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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the Journal of Sport and Tourism, 19 (1), 29-54, 2014.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2014.981569>

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**Understanding how sporting characteristics and behaviours influence destination selection:  
a grounded theory study of golf tourism**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sports tourism has received growing attention in academic research over the past two decades (Weed and Bull, 2009, Gibson, 2005) but greater understanding of the consumer is needed, particularly the factors influencing decisions to include sport as part of a leisure trip. This paper provides, through a focus on the sport of golf, insight into the characteristics of the sports tourist and how sports tourist behaviours influence the selection of locations deemed suitable for sports participation. This qualitative research employs a grounded theory methodology, underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, to evaluate twenty-six in-depth interviews with golf tourists.

The findings propose a model which explains the relationship between golf tourist behaviours and destination selection. This identifies six strands which determine the relationship between the golf tourist, golf behaviours and destination selection (constructing the golf holiday, emotional rewards of taking a trip, total trip spend, amenities and support facilities, course characteristics and reputation of the destination). Furthermore it illuminates the complexity of these relationships through recognition of four spheres of influence (group dynamics, competition and ability, golfing capital and intermediaries). Discussion elucidates how this increased understanding of the golf tourist behaviours and destination selection might be applied to other sports, with conclusions exploring implications for the sports tourism industry and destinations.

Keywords: Golf, sports tourism grounded theory. strands, spheres of influence

## **1. Introduction**

Although there has been steady growth in the tourism market globally - from 25 million international trips in 1950 to 1035 million in 2013 (UNWTO, 2013) - the traditional mass tourism market has moved its attention from passive forms of recreation to more active holidays (Bramwell, 2004; Hinch & Higham, 2011). Furthermore postmodern travel enthusiasms have created more demanding customers (Bouchet, Lebrun, & Auvergne, 2004) seeking greater variety of product offer which, matched with supply, has led to an increased growth in sports tourism.

In many developed economies the sport and tourism industries are a significant part of society, justifying increased attention within academic literature (Gibson, 2003; Weed & Bull, 2012). Understanding the motivations and behaviours of the sports tourist has been of interest to many authors (Funk, Beaton, & Alexandris, 2012; Holden, 1999; Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2005; Mansfield, 1992; McDonald, Milne, & JinBae, 2002; Robinson & Gammon, 2004) although there is limited research examining how sporting characteristics and behaviours influence destinations selection. To go some way towards addressing this deficiency this paper provides, through a focus on the sport of golf, insight into the characteristics of the sports tourist and how sports tourist behaviours influence the selection of locations deemed suitable for sports participation.

A focus on golf tourism is justified by the scale of this segment. With an estimated market worth in excess of \$20 billion (Hudson & Hudson, 2010), golf tourism is said to be the largest sports travel market. Furthermore golf tourists spend an estimated 20% more than other travellers (KPMG Golf Business Community, 2013) and with 60 million golfers worldwide (Mintel, 2012) often with above-average income levels, this is a valuable market for many tourism destinations.

## **2. Literature Review**

Factors influencing sports tourism participation and decision making are extensive and literature considering golf tourism participation specifically identifies the influence of weather, course availability, perceived value, hospitality and time constraints (Geissler, 2005). However limited consideration has been given to the influence of player characteristics and behaviours on destination selection. To address this both the golf tourist and destination selection are examined.

### **2.1. Characteristics of the sports tourist – a focus on golf**

The sports tourist is complex. Research identified that males are more likely than females to participate in sport oriented vacations and that an individual's demand for sports related vacations is affected by lifestage, social class, gender, race, ethnicity and religion (Gibson, 2005b; Standeven & DeKnop, 1999). Although golf has often been reported as being elitist, with higher 'social classes' contributing to the bulk of participation the last century saw increased diversification in participation (Howkins & Lowerson, 1979). Golf participation counters opinion that playing sport declines with age, with participation at its highest with the middle-age (35-64) segment (Doyle, 1987; Mintel, 2003; Sport England, 2011). However, lifestage does impact golf participation, as time and family obligations impede opportunities to play recreationally and while vacationing.

Focusing specifically on golf tourism Petrick (2002) and Hennessey et al (2008) identified variables to segment participants. These recognise four key influences: score/handicap, the number of rounds played each year, the number of holidays taken annually and the number of years playing the sport. Scores and handicap can establish skill level while identifying the number of rounds played and holidays taken provides insight into the level and intensity of participation. Finally, knowing how long a participant has been playing the sport provides insight into experience levels.

The golf tourist can be characterised by their alignment to a golfing subculture. This is not one homogenous group but is shaped by the members within groups (Bryan, 2000; Green, 2001; Humphreys, 2011). Therefore recognising the nuances that link individuals with their cultural groups appreciates the influence of such groups on destination selection. To clarify this further the term 'golfing capital' is introduced. While a fuller debate on this term – and its origins – is beyond the scope of this paper (and can be found in other works (Humphreys, 2011)) its principles draw on the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986) which introduced the concept of symbolic capital (which affords status and prestige) created by drawing on resources deemed economic, social or cultural capital (Holt, 1998). Golfing capital considers the transferable value attained through participation in golf and specifically the value gained by travelling to play golf. Golfing capital therefore asserts that a range of benefits may be experienced through being part of the golfing realm and that individuals may participate in travel to:

- enhance their standing within golf-related social networks as well as enjoy the benefits of these networks more extensively,
- to extend their own knowledge and skills of the sport of golf,

- to gain experience of golf-related cultural resources in order to expand their own capital assets
- to gain accreditation for the skills developed (perhaps recognition of improved skills through the use of a nationally recognised handicap system).

While Bourdieu's work has been contested within academia (Holt, 1998; Silva, 2006), concerned with its validity in a postmodern society, the principles as applied to the concept of golfing capital provide conceptual consideration of the power of exchange relationships in understanding how some destinations can stimulate golf participation.

