertainment venues, and whether those influenced their desire to return or refer, and, ultimately, spread their wings onto an actual golf course.

Despite its popularity as a competitive sport on T.V., golf has several barriers that limit its uptake as a recreational sport. Traditional golf can be intimidating—it demands considerable skill to play correctly, the equipment can be costly, and it generally requires club membership. It is also considered the reserve of older white males, and an average game can take hours to play. But remove those barriers, take the game off-course, and people flock to play it. This is evident in the rising popularity of 'alternative golf', an umbrella term for activities at driving ranges, indoor golf simulators, and golf entertainment venues, all of which fall firmly into the hospitality sector. Purists may dismiss such activities, but the reality is that America's National Golf Foundation considers alternative golf to be a branch of traditional golf and analyzes it as part of the overall golf industry. The Foundation also hopes alternative golf will be a springboard for getting more diverse people onto a traditional golf course. Researchers from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management have provided valuable insight into whether alternative golf could have this effect, and what other changes could help. They have also encouraged a rethink on what inspires consumers to revisit or recommend a hospitality venue to others.

For Drs. Juhee Kang, David Kwun, and Jeeyeon Jeannie Hahm, golf entertainment venues such as Topgolf, Drive Shack, and 4ORE are productive places to study consumer behavior. They boast multiple hospitality outlets such as restaurants, bars, and interactive game spaces catering to public and private events. But, as researchers, what they find most interesting is that these venues could be a gateway to traditional golf. The National Golf Foundation acknowledges that traditional golf faces constraints that make it unapproachable for the average consumer interested in playing recreationally. The Foundation is optimistic about alternative golf venues, believing they will eventually bolster the on-course game, but research from South Korea suggests they may become competition. Data on the relationship between the two is patchy as alternative golf is still a nascent leisure product category. In fact, before the Rosen College researchers' study, no empirical research studies had examined the link between alternative and traditional golf, making this study invaluable in its novel insights.

NEED FOR A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING

The researchers wanted to get a more precise idea of the relationship between consumers' value perceptions, satisfaction, and involvement in alternative golf and whether those influenced their intention to continue playing and, ultimately, take up traditional golf. They were also interested in whether gender influenced those decisions. Value perceptions, satisfaction, and involvement are vital components in determining whether consumers intend to re-engage with a leisure activity—hence their value for marketing research. However, they are not isolated causal factors—they influence

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The study aimed to understand the relationship between consumers' value perceptions, satisfaction, and involvement at golf entertainment venues.

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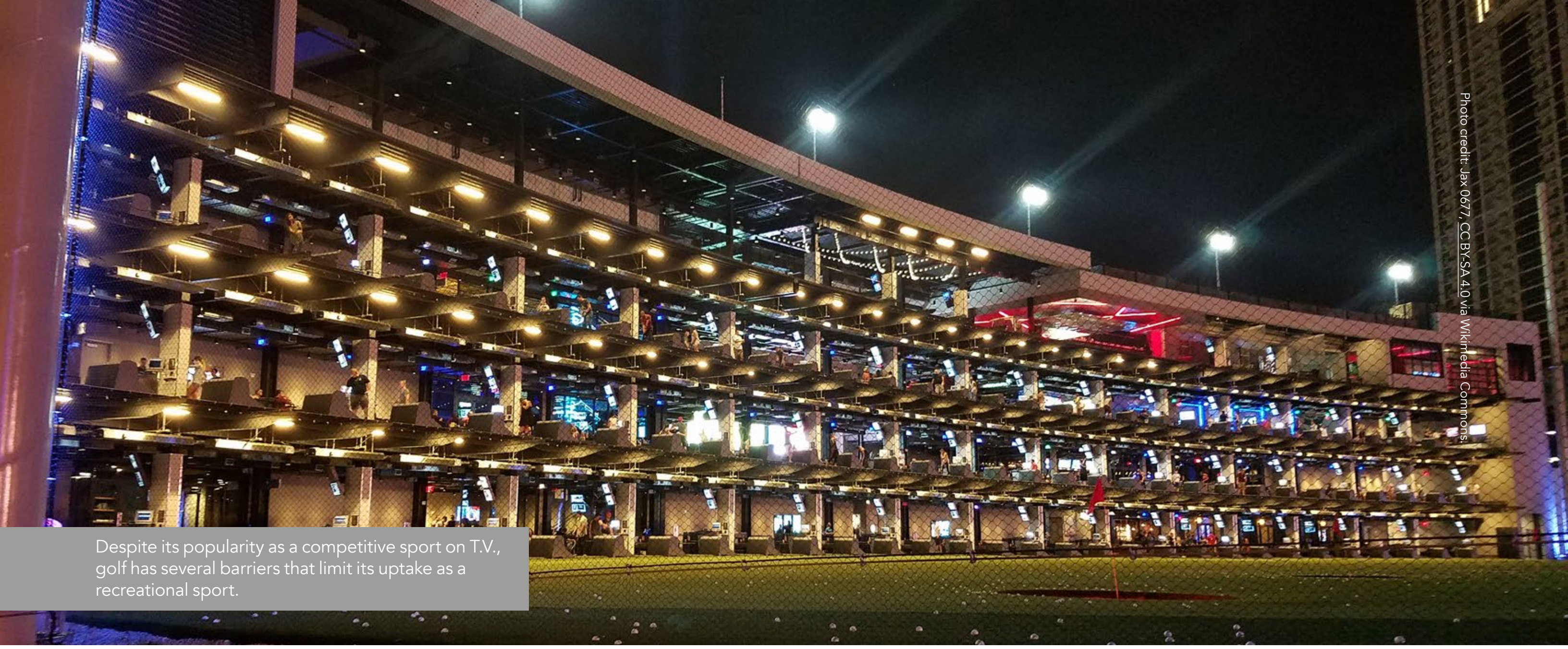
each other, and this relationship differs from activity to activity. Given that alternative golf is still finding its feet as a leisure activity, there's a need for a clearer understanding of what will draw people to golf entertainment venues, encourage them to revisit, and, for the benefit of the broader game, maybe spread their wings onto an actual golf course.

