

Women in Golf – A Critical Reflection

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Introduction

The culture of golf and its environment is widely regarded as male dominated and exclusionary. Historical accounts dating to 16th century Scotland detail instances where females were shunned from the golf course, and restricted to secret games involving little more than putting (George, 2009). Exclusionary practices continue to impact the modern game, where females still struggle for equality of access, participation, employment and decision making in golf (Kitching *et al.*, 2017). Global golf participation figures indicate the low visibility of female participants and some golf club institutions still preclude female members. It is not just on the fairways that female participants are less evident, but governance, administration and service provision in the golf industry is largely male dominated, making it difficult for females to gain employment and forge careers (MacKinnon, 2013). The earnings of female professional golfers pale in comparison to those of their male counterparts (Saffer, 2016). Research has confirmed the discriminatory environment in which golf takes place for females of all ability levels both on and off the golf course; some of this is consented exclusion (McGinnis and Gentry, 2006; Mitchell *et al.*, 2016). Prevailing perceptions of female golfers reduce them to less able, slower players, while the marketing of golf merchandise and products and the presentation of golf settings is normatively male (Hundley, 2004; McGinnis *et al.*, 2005). This chapter reviews research on women in golf, both from historical and modern day contexts, and concludes with some thoughts for the future. While efforts were made to include evidence from a range of international contexts, much of the research cited in this chapter emanates from the traditional golfing nations of Australia, Great Britain, Ireland and the USA.

Review of current research

Perspectives

The social history of golf is significant in understanding females' positioning in golf environments. Historical golf traditions and gendered institutionalised practices contribute to a culture that inhibits involvement and legitimises inequality, thus negatively influencing female engagement in golf. Taking this into account, this chapter is framed by critical feminism, a perspective that acknowledges the broad socio-historical context. Derived from critical theory, feminist perspectives begin with the assumption that sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed and culturally defined to serve the needs and interests of powerful groups in society (Dewar, 1991). Critical feminists write in relation to power, where gender relations are often defined by hegemonic masculinity and supported by cultural norms of male domination and female subordination. Thus, the framework presented here acknowledges the oppression of minority participants and the normalisation of patriarchal power relations. The literature reviewed in this chapter is derived from a combination of sources, e.g. journal articles on the history and sociology of sport, golf governing body reports and legislative evidence. Given the global and economic significance of golf, some of the included sources are derived from business perspectives.

A short history of women's golf in Britain

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the popularity of golf grew exponentially both in Britain and beyond. This period represents a significant time in the international development of golf, through a combination of industrialisation and the migration of golf to the commonwealth by the British monarchy and British workers (Concannon, 1995). Exploration of golf practices from this period is important, where the rapid spread of golf globally was accompanied by the

spread of exclusionary golf practices, some of which prevailed in other countries (see Haig-Muir, 1998). This section summarises the contested terrain on which women participated in golf in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Female golfers were not well received in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, when the first accounts of women's golf were recorded. Up until the mid-1800s in Britain women were often not tolerated in golf settings and it was seldom that a female golfer would be seen on the golf course. For years women were confined to secret games or putting activities, away from the 'real' golf played by male members (George, 2009). Writing on the acceptance of females in British golf clubs prior to 1914, Vamplew (2010) states that golf clubs were homosocial spaces for males of similar social backgrounds, where men could dine, drink, play cards, read papers all free from female involvement. While the rapid rise in popularity of golf at the time allowed women to develop a presence, their involvement was not taken seriously, where exclusion and discrimination was normalised and their play was ridiculed. Further, women generally accepted their subordinate and inferior roles in golf settings.

Women's access to golf was limited by golf club regulations, where female golfers were restricted to particular tee times, expected to give way to men on the course and confined to separate spaces in golf clubhouses. While male members were afforded full membership and uncontested playing rights in golf clubs, women formed 'ladies' sections where in many clubs they became known as associate members. Gender segregated golf governing bodies formed and women's golf developed independently from the men's game (George, 2007; Vamplew, 2010). Discrimination of women in golf was generally consented and women appeared to accept their subordinate role in golf clubs (George, 2007). Further, George (2010) found that tension prevailed not only between women and men but also between different groups of women.