## **2.2 Golf tourist behaviours**

Within tourism literature the decision making process has been widely discussed, focusing on aspects such as attitudes, utility and rationality of decision and the involvement of others (Mottiar & Quinn, 2004; Nichols & Snepenger, 1988; Woodside & MacDonald, 1994). Bieger and Laesser (2004, p368) highlight that sports trips can be complex 'as the potential activities of all travel companions have to be met by a supply in a given destination (maximizing utility for each travel companion)' and that those involved - or affected by the taking of a trip - will influence choices made. Humphreys and Weed (2012) further argue that participation is negotiated into a trip through a process of compromise and compensation within decision-making units (which may or may not include non-golfers).

Participating in golf tourism is driven by the desire for satisfaction and positive experiences. Attitudes to golf, particularly when players consider themselves fanatical or 'serious' about the sport (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003; Stebbins, 2006), influence the player's behaviour and expectations, shaping golf course choice. Both fanatical golfers and those driven by a desire for fun and enjoyment aim to avoid boredom (Hill & Perkins, 1985; Jafari, 1987). Boredom occurs when perceived ability exceeds perceived challenge (Danish, Petotpas, & Hale, 2007).

Although the cost of playing a sport (including equipment hire and lessons) may be an absolute barrier for some, more commonly it acts only as a relative barrier (Coalter, 1993), which can be negotiated by considering frequency and spaces used for participation. Furthermore, it is perceived utility (based on expected satisfaction gained from consuming the product or service) which influences demand (Gratton & Taylor, 2000). Unsurprisingly rising costs influence destination choice, with relative increases in price impacting market share (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000) or a reduction in disposable income diverting demand to competitor destinations – choosing domestic rather than international trips, for example.

### **2.3 Destination selection for golf tourism**

The range and quality of resources at a destination varies, influencing vacation choices. The location of sports resources (Bale, 2003) and in some cases the uniqueness of the resources plays an essential role in attracting users from beyond the local catchment area. Popularity of golf destinations are determined by tourist elements (such as accommodation) and by golf-related elements (the course, golf shops, practice facilities and clubhouses). Geissler (2005) further highlighted that influential factors include climate, course availability, perceived value for money, entertainment and an individual's own vacation time constraints. Thus destination choice sets evaluated for golf are influenced by decisions linked to climate, landscape and challenge (Graves, Cornish, & Pascuzza, 2002; Hutchinson, Wang, & Lai, 2010)

Tourism destinations have given increased attention to image and reputation because of their power to influence consumer choice. Golf destinations may use assets such as the characteristics of golf facilities, service quality and course uniqueness to establish or enhance reputation. For service sector firms specifically, the importance of word-of-mouth recommendation has been well established (Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999) and the intangible nature of many tourism goods means that such influences shape perceptions of potential users.

Finally, golf destination selection is influenced by courses ratings or rankings used to judge course suitability and make comparisons between destinations. Such information can shape decision-making and influence destination selection. Rankings determine courses perceived as 'elite', which may be sought to experience-gather (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003), in order to add to personal status. Elite courses may be those awarded high rankings but may also include those where professional televised tournaments are held. Frequently the term 'championship course' is used but this term is not formally defined, being used informally to denote courses deemed to be of the highest challenge and quality (Quinn, 2012; Weir, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

The relationships between golfing characteristics, behaviours and destination selection are immensely complex. In areas of research that are relatively uncharted or where complex relationships exist, employing a grounded theory approach allows for flexibility and creativity (Jaruwana, Nigel, & Keith, 2006; Seldén, 2005). The aim of this study was not to test hypothesis but to obtain insight into the behaviours of the sports tourists interviewed. Thus a grounded theory methodology was employed to structure the collection and analysis of data. Grounded theory, originally presented as a methodology by Glaser and Strauss (1967), has been used extensively across a variety of social science disciplines and is well-suited to explaining

complex social phenomenon (Jarawan et al., 2006), developing explanatory theoretical frameworks which deliver conceptual understanding (Charmaz, 2006).

### **3.1. Research design and participants**

This desire to achieve a greater applicability of findings from research encouraged Glaser and Strauss (1967) to identify and clarify grounded theory as an inductive research process which ultimately sought to close the gap between grand theories and empirical research (B.G Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Layder, 1993). Although there is some debate regarding the philosophical perspective of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Reed & Runquist, 2007; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) as well as divergent opinion on its application (Barney G. Glaser, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) this has not limited its use in many disciplines including sport and tourism (Jarawan et al., 2006). This research employs a constructivist grounded theory approach by which theory generation endeavours 'to construct the reality of the participants (own) lives using their symbols and life language' (Williams & Keady, 2012, p221). This ensures that the theory crafted is grounded in the data and context that produced it.

Inherent in the design of constructivist grounded theory is that data collection and analysis occurs concurrently through an iterative process which employs comparative analysis (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). This constant comparison means that as data is constructed (as a product of the research process) so it is analysed for properties and labelled. As more data is analysed – and significantly included in this is the examination of literature as data – so additional properties are determined allowing categories to be clarified. Through analysis of categories theoretical concepts are identified which direct further iterations of data gathering, using theoretical sampling to select interviewees.

In this research three iterations with a total of 24 participants (and 26 interviews) were completed with ability, golfing experience, frequency of play and number and destinations of golfing trips also being recorded (Table 1). Additionally information gathered confirmed that interviewees covered a wide spectrum in terms of household income, family status, education and employment, thus being reflective of golf players in the UK. Two participants (Steven and Debbie) were interviewed both at the beginning and the end of the research process to scrutinise the theoretical concepts developed as theory. As well as enhancing the quality of the theory constructed this processes of 'member checking' adds transparency to the analytical process (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). The individual in-depth semi-structured interviews ranged in duration between 30 and 90 minutes. Participants were initially identified through the use of an email database of people wishing to participate in sports activities in London (although the contacts did not have to live in London many worked in the

capital). Whilst this led to a geographic focus on London and the south-east of England, the forwarding of emails meant that some respondents came from outside this region. A snowball technique expanded the search for interviewees.

