

Local Communities Don't Walk the Greens: The Case of Portugal and Spain (Andaluzia)

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand why non-golfers in Portugal and Spain do not take advantage of golf, despite their popularity as golf tourist destinations. Given golf's association with mental and physical health, the question arises: why aren't residents playing more? The study is based on the three-dimensional leisure construct model - intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural, comprises six in-depth interviews (with golf professionals and amateurs) and a questionnaire survey. The survey received 306 valid responses from non-golfers in Portugal and Spain, representing a diverse range of professions. The data was processed using thematic analysis for the interviews and descriptive statistics for the questionnaires. The results show that golf is perceived as elitist, expensive, and challenging, but as a good way to meet friends, beneficial for mental and physical health, and a means to enhance social status. Findings also reveal a lack of knowledge and participation among residents, as well as mostly self-perceived interpersonal and intrapersonal constraints. This suggests that public stakeholders should take action to change perceptions and motivate local residents to play regularly, thereby promoting social interaction and sustainability. Examining individuals' perceptions of the game and identifying the relevant factors could inform guidelines to assist local governance and development.

KEYWORDS

Golf, Resident Communities, Facilitators, Constraints, Portugal, Spain.

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1. Introduction

In May 2025, a news article in the British newspaper *The Guardian* announced that Holland had started a national “Welcome to the Club” campaign to encourage more women and younger golfers aged 25–50. The article noted that many people thought golf was a sport for old men and that it was extremely expensive. Moreover, to keep the sport young, more young people and talent were needed on golf courses. It further indicated that this “also makes commercial sense” (Boztas, 26 May 2025). Some argue golf is in decline due to its long track record of exclusivity and that golf advocates should be “anxious” about the game’s future (Couture et al., 2023).

This current research, conducted in Portugal and Andalusia (Spain), examines the motivations and reasons why local (and young) people are uninterested in playing golf despite the geographical and contextual conditions that seem to offer an ideal setting for practising the sport. Additionally, promoting amateur golf within local communities could contribute significantly to both economic and environmental sustainability. Economically, amateur golf could strengthen local resilience by circulating revenue within the community and reducing reliance on international visitors. Supporting local clubs could potentially create year-round employment, stabilize seasonal economies. These initiatives can also generate green jobs related to course maintenance, water management, and ecological monitoring, while offering affordable recreation that fosters community cohesion.

From an environmental perspective, encouraging local participation helps maintain existing golf courses without expanding into new, ecologically sensitive areas (Casals-Miralles, 2023). Community involvement also fosters environmental awareness. Moreover, emphasising local play reduces long-distance travel and associated carbon emissions, transforming golf courses into hubs for environmental education and stewardship as well as tourism sites.

Suitable climate conditions for practising this sport throughout the year, combined with the availability of facilities, have converted Southern European countries into destinations for this type of tourism (Madrigal & Lara, 2019). Golf tourism destinations, such as Andalusia/Costa del Sol in Spain or the Algarve in Portugal, are considered among the top destinations to play golf during the winter season, when central and northern countries experience rain and snow. For these two regions, this is highly beneficial, as the golf season aligns with their primary sun and sea tourism product (Mendes et al., 2011).

As a result of the golf activity and the increment of its derived products (accommodation, hospitality, catering, rental cars, etc.), these areas in Southern Europe have long developed conditions to attract and receive high-quality golf tourism. The supply of golf facilities has grown in line with the influx of tourism. The number and design of golf courses respond to the tourism these destinations receive (Oliveira et al., 2013). However, considering the existing golf courses and facilities in these areas, both regions show a very low number of local players. Thus, for them to be sustainable, both economically and environmentally, the involvement of the resident population is crucial.

In fact, although golf is a highly attractive sport for tourists in Portugal and Spain, residents and the younger population often regard it as an elite sport for seniors, showing little interest in participating (Portugal et al., 2020). Arguably, for the country to maintain its privileged position, golf must be regarded as a leisure activity for the Portuguese (Completo & Gustavo, 2014), and, therefore, it is crucial to change the negative perception that the younger local population has of golf, both as a sport and an activity (Portugal et al., 2020). Bearing in mind that non-golfers, young populations, and local residents should gain new perceptions of golf, and in order to attract their engagement, this study focuses on identifying the affordances, i.e. the interaction between the individual’s capabilities and their circumstances (Buckley & Akhoundogli, 2020), that provide the facilitators and constraints to participation in golf by local non-golfer residents in the golf tourism destinations of Andalusia/Costa de Sol (Spain) and Algarve (Portugal).

In this paper we focus on the possible emergent affordances that golf courses provide to local residents, operationalizing affordances as the “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444); “in the case of humans, they offer a range of potential practices that are conditional on dispositions, abilities and intentions” (Kaaristo et al., 2025), which can also be framed as facilitators or enablers and constraints. As such, our focus on affordances attends to how golf is (not) practiced, perceived, and represented in relation to its material and environmental qualities (Ingold, 2000).