With the rapid spread of golf during this time, the game became an acceptable activity for well-to-do women, for whom it was a form of moderate exercise which allowed opportunities for social contact, did not threaten male players and helped to develop socially desirable attributes such as self-control (George, 2009). It also offered these women an opportunity to emphasise femininity and fashion, particularly where the majority of women who participated in golf viewed the game as a social activity (Cashmore, 2010). While shorter, less challenging courses facilitated these players, they didn't appeal to the better more competitive golfers, who were also aware that they could be derided if they displayed overly flamboyant playing styles and dress sense (George, 2007; 2009; Vamplew, 2010). Female golfers were widely perceived as inferior to their male counterparts, particularly given the higher number of shots they took and their 'inadequacy' in dealing with bunkers and other hazards (Vamplew, 2010). Around this time, as recorded by Haig-Muir (1998), women were perceived as emotionally unstable and incompetent in sport. While some aspects of golf such as equipment, technology and facilities have radically changed since the 1800s, the following sections detail how golf culture and practices have altered very little.

Visibility of females in golf

Golf participation figures in the period 2010 to 2016 indicate the low visibility of females in the game worldwide. In Great Britain and Ireland female golfers typically comprise less than a fifth of participants, compared with a quarter or even a third in other European countries (KPMG, 2013; European Golf Association, 2016). The 2014 England Golf membership survey states that females account for 15% of members in England, with junior girls comprising a tiny 1% of members (England Golf, 2014). In contrast, some European countries have much higher ratios of adult female golfers, with Germany and Austria (35%), Switzerland (33%), the Netherlands (32%) and Belgium (31%) recording the highest rates (KPMG, 2013). In Australia female participants account for 21% of the total golf club membership (Golf Australia, 2015). While female participation in

golf is gradually increasing, it appears that women leave golf almost as quickly as they enter. In America, female golfer drop out is almost double that of males; golf declined by 14% between 2005 and 2011 but the decrease in female golf participation in the same period was 27% (National Golf Foundation, 2012). Golf club membership attrition rates are higher than attraction rates in Australia, where membership declined by 21% from 1998 to 2014, with comparatively more females leaving the game (Golf Australia, 2015). In New Zealand women's membership dropped by 17% between 2010 and 2015 (New Zealand Golf, 2015). The recent global decline in golf participation appears to have greatly impacted women's golf.

Not only are the fairways void of female participants, but golf industry governance, administration, and service provision could be largely homogeneous, making it more difficult for females to forge employment and progression opportunities. A report instructed by the Australian Sports Commission found that women were underrepresented in all facets of leadership and management in Australian golf (Sheppard, 2008). Female PGA golf professionals make up less than 3% of all PGA Professionals in Britain and Ireland (Kitching *et al.*, 2017). This figure is less than 4% in America, where female PGA of America members are twice as likely as male members to become inactive. MacKinnon (2013) identified family and personal commitments, unsociable working hours and the lack of schedule flexibility as the primary reasons for this attrition. For the minority of females in the golf industry, there is some evidence of unpleasant working conditions. A study on female professionals' employment in the golf industry in Great Britain and Ireland found that both trainee and fully qualified female PGA professionals experienced access and rights discrimination both on and off the golf course, while the low expectations of male members, employers and club committees compromised their career progression opportunities (Kitching *et al.*, 2017). Respondents to an LGU survey identified the male dominated industry (27%) as the biggest barrier to a career in golf for women (Ladies Golf Union, 2005). As will be considered in later sections, the under representation of females in golf can imply that their mere presence presents a challenge to the status quo.

It is important to acknowledge the significant roles that male family members play as gatekeepers to golf participation for females. Similar to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when young girls' motivation to play golf was triggered by fathers, brothers and uncles (George, 2009), male family members are key influencers and socialising agents (Shin and Nam, 2004; Reis and Correia, 2013). In one of the most comprehensive surveys on female involvement in golf in Great Britain and Ireland ($n=1500$), 65% of respondents identified their husbands, partners, parents and other family members as the primary reasons why they took up golf, with almost 9 of every 10 golfers surveyed having another member of the household that participated (Ladies Golf Union, 2005). A 2014 study in the UK identified the participation of fathers, partners and children as key reasons for taking up golf (Syngenta, 2014). Thus, female participation is positively influenced by male family members.