*Table 1: Research Participant Details*

Table 1: Research Participant Details

Name (research phase)	Gender	Handicap	Age Band	Number of rounds played annually	Number of trips with a golf tourism element*	Total nights away on trips with golf tourism element*
Alexander (2)	M	12	55-64	88	4	11
Alana (2)	F	33	25-34	35	2	9
Adam (2)	M	6	35-44	44	1	2
Carter (3)	M	11	55-64	N/A	2	10
Charles (1)	M	5	25-34	38	3	8
Daisy-Mae (3)	F	11	35-44	60	3	10
Debbie (1 & 3)	F	11	55-64	28	2	15
Donald (3)	M	19	55-64	90	1	15
Eileen (2)	F	22	55-64	97	4	24
Gail (2)	F	19	55-64	97	6	15
Harley (2)	M	15	25-34	46	1	3
Ivan (3)	M	18	45-54	46	3	9
Jeremy (1)	M	17	25-34	28	1	n/a
Kenneth (2)	M	15	55-64	158	8	16
Margaret (1)	F	19	65-74	168	1	6
Mac (2)	M	2	25-34	52	2	7
Nathan (2)	M	14	45-54	8	1	3
Pamela (1)	F	33	45-54	46	2	15
Rita (3)	F	29	55-64	55	2	40
Ryan (1)	M	14	35-44	12	3	12
Rex (1)	M	24	65-74	48	1	5
Ray (2)	M	13	45-54	36	2	6
Steven (1 & 3)	M	25	25-34	14	2	8
Tommy (2)	M	28	55-64	35	1	1

\*based on 12 month period prior to interview

Grounded theory analysis begins with open coding to form initial categories that represent the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Categories and concepts are compared (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006; Webb, 1999) in order to build substantive theory. Grounded theory



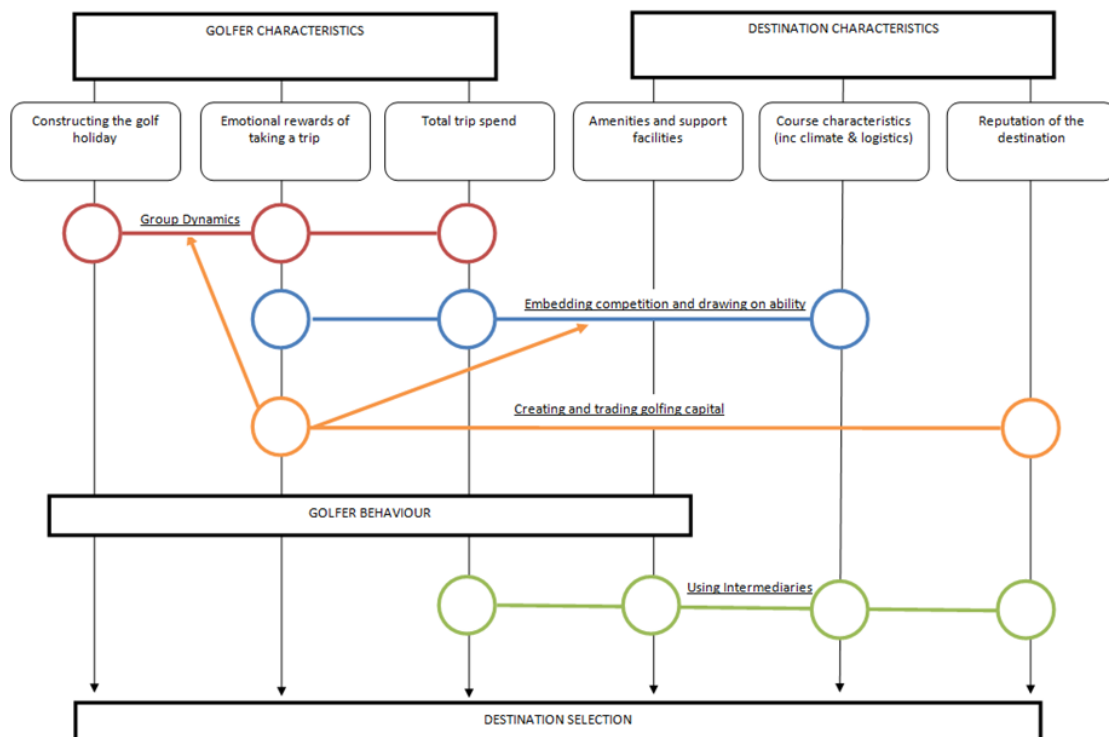
researchers develop 'a theory, often in the form of a conceptual diagram that interrelates and explains the data' (Churchill, Clark, Prochaska-Cue, Creswell, & Ontai-Grzebik, 2007; p278) while formal theory which is generalisable can be developed by determining value of substantive theory in a wider context ( Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart, 2013).

Following full transcription of the interviews open coding using an incident by incident approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2008) identified 102 initial codes, an unsurprising number given the complexity of this topic. Through the three-stage iterative process of data gathering and analysis the key categories representing golfer characteristics, behaviours and destination selection were fully saturated, clarifying properties, relationships and ultimately the substantive theory presented in this paper.

#### 4. Research findings

From the initial 102 initial codes comprehensive analysis of the data confirmed the substantive theory that six strands determine behaviours and destination selection of the golf tourist. However, the complexity is highlighted with an appreciation that four factors influence these strands. A conceptual diagram summarising the relationships (Figure 1) is presented and data underpinning this model is explained in this section.