To identify these facilitators and constraints, we employ a mixed-methods approach based on a variety of primary data, following an exploratory sequential design. Considering this, this study takes a pragmatic approach to epistemology, acknowledging both the objective patterns evident in the data and the subjective meanings constructed by the participants in the interviews. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with six golfers to gain an understanding of the narratives and discursive constructions of both professional and amateur individuals regarding golf. This was examined within the framework of the three-dimensional paradigm, which comprises intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors (Crawford et al., 1991; Godbey et al., 2010). These factors are perceived as either facilitators (Raymore, 2002) or constraints to participation in leisure activities (Jackson, 2005). The categories obtained through thematic analysis served as the basis for developing a questionnaire survey administered to non-golfers from Portugal and Spain, yielding a total of 306 valid responses.

As the interviews proved to be immensely rich and informative, this paper focuses primarily on their content. The questionnaire data will be utilized as supplementary material to corroborate and contextualize the central findings derived from the semi-structured interviews. While the interviews serve as the primary source for rich, in-depth qualitative data and emergent themes, the questionnaire, which gathers quantitative and descriptive metrics, will be referenced only where its results directly support, quantify, or provide a broader expressive context for the qualitative themes and outcomes identified. This approach ensures that the analysis maintains a qualitative focus, with the questionnaire providing another layer of validity and generalizability rather than forming an independent data set for major claims.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, from an empirical perspective, it illustrates the low level of golf participation among residents in two of Europe's leading golf tourism destinations. Secondly, it identifies the factors that have supported and continue to support this status quo. Thirdly, it focuses on the interaction between individuals and their context, as well as the facilitators and constraints of participation theory. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the body of knowledge about more sustainable practices for local communities.

After the introduction, section two of this paper provides a contextual overview of the current situation in the Algarve and Andalusia. Sections three and four present the theoretical framework and the theories that underpin this research. Section five presents the findings, followed by a discussion of the conclusions and limitations.

2. Portugal and Spain as Golf Destinations

The growth in golf tourism has led to an increase in infrastructure in host destinations, allowing them to diversify their tourist offerings and break the seasonality characteristic of the tourism sector (Garau-Vadell & Borja-Solé, 2008; Completo & Gustavo, 2014). The overall revenue from golf tourism is not limited to the income received by facilities dedicated to this sport; value is also added to the entire tourist offer necessary for golf, including accommodation, catering services, transportation, and income from complementary activities in the destination. Golf tourists spend more on average at the destination than conventional tourists (Madrigal & Lara, 2019), which is crucial for Spain and Portugal, leaders in golf tourism in Southern Europe (López-Bonilla et al., 2020).

Portugal is making continuous efforts to brand golf tourism as a fundamental and strategic axis within its economic policy (Madrigal & Lara, 2019). Golf tourism has been established in the Algarve, located in the southernmost region of the country, and has been recognized for its significant economic impact for a long time (Correia et al., 2006; Portugal et al., 2020). As a golf destination, the Algarve stands out for the high quality of its facilities and has been recognized by the International Association of Golf Operators (IAGTO) and by specialized golf magazines as one of the best destinations in the world (Portugal et al., 2020). In 2025, its offer comprises over 40 golf courses.

The primary destination for golf tourism in Spain is Andalusia, situated in the south of the country, which boasts 105 golf courses. In 2017, it was recognized as the Best European Destination for promoting the golf segment by IAGTO, due to the quality of its facilities and services (Official Tourism Website of Andalusia, 2019). Within this region lies the Costa del Sol, a well-established golfing destination in Europe also known as the Costa del Golf. It currently holds 78 golf courses (Ministerio de Industria y Turismo,

n.d.). It is home to some of Europe's most renowned courses, such as Valderrama (Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism, 2023). The region also offers a variety of golf courses categorised by level. Most golf courses offer green fee packages that are more affordable for locals (Royal Andalusian Golf Federation, 2023). In contrast to the Algarve, which has no public facilities, apart from Academies or Cliniques provided by the private golf courses, Andalusia also has three public golf courses (two 9-hole courses operated by the Andalusian government and one 18-hole municipal course) and two public schools (Royal Spanish Golf Federation, 2023).