Golf club regulations

Golf club rules, regulations and constitutions still limit female members, where both associate membership and male-only clubs remain in existence, particularly in the USA, Great Britain and Ireland. Contentious legislation in some jurisdictions upholds the right of clubs to pursue all male memberships, as long as it is written into the club's legal constitution (Song, 2007; Lenkiewicz, 2011). A number of high profile clubs, tournament venues and governing bodies have been caught out in the debate on female membership. Following media scrutiny and the objections of equality campaigners, the annual US Masters venue Augusta National admitted their first female members in 2012. The Royal and Ancient (R&A) golf club at St. Andrews admitted its first female members in 2015. However, all male memberships exist in other well-known clubs such as the Australian

Club in Sydney, Muirfield in Scotland, Pine Valley in New Jersey, USA and Portmarnock in Ireland. In their examination of the daily presentation of gender issues in a private golf club in England, Shotton *et al.* (1998) suggest that gender discrimination does not end once women gain access to golf club membership.

Women's golf – what is 'acceptable'?

Women's golf is becoming more reflective of female's multiple and varied femininities and ethnicities, something which has not been widely welcomed. A strong competitiveness and will to win – traits that have often been associated with masculine performance – have been encouraged by male family members and coaches in their socialisation of girls into golf (Reis and Correia, 2013). In contrast, a study in Midwest America found that women golfers embraced stereotypical roles where their emphasis on the femininity of golf was an important factor in their continued participation; McGinnis *et al.* (2005) termed this 'role entrapment'. Contrasting assumptions about the appropriateness of golf as a female activity can be problematic for some female participants. In conducting an ethnography on the American LPGA (Ladies' Professional Golf Association) tour, Crosset (1995) detected that LPGA tour players experienced tensions between their roles as athletes and societal expectations of them as females. These expectations about femininity are not limited to professional athletes; McGinnis and Gentry (2006) discuss the peer, spouse and family expectations that are placed on women, including the 'ethic of care', and embracing gender appropriate roles.

Like other female sports, golf has often been closely associated with lesbian and tomboy identities, and women's golf has been characterised as attractive to lesbian followers. Referring specifically to an ongoing preoccupation with lesbianism among professional ranks, Haig-Muir (1998) even referenced the 'image problem' permeating western media coverage of women's professional golf. In writing about gender differences in perceptions and attitudes toward the LPGA and its tour professionals, Dixon (2002) found that almost all survey respondents were aware of sexual orientation 'issues' in the LPGA tour. The LPGA itself has even been criticised for a controversial 2002 marketing plan, which along with appearing as homophobic, encouraged golfers to display femininity to compensate for the traditional masculine characteristics associated with sport (Wolter, 2010). While modern golf is more accepting of female players, it appears that traditional notions of fixed femininities are preferred.

The growth of golf in Asia has resulted in an influx of female professionals on the LPGA tour, particularly from South Korea. Korean fathers have identified professional golf as a respected and appropriate career for their daughters where it serves as a way to gain advantage in education settings (Shin and Nam, 2004). Korean females have been characterised as disciplined and hardworking, and from 1998 to 2011 Korean women won one hundred tour titles (Yoo, 2012). The growth of influence of Asian players on the LPGA tour wasn't initially celebrated; in 2008 the tour imposed a regulation requiring international players to pass an oral test to demonstrate proficiency in English (Claussen, 2010). Choi (2010) found that ethnic diversity and the dramatic increase of Asian players on the LPGA tour influenced the sponsorship decisions of a brewing company. In a study examining newspaper coverage on the three top women golfers at the time, Kim *et al.* (2006) found that South Korean golfer Se Ri Pak received less coverage than Annika Sorenstam and Karrie Webb, while more negative characteristics were used to describe Pak. It appears that professional women's golf has yet to fully welcome participants from varied backgrounds and ethnicities.