Figure 1. Six strands of golf tourism destination selection



## **4.1. The Golf Tourist**

### *4.1.1 Constructing the golf holiday*

Multiple motivators influence decision making, affecting how the trip is constructed in the minds of the golf tourist. This construction determines the extent to which negotiation may take place to allow time and money to be spent on participation while travelling. When constructing a golf tourism trip the sporting element may form a primary, secondary or no motive at all. In many cases, especially when all participants of the trip are golf enthusiasts, golfing elements are considered during the trip planning stage, directly influencing decisions related to destination choice. However golf is included in many trips which are not considered to be primarily a golf holiday. In such cases the point at which the decision to play varies, with the outcome being that golf tourist behaviour – and destination selection – is determined by how much golf is to be included, how this fits around other planned activities during the trip, and whether golf is planned in advance of departure.

In some cases golfers employ covert actions to increase the likelihood that golf will be played. Such actions may be covert to avoid signifying intentions to other travellers in the group that golf may be planned, deferring negotiation. Established norms (perhaps negotiated historically within extended decision making units such as families) will influence whether/when discussions to include golf in such trips take place.

*'I took a few balls and some tees and my glove. I packed them in case we might [play], if I could persuade somebody to go.'* (TOMMY)

Golf is included in trips only some of which are termed by participants as 'golf holidays'. Furthermore travelling with - or without - equipment does not necessarily determine whether golf will be included in a trip because, on the one hand golfers may choose to travel with their own set of clubs even when golf plans have not been made, while conversely hire opportunities service any spontaneous demands. However inconvenience and cost of hiring clubs may influence behaviour in terms of frequency of participation. Thus logistics of travelling with sporting equipment contrasting with availability and quality of hire equipment can directly influence destination selection.

In conclusion the way players construct trips which include a golf element and the point at which participation is determined influences the extent to which destination selection is adjusted to meet the needs of the golf tourist.

### *4.1.2 Emotional rewards of taking a trip*

In cases where courses are excessively challenging or alternatively perceived as boring, frustration can be experienced thus reducing satisfaction and enjoyment. Competence

mastery and escape from mundane environments are fundamental motives for sports participation. However overly challenging experiences also cause frustration rather than enjoyment.

*'We had quite an interesting debate after we played Gleneagles, where we all played badly, and my view was what a fantastic place, I am not good enough for this golf course, but I am still really glad that I have come here, whereas the best golfer in our group said 'we are not good enough for this golf course and therefore I am actually not enjoying it', so it's personal reaction. Mine was 'I'm glad I had the experience', his was 'I wish I hadn't bothered', but it is the same experience essentially. I suppose he is more likely to get frustrated.'* (IVAN)

Competition and exhibitionism are evident motivations allowing individuals to prove themselves to others and display skill levels. Furthermore playing to the limit offers intrinsic rewards in the present moment, heightening emotions through the focus and efforts required. Sociability and the desire for shared experiences and group interaction also shape behaviour. Both individual performance and interaction with others determines expectations of course design, with comparisons frequently made to both judge and enhance the experience - including contrasting course design with a home course, or benchmarking player performance relative to a professional golfer. Expectations usually require that courses outperform those at home to provide satisfaction with the selected destination. Furthermore the opportunity to display and assess competence, relative to both the individual and to other players, brings emotive rewards. Significantly while players acknowledge that performance is impaired by trip elements such as alcohol ingestion and lack of sleep this does not alter decisions regarding course selection. In summary course and destination selection are influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic desires to gain emotional rewards.

#### *4.1.3 Total trip spend*

Unsurprisingly travel costs influence destination selection and fanatical golfers are more likely to choose challenging and costlier courses than infrequent or golfers (Hennessey et al., 2008; Priestley, 1995) Yet 'cost' is considered as a reflection of the overall vacation cost rather than specific course costs. Group trips consider whether the total trip cost is affordable to all those wishing to participate which impacts decisions made regarding quality of amenities and facilities as well as course selection. Maximising utility in balance with budgetary restrictions influences consumption decisions, particularly in regard to destination choice. Recession, exchange rate fluctuations and national or regional economic instability affects destination demand but, while price sensitivity is influenced by substitutability of destinations places that offer unique golf experiences are buffered against price pressures.

Value for money also affects decisions on when to play a course as many courses yield manage tee-times, adjusting price according to demand. This encourages off-peak participation. Furthermore perceived value focuses on total trip cost not individual trip elements, with the cost of food, drink and entertainment a factor.

*'Le Touquet is quite an expensive place. I found it quite expensive, the drinks were expensive, the food was expensive. It didn't put a dampener on it, it just made us think "coo this is a bit dear".'* (ADAM)

Time, search costs and convenience combine with monetary price to create a perceived product price and while the utility received can justify the price paid for services where experience is one element of the overall package assessments of value must account for intangible elements. Specifically for golf tourism this considers factors such as reputation (and brand), exclusivity of access, and course design uniqueness. Perceived value thus makes judgements about the overall experience relative to monetary price. In summary utility of participation and perceived value for money judgements are made in relation to total trip spend.

## **4.2 The Golf Destination**

### **4.2.1 Reputation of the destination**

Golf tourism reputations are established through a variety of trip components, which, combined, encourage golf tourists to select one destination ahead of others. Reputation can be enhanced through marketing activity, media coverage or by hosting renowned competitions (such as the Ryder Cup) which are often used strategically by tourist destinations as a means of profile raising.

Golfers relate experiences to courses and golf destinations benefit from word-of-mouth recommendations, with dissatisfaction also shared through negative word-of-mouth comments. Earlier work by this author (Humphreys, 2011) asserted that reputation is bestowed by stakeholders or communities who collectively value the assets of the reputation holder and this data indicated that reputation is also impacted by the behaviour of other golfers (visitors and club members).

Although golfers are frequently offered recommendations action is shaped by judgments made about recommendation source, especially in regard to similarity, credibility and trustworthiness (Beeho & Prentice, 1997; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, & Yale, 1998; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). The power of word-of-mouth recommendations is about risk-reduction in decision making.

*'Given that it is the tyranny of choice, if somebody says 'oh yeh, I played there', that takes a bit of risk out, so if somebody says it's a good place and it's somebody I know and somebody who's judgment I value. It's one less choice to make.'* (CARTER)

In summary earned reputations as good golfing destinations attract participation, not just for trips where golf is the primary motive but also by encouraging golf to be negotiated into other trips.

