

1998

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### Recommended Citation

Petrick, James F.; Backman, Sheila J.; and Bixler, Robert D. (1998) "An Investigation of Selected Factors on Golfer Attachment," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol17/iss1/2>

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**AN INVESTIGATION OF SELECTED FACTORS ON GOLFER ATTACHMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

While little change has occurred in the total number of golfers in the United States, the total number of golf courses is rapidly increasing (3). This increase in market competition has made it vital for resort owners and managers to examine the variables which influence golfers to use and return to their facilities. A relationship that appears to form between golfers and golf courses which has been neglected is place attachment. The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not place attachment actually occurs on a golf course. A second purpose was to investigate the relationship between attachment and a golfer's proximity to the course, gender, age, frequency of play, handicap and income. A third purpose was to examine the relationship between attachment to course and overall satisfaction

and perceived value. Subjects (N=1,397) were randomly selected by tee times stratified by weekday and weekend and season of the year at six different Cleveland Metro Parks golf courses. Of the golfers that participated, the average age was 49.9, 70.2% were married, 79.9% were male, and the median household income was \$50,000 to \$59,999. Results show that a distinct variable of attachment emerged from golfers' perceptions. Further, age, frequency of play, perceived value and overall satisfaction were all found to have strong relationships to attachment. Managerial implications and applicability are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the early 1700's, the game of golf has evolved into a major industry. While little change has occurred in the total number of golfers in the United States, the number of golf courses is rapidly increasing (3). According to the National Golf Foundation (8) nearly 400 new courses were built in 1997 and projections for 1998 are even higher. With an increasing competition for attracting golfers to individual sites, it is becoming more important for resort owners and managers to examine the variables which influence golfers to use and return to their facilities. An understanding of how golfers perceive, choose, and relate to various settings is essential for researchers attempting to understand golfer behavior and managers attempting to provide opportunities for satisfying recreation experiences (7). A relationship that appears to form between golfers and particular courses which has been neglected is place attachment.

Place attachment has been defined as the extent to which one values or identifies with a particular environmental setting. A majority of research on place attachment has examined attachment to home and community (6). This literature states that emotional bonds are associated with long-term relationships to places. It has been argued that this same emotional bond occurs in recreational settings (15). It has been further argued that attachment to recreation settings will reduce the willingness to substitute settings and increase the level of concern regarding how a place is used and managed (15). Attachment to place has also been found to increase with age (2, 9), frequency of use and proximity of place (7), be higher in females than males (10), and to be highly correlated with satisfaction (11, 13).

Two forms that place attachment appears to take are place identity and place dependence (15, 16). Place identity is a valuing of a particular setting for emotional or symbolic reasons, while place dependence is associated with the potential of a particular place to satisfy an individual's needs and goals, and the assessment of how the current place compares with similar settings available to satisfy the same needs (12). In other words, a place can be valued by a recreationist because it is a "good" place to undertake a particular activity, or it can be valuable because it is seen as "special" for emotional or symbolic reasons, or both (7).

While it is possible to develop emotional attachment to places that one has never visited, place attachment to a particular setting generally begins to develop after one or more visits. Some of the variables which may influence how often one frequents a site may include, how far away the site is, the sites accessibility, the number of alternative sites that are available to the recreationist, the importance of the activity to the person, and the recreationists skill level, health and age (7).

It has been argued that place dependence can occur after only a few visits to a site (16). Through simple comparison of possible alternative sites, one can establish an emotional attachment (place dependence) to one destination. Conversely, place identity can only develop after numerous visits to a site (7). Thus, place identity is believed to be a function of how long a person has been associated with the site and how dependent they are on it.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Previous studies have shown that valuable information can be obtained by analyzing

the effect of place attachment on community sentiment (6), leisure mobility (4), trail use (7) and environmental values (1). However, investigations of a golfer's attachment to golf courses has received little attention (5). The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not place attachment actually occurs on a golf course. A second purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between attachment and a golfer's proximity to the course, gender, age, frequency of play, handicap and income. A third purpose was to examine the relationship between attachment to course and overall satisfaction and perceived value.

Three research questions were developed in order to guide this study:

- 1) Is there a distinct variable of place attachment which can be identified?
- 2) What is the relationship between a golfer's level of attachment and proximity to the course, age, gender, frequency of play, handicap and income?
- 3) What is the relationship between place attachment and overall satisfaction and perceived value?

## METHODS

Subjects (N=1,688) were randomly selected by tee times stratified by weekday and weekend and season of the year at six different Cleveland Metro Parks golf courses. The six golf courses at Cleveland Metro-parks are all situated within a 20 mile radius. To reduce selection bias within tee times, one subject from each foresome was randomly selected to participate. Of the golfers that participated, the average age was 49.9, 70.2% were married, 79.9% were male, and

the median household income was \$50,000 to \$59,999.

Once a golfer agreed to participate, they were asked for a mailing address. The questionnaire was then sent to their given address, and if no response was received after the first week, reminder postcards were sent. Three weeks after the questionnaire was first sent, non-respondents were sent a new questionnaire, and after four weeks a final reminder postcard was sent. Using this procedure, 1,397 out of 1,688 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 82.8%.