The portrayal of female professional golfers in television coverage and print media in the USA has been widely researched, much of which depicts females as less important and less able. In

examining over 200 hours of nationally televised PGA and LPGA golf across eight US television networks, Billings *et al.* (2005) found that women golfers were more likely to be described in terms of why they succeeded or failed, whereas men were more likely to be described in terms of their personality or physicality. An examination of hidden media biases surrounding Annika Sorenstam's involvement in the 2003 PGA Colonial Tournament showed that commentators were more likely to highlight Sorenstam's emotions and outside pressures (Billings *et al.*, 2006). In both of these studies, women golfers were more likely to be depicted as succeeding because of their intelligence, composure, and even luck, and failing because they lacked athletic ability. Two studies of golf magazines revealed how women were underrepresented, and deemed inferior athletes and spectators of golf who lived conventionally feminine, hetero-normative lifestyles (Maas and Hasbrook, 2001; Apostolis and Giles, 2011). An examination of the portrayal of LPGA player Nancy Lopez during her final professional tournaments outlined how magazines represented her as a heterosexual, married mother, thereby perpetuating a model of family life and divisions of labour that benefits white men and subordinates women (Douglas and Jamieson, 2006). Overall, these studies show how media reproduce images about white, wealthy, able-bodied golfers, and reinforce dominant ideologies in golf culture. The acceptability of women in golf is often influenced by the social or competitive motivations of the golfers themselves. This will be considered in later sections.

Assumptions and perceptions

Female golfers are widely perceived as inferior to their male counterparts. Driving distance has frequently been used to frame women as less able golfers, and in a study on golfers from Midwest America, McGinnis *et al.* (2005) reported women feeling singled out when it came to slow play. Female participants in the McGinnis and Gentry (2006) study expressed frustration in relation to their golfing ability, where they were less assured than male golfers and admitted a knowledge deficit about golf, all of which contributed to anxiety and a lack of confidence on the golf course. In writing about gender differences in perceptions and attitudes toward the LPGA and its tour professionals, Dixon (2002) found that women had much higher perceptions of female golfers' skill levels than men, and were much more likely to regard negative comments made about female golfers as being inappropriate. Women enter golf aware of gender stereotypes and perceived ability limitations, and can pressurise themselves to perform. In gathering the views of golf professionals, McGinnis and Gentry (2002, p.7) comment in relation to female golfers "to excel or be noticed, they have to try harder than men, and if they do succeed, they often have to suffer the consequences of not doing gender appropriately". This has been confirmed in relation to Portuguese elite female golfers (Reis and Correia, 2013) and female golf professionals (Kitching *et al.*, 2017). Coupled with negative ability perceptions, these performance role expectations contribute to female golfers' feelings of inferiority in golf settings, and particularly on the golf course itself.

Linked to the inferiority element of female participation in golf, there is some evidence of golf clubs and golf courses making assumptions about the social or competitive intentions of female golfers. While some studies have indicated how female participants placed more value on the social rather than competitive elements of golf (Shotton *et al.*, 1998; Wright, 2008; Danylchuk *et al.*, 2015), there is also evidence of a lack of competitive options for female players. In their interviews with golf professionals in Midwest and West USA, McGinnis and Gentry (2002) found professionals promoted their women's programmes around meeting groups, wine-tastings and themed events, with less focus on competitive golf. Female participants in the McGinnis *et al.* (2005) study suggested that the emphasis on mixed, social events indicated to female golfers that the serious play was left for the men.

Similar to women in predominantly male occupations, recreational female golfers have identified how they experienced heightened visibility and typecasting on the golf course, where they reported feeling ignored, overlooked or unimportant, particularly in their on course interactions with males (McGinnis *et al.*, 2005; McGinnis and Gentry, 2006). According to golf professionals, male golfers use body language such as folded arms, sending unwelcoming signals in order to hurry female golfers on the course; while male professionals commented that they often fielded complaints and questions from male patrons about women's slow play (McGinnis and Gentry, 2006). In their study of female recreational golfers in an English golf club, (Mitchell *et al.*, 2016) found that female members recounted feeling under surveillance when both out on the course and in the clubhouse; they described themselves as being objectified, 'othered' and highly visible as women, and uncomfortable that their appearance and social behaviour were being subjected to scrutiny and critique. The inferiority experienced in women's engagement with golf environments is likely influenced by these assumptions about ability, heightened visibility, performance role expectations and negative on-course interactions. When these gendered expectations become hegemonic, and 'the way things are supposed to be', females are further marginalised from golf settings and the gender divide in golf is reinforced.