#### 4.2.2 *Course characteristics*

Alongside the clubhouse, practice facilities are considered important by golfers although few use such resources substantively.

*'A good destination for me is somewhere that is warm, not too busy, immaculate condition, good facilities, practice facilities, big bar, place to eat and drink outside.'* (HARLEY)

Destination selection also contemplates variety. For trips where multiple rounds of golf are planned course characteristics dominate player expectations, increasing the likelihood that multiple courses are required at the destination. However, while variety may be demanded on any one trip players return to the same destination repeatedly, playing some courses - those perceived as offering high levels of satisfaction and value - again and again. Analysis of the data emphasises an expectation from 'men-only' trips that a different course will be played each day of the trip (with the occasional possibility that more than one round will be played daily when multiple courses exist at the same location). This is not evident for couples and mixed-sex groups where convenience of other factors outweighs the desire to travel to different courses. For women-only groups, while there is often an expectation that different courses will be played, this is less of an imperative.

The number of golf courses available worldwide means players can factor in a range of elements when selecting a location to play. However, with many golf courses offering similar environments it is destination attributes, golf course attributes and perceived quality combined which ultimately determine destination selection. Additionally satisfaction with a course encourages repeat visitation to a destination.

#### 4.2.3 *Amenities and support facilities*

Amenities such as accommodation and catering dominate off-course golf experiences, with evidence that destination selection is influenced by the inclusion of women in the travel group. In summary data demonstrates that different amenities are required by men-only groups in

contrast to women-only or mixed sex groups. Specifically 'lad's trips' may compromise on the quality of accommodation because time spent using such facilities is perceived to be lower.

Lifestage (as a reflection of age and family status) also influences accommodation selection, with golfers noting that as they aged they had increasingly sought higher standards of accommodation. While increased disposable income may assist in making this possible players were adamant that it was motivated by a desire to eat and sleep well.

*'As I have got older I want a comfortable bed and I want a reasonably comfortable room. The counter balance is that, excluding the time you are sleeping you are not spending a massive amount of time in there, so whilst I want it to be comfortable it doesn't have to be the best room in the house.'*

*(DONALD)*

Using time on a trip to participate in other tourist activities (such as visiting commercial attractions or historic or cultural sites) is rare. While shopping offers an appeal for some, again this is an infrequent use of vacation time. For trips including non-golfers alternative activities which take a similar amount of time as a round of golf are often demanded.

Finally the role that food and drink play in the structure of the trip is evident as it links to elements of relaxation and socialisation which form an inherent part of the motivation to travel. Bars and restaurants provide spaces for experiential moments to occur and can influence trip satisfaction. Therefore destinations are selected if they are perceived to offer amenities likely to satisfy the needs of the trip group off the golf course - which is seen to be a significant proportion of the overall trip schedule.

### **4.3 Spheres of Influence**

The six aspects presented above are individual strands of the relationship between the golf tourist and their selection of a destination. While each is largely independent of the others there are four factors which exert influence on these strands. These four factors are denoted as 'spheres of influence' (Levine, 1972) acknowledging their ability to shape or change the way the golfer selects their golf destination.

#### **4.3.1 Group Dynamics**

The formation of travel groups shapes the nature of the trip. Whether this includes family, friends or acquaintances known only indirectly, whether it includes non-golfers, women, or high-ability and low-ability players all influences group dynamics. Regardless of whether groups have fixed or transient membership norms of behaviour are established with players expected to adhere to these. The process of naming groups is significant in the creation of group identities recognised externally. Group identification is also important to the self-

identity of players, whose behaviour is shaped by their affinity to others. Once groups are formed habitual behaviours are developed which influence choices made about the destination. Habitual behaviours can be determined by group 'organisers' who emerge as gatekeepers, controlling membership, rules of behaviour and trip elements. This may be in negotiation with all or just some group members - depending on group size and construction - thus some group members exert greater power than others over decisions such as trip timing, destination location, course choice and frequency of play.

Group size also influences trip behaviour, with larger groups having different social dynamics from smaller groups. Compromises are necessary for both groups but larger groups can manage with lower levels of compromise as it becomes acceptable for groups to segregate into smaller units for convenience and greater enjoyment. The emotional rewards of being part of a coherent established group results in affinity and enjoyment and the desire to spend time with group members stimulates travel. Furthermore groups proactively compromise on many elements of the trip – but particularly cost - to ensure that participation is possible for all members of the travel party.

In summary group dynamics shape golf tourist behaviour, particularly in regard to the including golf in a trip, emotionally benefiting from participation and the compromises made in terms of total trip spend so that participants can gain utility, value and satisfaction.

#### *4.3.2 Competition and Ability*

Participating in commercially organised competitions allows judgments to be made by and about the golf tourist but it also offers access to courses which may not otherwise be possible. Moreover competitions can reduce course costs. Therefore attending competitions is a means for assessing ability, lowering total trip spend and gaining access to exclusive courses.

In terms of informal competitions, organised between groups of players on the same trip, the emotional rewards gained from success - winning a trophy, prize or just a small bet with another player - can enhance individual status. Betting is frequent within many groups, and while occasionally the sums involved may be large, more commonly winning is about the right to claim the bet. Competing for the glory can enhance camaraderie and, in turn, increase satisfaction and trip enjoyment.

Throughout the data it is clear that the absolute ability of players (reflected by handicaps) does not directly influence course choice. However although groups do not overtly and directly use ability as a marker required for membership frequently players of broadly similar abilities form the core of the group and courses are selected which suit the needs of the trip group. Furthermore groups alter golf behaviours to accommodate weaker players,

such as adjusting the complexity of the course by the tees used. While it may be the case that outliers - in terms of ability - move to other groups, emotive rewards of being part of the group often means diversity of ability becomes irrelevant. Furthermore differences in performance consistency are managed through the manipulation of handicaps to concertina the field, equalising opportunities among high and low performing players to achieve success in the informal competitions.