Within Andalusia, the Costa del Sol is the destination that most closely resembles the Algarve in terms of its offer and price structure. It is noteworthy that the supply of golf facilities in both countries has grown in response to the growing demand for this niche tourism and the increasing number of players coming from Central and Northern Europe. By contrast, there are very few golf players from Portugal and Spain. Of the 4.7 million registered golfers in Europe, 85% are concentrated in the top ten markets, most of which are located in Western Europe (R&A, 2025). Participation in the sport can be measured by the ratio of players to population in each country. The percentage of golfers in relation to the population in the countries that comprise the main European golfing market. Spain (0.63%) and Portugal (0.17%) have the lowest number of golfers per capita compared to other European countries, such as Sweden (5.33%) or Scotland (3.83%), indicating the relatively low popularity of the sport in these countries (see The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Report June 2025).

Consequently, exploring individuals' own narratives about their relationship with and trajectory in golf, and highlighting the factors that contribute to a lack of interest from residents in both regions, is a first step towards possibly bringing residents closer to the greens.

3. Perceptions of Golf

The view that golf courses and clubhouses have long served as spaces where men of similar social standing gather in a homosocial setting - maintained through exclusive costs and membership policies (Vamplew, 2010) - has endured over the centuries. The news article cited in the introduction to this paper echoes this perspective. Among research carried out, it is possible to highlight studies focusing on the low participation in golf among women (McGinnis & Gentry, 2006; Reis & Correia, 2016), and, more recently, among young generations (Portugal et al., 2020) as well as the sport's current image as a health sport from (non-) golfers' perspectives (Huth & Breitbarth, 2020). Portugal, Carmo and Correia (2020) describe the Portuguese Golf Federation's endeavor to promote activities among schoolchildren, which, of course, impacts their interest and motivation to practice this sport. Other studies have also focused on millennials, as well as the overall decline in participation, highlighting the amount of time needed to play and the resulting lack of leisure time, in both genders (McGinnis et al., 2021). However, McGinnis et al.'s (2021) research was conducted in the United States, where traditional male participation has been declining over the past decade. The differing perceptions of golf between golfers and non-golfers may be another reason for the low participation in this sport (Neo, 2010; Huth & Breitbarth, 2020). Considering a longer life expectancy, a greater desire for open-air activities, such as long walks, and a better connection with nature, new approaches could be presented to communities, as golf offers all these benefits. Thus, Huth and Breitbarth (2020), focusing on the German context, follow the recent trend to position golf as a health-promoting sport. However, their study did not reach a positive conclusion, especially among non-golfers, who do not perceive golf as a sport for health.

4. Affordance Theory

Affordance theory focuses on the relationship between individuals and their environments, examining how the physical environment enables specific activities. Drawing on Gibson's (1979) environmental psychology, the theory is applied across various disciplines (Buckley, 2019). Affordances are shaped by both the environment's physical traits and the inhabitants' perceptions (Gibson, 1979), enabling people to interact with the world through their activities and skills (Ingold, 2018).

Therefore, this study assumes that the activity of playing golf involves potential actions within a spatial, material, and social-cultural context that either constrain or enable behaviours, within which individuals encounter and interact with their own capabilities and intentions (Kaaristo et al., 2025).

In this context, affordances are relational and context-dependent. They are neither specific attributes of the environment nor of the perceiving human. Accordingly, integral to affordance theory is an understanding of the role of perception, behaviour, and cognition in how organisms relate to environments (Kaaristo et al., 2025). Affordance theory focuses on how encounters with things, places, and landscapes can generate a range of affective and imaginative experiences and inspire practices that develop over time or are enacted in situ and in the moment (Kaaristo et al., 2025). Affordances are interconnected with shared, socio-culturally regulated practices, habits, and beliefs (Kiverstein, 2015). As the affordances framework integrates theoretical analyses of freedoms and constraints (Buckley, 2020), the next section details these concepts.

5. Facilitators and Constraints

5.1 The three-dimensional factors

Several studies on leisure have increasingly relied on affordance theory to report on perceived facilitators and constraints (Buckly & Akhoundogli, 2020). Expanding upon this framework, it is essential to consider that decision-making is often influenced by socio-cultural or life contexts (Portugal et al., 2020), particularly when decisions involve tourism or leisure (Woodside et al., 2005). Building on this, the present study adopts the three-dimensional framework comprising intrapersonal (individual), interpersonal (social), and structural dimensions (environmental) (Crawford et al., 1991; Godbey et al., 2010).

The intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural dimensions perform as facilitators (Raymore, 2002) or constraints (Jackson, 2005), being facilitators the ones that encourage participation in an activity, whereas constraints inhibit it, since these are factors perceived or experienced by individuals as limiting a preference for an activity or inhibiting participation (Jackson et al., 1993). The authors argue that the theory has evolved to the extent that constraints are not merely barriers to participation; rather, they are interrelated with other variables and lead to lower participation in an activity. The relationship between constraints and the behavioural aspects of participation – such as frequency of participation, preferences for specific activities, and loyalty and specialisation in recreational activities – has been widely studied by authors such as McGinnis et al. (2021), Portugal et al. (2020), and others.