Drs. Kang, Kwun, and Hahm designed an online self-administered questionnaire targeting current and potential golfers who were at least 18 years old and had played golf at a golf entertainment venue at least once within the past 12 months. Because the researchers were looking for the relationship between the perceived value of alternative golf, involvement, satisfaction with their experience, and their intention to revisit an alternative golf venue and play traditional golf, they earmarked those as constructs and structured statements around them. For example, to measure how participants rated perceived value, the questionnaire presented statements such as 'Overall, my last visit to XXX was a good buy' and to measure their intention to play traditional golf, statements such as 'I will make an effort to play golf at a real golf course in the future.' Participants were asked to rank the statements using a Likert-type scale from 1, representing strongly disagree, to 7, representing strongly agree. A research company distributed the questionnaire during the summer of 2018, receiving 493 valid responses.

One of the encouraging aspects for the researchers was the balanced gender spread of the respondents: 55.6% were female, and 44.4% male. Interestingly, 68% had already ventured onto a golf course—either just starting out, or had already played a few rounds of traditional golf. Most of the respondents—well over 75%—were white. One of the standout points was that over 95% of respondents had visited the venue as part of a group, usually as a family, with friends, or in company outings. This makes sense, considering that the alternative golf venues bill themselves as multiplex entertainment venues. But it does shine a light on why alternative golf is becoming popular, especially considering traditional golf's more formal and structured nature. It also may explain some of the results of the study.



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RETHINKING PERCEIVED VALUE

Within the scope of the many activities that fall within the hospitality sector, the perceived value of an activity is a direct precursor to consumers' intentions to re-engage with that activity. If people pay to do something, they're more likely to do it again if their perception is that they're getting value for their money. However, this study showed that this was not the case with alternative golf. Instead, the perceived value was a precursor to their *involvement* and *satisfaction* with their experience and, through that, their intention to return to or refer an alternative golf venue. So, there was a link between perceived value and the intention to return or refer, but it was *indirect*. This is probably because, unlike other hospitality-focused activities with a core feature, such as a restaurant meal or a driving range, visits to a golf entertainment venue involve multiple hospitality contact points.

The multidimensional nature of golf entertainment venues could explain why the data from the study emphasized the value of satisfaction of the cumulative experience on whether consumers wanted to revisit an alternative golf venue or recommend visiting it to others. The relatively lower influence of involvement in alternative golf in wanting to revisit or recommend, as the study showed, could be explained by the purpose of the initial visit—the playing of golf-related activities may not have been the primary purpose; perhaps it was simply to have fun with friends and family.

If having a good time was the primary purpose for most people visiting an alternative golf venue, it does pour some cold water on the hopes of organizations such as the National Golf Foundation that people who visit such venues might be one step closer to walking 18 holes. However, this study showed that favorable experiences at an alternative golf venue could encourage revisits and referrals, ultimately leading to more interest in and a willingness to play traditional golf. This is encouraging because more than half the respondents were new to the sport. However, mainly male respondents felt so; female respondents seemed less enthused. These results suggest traditional golf's organizing bodies need to do more than make golf part of a fun activity to encourage more women to play the game.

A NEED TO UP THEIR GAME

Managers of golf clubs and alternative golf venues should pay close attention to this study. Drs. Kang, Kwun, and Hahm have provided empirical evidence showing that the traditional golf industry should consider alternative golf not as a threat but as an opportunity. In their research, published last year in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, they recommend golf clubs and local alternative golf facilities develop symbiotic partnerships to encourage patrons to visit each other.

For alternative golf venues, the study sends a clear message that good value is not the main factor to consider if they want patrons to revisit or refer—they should concentrate on ensuring that patrons are satisfied with their overall experience. Therefore, the researchers recommend that venue management focus on delivering a high-quality service in a well-maintained and serviced venue, with a generous range of food and beverage options and, importantly, a fun atmosphere.

However, while such venues should encourage people to have a good time, another aspect could be timely for promotion: golf is a physical activity, and for a nation still in the wake of an epidemic, health and well-being are front of mind. As for the gender differences in the intention to transition to traditional golf, the researchers suggest that alternative golf venues up their game by encouraging more female coaches and developing special programs for female groups—beyond the costs and time of taking up traditional golf, most barriers remain perceptual.

THESE RESULTS SUGGEST TRADITIONAL GOLF'S ORGANIZING BODIES NEED TO DO MORE THAN MAKE GOLF PART OF A FUN ACTIVITY TO ENCOURAGE MORE WOMEN TO PLAY THE GAME.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Understanding the relationship between consumers' value perceptions, satisfaction, and involvement at golf entertainment venues.

REFERENCES

Kang, J., Kwun, D.J., & Hahm, J.J. (2022). Investigating the effect of alternative golf experience on traditional golf: An integrated framework of perceived value, satisfaction, and involvement. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 34(11), 4266–4287. doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-10-2021-1231

PERSONAL RESPONSE

How would you like to see other researchers develop on your insights from this study?

"Despite the possibility of the growing population in traditional golf, a further and deeper understanding of how recreational golfers become 18-hole golfers is needed. Based on the information provided in this study, we hope that other researchers will develop new research frameworks and develop new insights into potential golfers' motivations and behaviors, and suggest more effective solutions for alternative and traditional golf industries."

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