In summary ability has limited direct influence on destination selection while embedding competitions provides enhanced trip experiences. These positive experiences can be derived as outcomes of playing successfully, accessing courses otherwise unattainable, or through increasing the likelihood that perceived value for money will enhance overall satisfaction.

#### *4.3.3 Golfing Capital*

The interaction which occurs when participating in golf tourism expands networks enhancing golfing capital. Frequently motives to participate are derived from desires to bond with existing friends but there is also evidence that golf tourism can bridge different golfing groups, for example in cases where golfers are asked by course managers to join up with other players on the course or where social spaces in golf resorts are shared. However it is not seen to bridge to non-golfing groups thus the diversity of network is limited.

The experience of playing golf in a variety of locations, some of which may offer unique or unusual environments, means that knowledge about the sport is built. This knowledge, in and of itself, can be informative but it can also strengthen ties with others. For example discussions of courses played are frequent among golfers, who may make judgements about each other based on opinions about courses known by both parties. Thus golfing capital can be used to establish status within golfing cultures.

However, while golfing capital may be obtained through participating in golf tourism, trading on these assets is challenging. In some cases an ability to play golf is seen as an asset when working in the corporate world, where performing consistently - not necessarily to a high standard - is seen as a direct means to trade golfing capital for financial capital. However few golfers have the opportunity to use their skill in this way and commonly the desire to participate is for golf's sake rather than for the indirect benefits it may bring in terms of trading capital.

Within groups (established networks) the status of winning competitions has some – albeit limited - effect on golfing capital. In the case of perpetual trophies players who have never won are often teased about this fact while conversely players who have frequently won



are recognised for their achievements, enhancing their reputation within their group. With informal competitions, any golfing capital developed as a result of success is only valued within the trip group so again trading on this capital is limited. Group dynamics (including the size of the group and its churn in membership) further influence the extent to which such successes augment golfing capital. Significantly playing commercially organised competitions, even national events, also adds little to a player's capital. Finally it is evident that holding a low handicap, as a reflection of being a skilled player, is more likely to add golfing capital than competitive success.

Some golfers have the opportunity to play courses where renowned events have recently been held, while others have played highly reputed courses which may be inaccessible to the general golfing public. Although golfers may be covetous of such experiences, this does not mean they afford additional status or endow capital on the player fortunate enough to have gained such an experience. Furthermore, earning and trading golfing capital varies in its importance for each individual. Therefore, while playing reputed courses can add to overall golfing capital in terms of extended knowledge and experience, its tradable value is rarely, if ever, high. What is valued, however, is holding a diversity of experiences which offers greater opportunity to trade on golfing capital.

The earlier discussion on reputation acknowledged the importance of credibility and trust when listening to, and acting on, reputation. Golfing capital helps to establish that trust, particularly through its ability to bond player together in strong networks. Therefore recommendations are more likely to influence destination selection in cases where they have come from within networks.

In summary golf tourism expands an individual's golfing capital but trading on the capital is challenging. Networks are extended through golf tourism opportunities and it is within these networks that the capital is more successfully traded. Group dynamics influence the characteristics of networks thus golfing capital can influence status and recognition within these groups. Additionally golfing capital plays a role in enhancing trust and reciprocity, which determines whether recommendations are used to inform the destination selection process.

#### *4.3.4 Intermediaries*

This final sphere of influence acknowledges the role of intermediaries. While there are many specialist golf operators, the golf tourism sector is of such size and importance that mainstream tour operators have introduced golf departments into their operations to capture some of this market. The products and advice offered means tour operators have a significant effect on the decisions made when participating in golf tourism. However, sometimes no

intermediary is used, with players selecting and booking directly with the principal. Two factors predominantly determine the approach used; firstly the perceived complexity of the trip and secondly the nature of the trip group. In the first case intermediaries are used when the trip is perceived as complex, perhaps because multiple courses are to be played, air transport elements are required or reservations are to be made in a foreign language. In the second case, where trip participants are not from one family (or a very close group of friends) intermediaries are used to provide transparency to the pricing and booking process. In such cases using an intermediary lets the organiser transfer risk should problems occur before or during the trip.

In cases where intermediaries are perceived as offering better value, this is attributed to a lower total price (bulk-purchase arrangements by operators allowing discounts to be passed to the consumer) and increased quality of experience, as an outcome of better tee-times or knowledge of when courses are at their best. The knowledge held by intermediaries is a valuable asset, the result of which is that many customers seek the opinions of agents when selecting the trip destination. Specifically, knowledge of courses, climates and logistics means intermediaries offer informed recommendations although concern that tour operators and travel agents push customers to courses and hotels most profitable is noted. Importantly trip organisers appreciate the guidance of specialists, to reinforce decisions made to select a course or destination.

The power to recommend destinations, courses and accommodation to the customer base means that golf tourism intermediaries influence reputation. This power affects decisions by a trip organiser, perhaps diverting from a destination known to the golf tourist to one known only to the intermediary. Where large travel groups are concerned intermediaries may be asked to offer multiple suggestions (along with price) which informs group discussions of destination selection. In such cases the intermediary effectively narrows the destination choice set.