The presentation of golf

A wealth of evidence from the American golf industry confirms how the presentation and marketing of golf can isolate female participants. In examining the language used in scorecards from 85 golf courses in 12 states, Hundley (2004) found that gendered tee boxes related to skill level served as hegemonic signs of the value placed on male and female golfers. Looking at approximately 500 golf courses in the USA, Arthur *et al.* (2011) found that highly gendered golf courses may result in women teeing off from separate parts of the course, and taking separate golf carts. Thus women who use golf for networking can be omitted from valuable conversations about business and career opportunities. Hundley (2004) suggests that tee box locations (where men have freedom of choice) imply that men are always stronger, more skilled and more qualified than women, regardless of their golfing ability. Haig-Muir (1998) suggests that this gender-marking separates women's golf from 'real' golf, where the men's game becomes the benchmark against which all else is measured. Kitching *et al.* (2017) found that by denying women access to tee times and parts of the golf course and clubhouse, male members and patrons sometimes deliberately suppressed female golfers' participation. Further, a number of studies have shown how the golf industry does not take female customers seriously, through marketing practices and strategies, the presentation of merchandise, lack of gender specific equipment and products, inadequate on-course restroom facilities and the overall prioritisation of male customers (McGinnis *et al.*, 2005; MacKinnon, 2011). In what they termed 'sensible business practice' and the 'good old boy network', McGinnis and Gentry (2002; 2006) found that some professionals demonstrated their need to appease the male golfing population by rationalising male exclusivity, devaluing the female golfer and succumbing to sexist commentary.

The presentation of golf as normatively male means that the mere presence or involvement of women can be viewed as different or unexpected. Female golfers are sometimes presented and positioned as the 'other' in contrast to the dominant male position, as exemplified in the use of language such as 'ladies' rather than 'golfers' (Haig-Muir, 1998). Hundley's (2004) study of golf scorecards demonstrated how language illuminates sexism in golf, where gender is represented and reproduced in a way that preserves difference. While McGinnis and Gentry (2002) found that the term 'lady' was widely used by golf professionals as a label of respect, in other contexts the term 'lady' can be seen as archaic, patronising, derogatory or demeaning. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) also cited examples of how golf personnel and professionals use condescending language and actions that create an unwelcoming environment for women. They termed this 'traditional politeness', where using the term 'lady' prolongs the female stereotype that confines and limits

women's performance and participation. Collectively, this evidence can enhance feelings of gender segregation and exclusion, and may also portray negative assumptions about women's positioning and abilities, all of which serves to perpetuate the gender gap in golf.

Female complicity?

The evidence presented thus far indicates how discrimination has been experienced in golf settings by females of all ability levels, while prevailing patriarchal practices are maintained and reproduced in golf club institutions. Hegemony works when the practices of dominant groups become normalised and privileged, and often goes unquestioned. While the interests of dominant groups are furthered, the preferences of marginalised groups become less significant, particularly when they themselves consent to or comply with the existing order. Where they seek out fellow females as playing partners, female cohesion in golf club settings has been shown to be an important strategy in their continued participation (McGinnis and Gentry, 2002). However, at times it appears that women golfers often fail to support each other and are complicit with marginalisation. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) noted that much of the insensitivity and hostility that female golfers experience actually comes from other female golfers. The exclusion of women in golf settings is sometimes supported by females themselves, who even perpetuate the status quo by accommodating to and playing by men's rules (Reis and Correia, 2013). Following in-depth interviews with 22 women golfers, McGinnis *et al.*, (2009) found that 'accommodating' golfers tolerated rather than challenged golf rituals that privileged men; some of these women felt more intimidated by other female golfers. Where male hegemonic discourses were consistently encountered by female professionals in golf settings, experienced professionals resorted to passive acceptance; "it's better not to say anything" (Kitching *et al.*, 2017). Kitching (2011) also found that girl golfers' adoption of peer group hierarchy based on ability meant that they complied with the prevailing power relations in the golf club, potentially reinforcing rather than challenging gender relations. This complicity can also be seen in the way the LPGA has dealt with ethnicity and difference amongst its tour players. McGinnis *et al.* (2005) suggest that when individuals find ways to accommodate gender inequity, the system remains unchanged. By placing more value on what is male, these strategies can reinforce the masculine hierarchy in and of golf, deeming it more difficult to interrupt conventional order and elicit change. The prevailing male hegemony, coupled with this evidence of female complicity and acceptance ensures that gender gaps prevail.