The questionnaire was developed by the division of Research and Program Evaluation at Cleveland Metro Parks and reviewed by golf and marketing staff. The final questionnaire consisted of 8 sections. The first section measured overall satisfaction and perceived value of the experience. Similar to past research (14), overall satisfaction and perceived value were measured using a single scale from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). The second and third sections measured proximity to course and mastery. Section 7 measured perceptions of the golf course and section 8 measured demographics. Sections 4, 5, and 6 were not relevant to this study.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Factor analysis was employed to determine if a distinct variable of place attachment could be identified. The 12 items addressed in golf course perceptions were factor analyzed using the principal components method with a varimax rotation. Perceptions were assessed by a 12 item, 5 point Likert scale. Items for this scale were developed following a literature review and Cleveland Metro Park golf staff input. Three factors were identified on the basis of

eigenvalues which exceeded one and accounted for 68.8% of the total variance.

A very distinct variable of attachment emerged with six variables loading on it. The six variables were: (1) For me, no other public golf courses in NE Ohio can compare to this one, (2) Most of my golfing friends prefer (*name of course*) to other public courses, (3) (*Name of course*) is the best golf course in northeastern Ohio for the kind of golf I like to play, (4) For me (*Name of course*), provides the right level of challenge, (5) The layout of (*name of course*) is one of my favorites in northeastern Ohio and (6) I would like to play more of my golf games at (*name of course*). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was .85. This reliability coefficient was considered acceptable for the study. A mean score was then operationalized as either high or low, by dropping the median score of 3.33 and transforming all mean scores greater than 3.33 as high attachment, and all those lower than 3.33 as low attachment.

T-tests were used to investigate the relationship between attachment (high versus low) and proximity to course, gender, age, frequency of play, handicap and income. A significant difference was found between the ages of low (mean = 47.3) and high (mean = 51.6) attached golfers ( $t_{1183} = -4.26, p < .001$ ) (see Table 1). Further, golfers with high attachment played significantly more ( $t_{1072} = -4.48, p < .001$ ) rounds of golf at the respective course (mean = 17.7) than the low attached golfers (mean = 13.2) (see Table 1).

No significant difference was found between males and females and their level of attachment. Also, no significant difference ( $p > .05$ ) was found between high and low attached golfers and the miles traveled to play the course and handicap (see Table 1).

Chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship between income and attachment and no significant difference was found ( $p > .05$ ).

In order to examine the relationship between overall satisfaction and high versus low attached golfers a t-test was used. Overall satisfaction was measured on a scale from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). It was found that high attached golfers were significantly ( $t_{1176} = 12.77, p < .001$ ) more satisfied (8.5) with their experience than low attached golfers (7.3) (see Table 1). Further, results of the Pearson's correlation between overall satisfaction and attachment showed a moderate positive relationship ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ).

A t-test was also employed to examine the relationship between perceived value and high versus low attached golfers. Perceived value was measured on a scale from 1 (extremely poor value) to 10 (extremely good value). High attached golfers rated the value received for their money significantly ( $t_{1183} = 11.75, p < .001$ ) higher than low attached golfers (8.7 and 7.5 respectively) (see Table 1). Further, results of the Pearson's correlation between perceived value and attachment found a moderate positive relationship ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined the relationship between selected factors and golfers' attachment. Since attachment has been shown to reduce the willingness to substitute settings and increase the level of concern regarding how a place is used and managed (15, 16) it is believed that results of the current study will be useful to resort owners and golf course managers.

Results showed that a distinct variable of attachment emerged from golfers' perceptions of the golf course. Age, frequency of play, perceived value and overall satisfaction were found to have strong relationships to attachment. It was also found that highly attached golfers are more likely to return to play the course, perceive their experience to have more value, and are more satisfied with their experience than low attached golfers. Further, it was found that attachment is positively, moderately correlated to satisfaction and perceived value. Also of concern to resort managers is that gender, miles traveled to play, handicap and income had no effect on attachment.

Due to the characteristics of a golf course, and the present results, it is believed that the current study analyzed place dependence (satisfaction of one's needs) and not place identity (emotional attachment). It is recom-

mended for further study that the differences between place dependence and place identity for golfers be examined. It is also recommended for future study that distinct features of a golf course, which promote place attachment, be measured and analyzed.

In conclusion it is believed that the current study is an excellent stepping stone for the analysis of the relationship between place attachment and golf courses. While results of this study should not be generalized to all courses, it is suggested that the promotion of place attachment could be a very useful tool in the highly competitive golf market. With the use of place attachment promotion, resort managers may be able to attract and maintain a clientele that is not only loyal, but also genuinely concerned about the overall well-being of one's resort and golf facilities.

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TABLE 1  
MEAN VALUES OF HIGH AND LOW ATTACHED GOLFERS

	<u>Low Attached</u>		<u>High Attached</u>		p
	mean	SD	mean	SD	
Minutes from Course	18.3	14.3	19.35	14.6	.329
Age in Years	47.3	14.8	51.6	15.7	.014
Rounds per Year	13.2	4.8	17.7	5.2	.001
Handicap	16.2	7.4	17.4	6.9	.280
Perceived Value	7.5	1.9	8.7	1.4	.001
Overall Satisfaction	7.3	1.7	8.5	1.4	.001