In summary intermediaries influence the perceived reputation of a destination, can shape the destination choice set and offer convenience to the customer, in turn gaining loyalty. The outcome is that intermediaries shape destination selection.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

The model of behaviour depicting the relationship between the golf tourist and their destination choice (Figure 1) summarises analysis of the data to clarify how each of the six theoretical 'strands' determine the relationship between golfer characteristics, golf tourist behaviour and destination selection. Furthermore the relationship between each of these six

strands and destination selection is not without external stimulus. Such stimuli span multiple strands and have been identified as a 'sphere of influence' acknowledging their cross-territory effects. Analysis has shown that the first of these four spheres, group dynamics, has an effect on the way the trip is constructed, the emotive experiences of trip participants and trip spend. A second sphere of influence, competition and ability, shapes golf tourist behaviour by affecting decisions on total trip spend as well as the emotional rewards of taking a trip (for example in establishing measurements of performance which depict success or failure). Its influence also reaches directly to the choices made regarding the course, thus having direct bearing on destination selection. The third sphere of influence, creating and trading golfing capital, is related to the emotive rewards of participating in golf tourism. It also has an indirect effect on golf tourist behaviour through the variations it brings to the two spheres of influence previously explained ('group dynamics' and 'competition and ability'). This third sphere also has direct influence on destination selection through its relationship to reputation. The final sphere of influence, using intermediaries, directly influences destination selection because it relates to three destination characteristics strands (amenities and support facilities, course characteristics, and reputation of the destination) as well as affecting total trip spends.

### **5.1. Conclusions**

While this research has focused on golf specifically it is posited that these factors can be applied to sports tourism. Making generalised assumptions about all sports participation must be undertaken with caution but with this caveat it is possible to examine the wider applicability of the findings summarised in Figure 1.

The first strand 'the way the trip is constructed and the point at which the sport is embedded into the trip' particularly considers the underlying process of including golf into the trip, the point at which golf is included (pre or post departure) and any negotiations which may underpin this. Negotiating constraints in sports participation acknowledges that these are embedded in individuals as well as shaped by the cultural and structural norms of each sport (Little, 2007). Furthermore negotiating with others, such as family members, may lead to conflict and disapproval directly impacting participation (Dionigi, Fraser-Thomas, & Logan, 2012; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Moreover some sports may more easily be included into a trip at last minute (because they require limited resources or equipment) thus the point at which the sport is embedded into the trip decision will vary.

The second strand 'the emotional rewards and benefits earned by participating in the trip' focuses on the personal experiences gained from taking golf trips - with rewards coming from many factors such as spending time with others or achieving successful performance.

These rewards may provide short-term or immediate gain while others provide longer-term enhancements, such as expanded social networks or memorable life-markers to look back on (Fairley & Gammon, 2005).

The third strand spotlights the 'perceived value for money alongside total trip spend'. Golf participation directly adds to the cost of a trip because it requires payment for course access, usually with higher charges for more exclusive or better quality courses. While some sports (for example cycling) can make use of the public realm to avoid adding to total trip cost for some enthusiasts cost may be seen only as a relative barrier (Coalter, 1993) thus electing to purchase access to dedicated facilities (i.e a velodrome) is accepted to enhance overall experience.

This strand also considers spend on non-sport elements of the trip, (catering / accommodation) which informs judgements about value and perceived utility. Sports also vary in terms of participation costs as a ratio of overall trip spend. Furthermore costs are affected by factors such as shifts in exchange rates or seasonality pressures on demand (Nadal, Font, & Rosselló, 2004).

The fourth strand 'amenities and support facilities (including entertainment and social spaces)' explains the influence of hospitality elements such as accommodation, food and beverage provision. It also confirms the importance of places for entertainment and social interaction. This includes visits to tourist attractions, cultural and heritage sites, music venues and bars (Fox & Sobol, 2000). These are not unique to golf and therefore can be considered for all sports participants.

In terms of golf the fifth strand specifically acknowledges the availability and quality of the golf resources used by the golf tourist. Design of sports facilities play an important role in determining successful use (Puhalla, Krans, & Goatley, 1999) while informal spaces are more frequently serving as places for sport (Kural, 2010). Thus for sport tourism generally 'the tangible and intangible characteristics of the sporting resources' acknowledges accessibility, design and maintenance of the physical resources (Shmanske, 1999; Warnken, Thompson, & Zakus, 2001) as well as the surrounding landscape and climate. Sports which rely on the natural environment (for example skiing or scuba diving) may need to consider how maintenance and protection can control resource quality and maintain an appealing atmosphere conducive to participation. Sports less reliant on the natural environment still need to consider how constructed facilities fit in the surrounding built environment.

The sixth strand highlights 'the reputation of the sporting and non-sporting elements of the destination', which acknowledges that recommendations shape travel plans and thus destination selection. It distinguishes between places and acts to pull the sports tourist to one

location ahead of others (Dann, 1977; Rodden, 2006) by stressing characteristics deemed significant to the participant. To be of value reputation relies on dissemination, often through word-of-mouth recommendations or media reporting.

Significant conceptually to this model is that these six strands are shaped by four spheres of influence. These are closely aligned to the cultural norms and behaviours inherent in each sport. Firstly 'group dynamics' between trip participants significantly impacts both sport tourist behaviours and the selection of trip destinations for fixed membership and transient membership groups. In a wider context team sports may have contrasting experience in this regard - on the one hand membership is fixed when entire teams travel as a group to compete, while conversely the need to travel with sufficient numbers to play the sport means additional players may be recruited to 'make up the numbers' when team members are unable or unwilling to travel. Importantly, such recruits are not without affiliation to the group and are likely to adhere to group norms and behaviours (Bouchet et al., 2004). Participants in solo sports can still be encouraged toward group travel to achieve shared emotive rewards and collective identity (Higham & Hinch, 2009). Furthermore trip organisers act as gatekeepers, controlling membership and norms of behaviour.

The second sphere of influence acknowledges the importance of embedding competitive elements into the trip, in terms of both commercially organised events and informal competition. This provides a means for focusing sporting efforts to enable ability to be developed and displayed. The form of competition can vary the intensity of the challenge to meet differing expectations of players, in turn enhancing the overall sporting experience. For some sports embedding a variety of competitive challenges may be difficult - and few sports have a handicapping system akin to that of golf which allows different ability players to perform fairly and enjoyably in the same competition. This is not without possibilities however; for example assembling leagues comprising teams of similar ability with each group playing for a separate trophy. Solo sports can also use competition as a means of ability assessment. Therefore providing opportunities for 'competition' which allow sporting ability to be effectively developed and displayed affects sport tourist behaviours and can lead to one destination being chosen ahead of others.