Summary and future directions

Acknowledging the critical outlook framing this chapter, and granted that much of the evidence emanates from the traditional golfing nations, the position of women in golf as presented here offers little optimism for the image and future advancement of the game. Patriarchy is a strong force in reproducing a culture in which male preferences are valued and female participants are less visible, perceived as inferior and marginalised from decision making. Golf remains a homogenous, linear and exclusionary sport for many cohorts, including lower social classes, disability groups and non-whites. The regressive image of golf hampers the game; the majority of respondents in the LGU research (65%) believed that single sex/gender segregated golf clubs damage the image of golf, while the intimidating atmosphere and male pervasiveness deem the sport unwelcoming for newcomers (Ladies Golf Union, 2005; Syngenta, 2014). While there is evidence of a lack of strategic leadership to address the low participation of women in golf (Sheppard, 2008), a milestone was reached in Scotland in January 2017 when the R&A merged with the LGU. While the introduction of novel participation initiatives (e.g. LPGA/USGA Girls Golf), the merging of male/female golf governing bodies in Great Britain, and the recent admission of female members to heretofore male only clubs may be perceived as progressive, there is a view that these moves are tokenistic, triggered by the threat of losing endorsements and state

sport funding. Forced moves and empty gestures will do little to change attitudes, affect female participation and initiate real change in the game at grassroots or club level.

Golf has social, cultural and economic significance globally; from the playing population it reaches, to the celebrated icons and the industry, tourism and employment generated. With the growth of world tours, television exposure and the emergence of Tiger Woods some commentators anticipated that golf would reach a new diverse audience. While there is increasing interest in junior golf, golf participation declined particularly during the global economic recession, and aside from the re-introduction of golf into the 2016 Olympics, and the European Tour's proposal of alternative golf formats in 2017, there is little reason to expect a revolution in the game. The prevalence of younger players on professional tours could present an opportunity; in spite of the complicity of older professionals in the Kitching *et al.* (2017) study, younger professionals appeared more willing to challenge, discuss and confront the underlying discrimination, thereby marking a shift across the generations. Nonetheless, the evidence gathered to date on junior golf also points to stagnation and a reproduction of culture, where young golfers have to assimilate to learn the cultural system of golf or face marginalisation (Zevenbergen *et al.*, 2002), while golf clubs use rules, restrictions and other symbolic practices to classify and reproduce cultural capital among young golfers (Kitching, 2011). Haig-Muir (1998) suggests that the socialisation of young males into golf from a young age is a strong force in maintaining and legitimating existing patriarchal practices and hierarchies.

Attempts at making golf more inclusive must go beyond growing the professional women's game, merging of golf governing bodies and the promotion of novel participation initiatives. Many of these moves address women as the 'problem', where they are perceived as lacking the interest, time and ability to persist at golf, while some participation strategies superficially focus on females socialising together or playing on women friendly courses. McGinnis *et al.* (2005) call for systematic changes in golf institutions including challenging the prevailing stereotypes of women golfers and providing support for working mothers to play. MacKinnon (2011) suggests that golf coaches should modify their traditional instructional techniques that were developed by men for men, and also acknowledge the anxiety facing women golfers in a male dominating environment. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) suggest treating female customers as equals and as serious golfers, creating a sense of belongingness and avoiding gender segmentation (i.e. separate competitions, equipment and teeing grounds), deference and archaic 'lady' language. Changing the culture of golf requires a fundamental shift in assumptions, attitudes and policies within golf club settings, otherwise as Crosset (1995) posits, females will continue to remain outsiders in the masculine world of golf.

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