Thirdly applying the concept of golfing capital has clarified both the assets gained from participating in sport tourism and tradability of such resources. It identifies networks, group bonding and sporting status (Murphy, 2001; Putnam, 1995). The ease with which capital can be amassed and traded depends on the actions and networks of the individual. In a wider sporting context it is useful to understand the influence on 'sporting capital' amassed and traded as an outcome of participating in sports tourism activities. Furthermore this is directly

linked to the competition and ability sphere of influence discussed above in that the opportunity to develop and display ability directly enhances capital value and tradability.

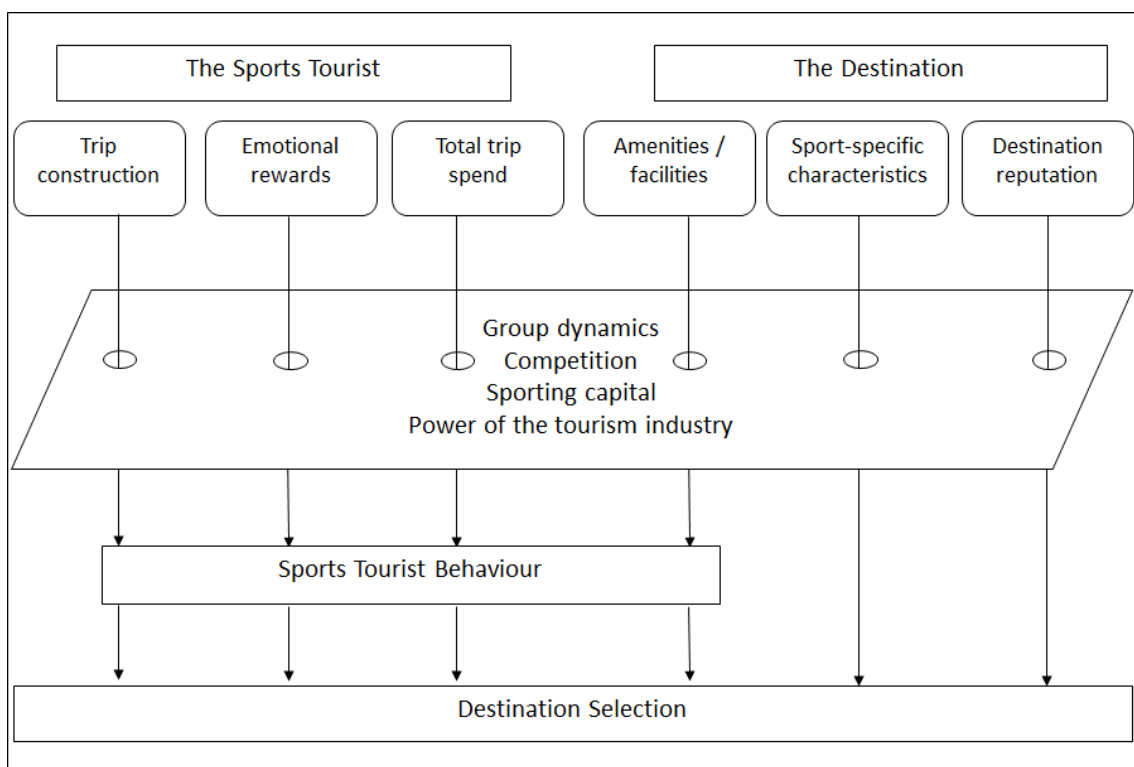
The final sphere of influence acknowledges the use of intermediaries to create and retail sport tourism trips. While it is clear that not all travellers use intermediaries in their purchase of trip elements the influence of the industry to package trips and market destinations stimulates demand. While golf tourism is seen to be the largest sector of the sport tourism market other sectors have specialist intermediaries serving the needs of the players. Specialists require extensive knowledge of the product (and suitable destinations) as well as understanding the cultural norms of their sport in order to best serve - and gain loyalty from - their market. This brings with it trust and power which can influence behaviours of, and choices made, by niche sports tourism sectors.

In summary a model outlining the relationship between the sports tourist and destination choice is presented in Figure 2. This is extrapolated from the robust data gathered and analysed in relation to golf tourism and thus comes with caveats in terms of absolute generalisability but its value lies in reinforcing understanding of the complex relationship between the sports tourist, behaviours and destination selection.

Figure 2 Relationship between the sports tourist and destination choice

**5.2. Theoretic implications and directions for future research**

The way in which golf tourism has been previously understood is much less sophisticated than



the model developed as a result of this research. The comprehensive and robust analysis has identified and explained the complexity of the relationship in a more dynamic way. Golfers require different things from their golf tourism products. The implication of this is that courses and destinations can promote different aspects of their product to appeal to different markets. Thus knowing that sports tourism markets are not homogenous means that destinations can align supply - based on availability of resources - with diverse demand characteristics. Therefore this paper offers a useful contribution to knowledge in terms of understanding the heterogeneous nature of the sports tourist, as well as appreciating how sports tourism behaviours are related to and shape decisions made regarding the location of sporting trips.

There is also great value in the findings of this research for the tourism industry. Knowledge that sports may be embedded into trips once at the destination could encourage sports venues to package entry fees, equipment hire and competition entry together to attract holidaymakers from nearby resorts. Furthermore it could enhance collaborative marketing to create coherent reputations as sporting destinations.

There are established cultural attitudes, particular in terms of racism, sexism and elitism, associated with golf. Sports are varied and participants seek many rewards from participation and generalising behaviours for all sports is challenging. However, this model is developed to initiate critical thought on this realm, with the reward that better understanding of the relationship between the sports tourist and their choice of destination can enhance understanding of the expectations of the tourist and furthermore inform industry practice.

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