The intrapersonal (I love/hate sports), interpersonal (I play golf because my friends and family also play), and structural (I play because there is a golf course near my home) are categorised within the three-dimensional theory. The intrapersonal category stems from an individual's beliefs, past experiences, and personal history, which shape their motivations and personality. Intrapersonal limitations are perceived internally and directly related to an individual's psychological factors (Funk & Brunn, 2007; Alexandris et al., 2002). It has been proposed and empirically verified that intrapersonal limitations are the most important factor in deciding whether to participate in leisure activities (Alexandris et al., 2011; Portugal et al., 2020).

Interpersonal factors encompass an individual's relationships with their family, friends, colleagues, peer group, reference groups, strangers, and opinion leaders/market mavens (Raymore, 2002; Reis & Correia, 2013), reflecting their social background. Very often, interpersonal limitations result from social interaction and the individual's inability to find partners to participate in activities.

The structural are external and contextual factors that relate to socioeconomic status, geographical and political conditions, institutions, infrastructures, time, money, gender, and race (Raymore, 2002), availability and resources that enable the individuals' willingness to engage in certain events or not (Crawford et al., 1991; Funk & Brunn, 2007; Godbey et al., 2010; Reis & Correia, 2014; Portugal et al., 2020).

This framework has been widely used in tourism research (Carroll & Alexandris, 1997; Palen et al., 2010; Reis & Correia, 2014; Crossman et al., 2024) as it helps to identify the reasons for low participation (McGinnis et al., 2021), enabling the adoption of strategies to address this issue (McGinnis & Gentry, 2006;

Reis et al., 2016). Reis and Correia (2013) created a comprehensive map of the factors highlighted in the literature, which serves as a reference for the present study, details of which are provided below.

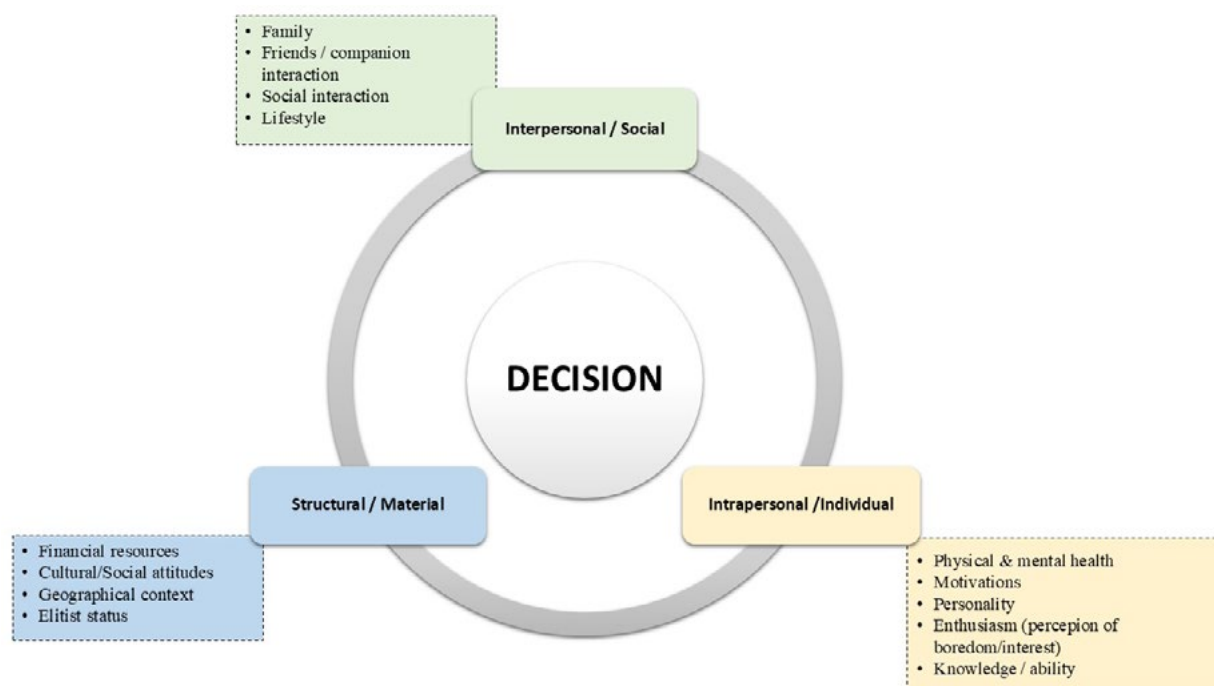
5.2 Facilitators and Constraints

The three dimensions of factors are not static, meaning that the same factor can incorporate more than one dimension (Godbey et al., 2010), and can either encourage or hinder participation. For instance, the factor ‘friends’ (interpersonal) can facilitate participation in golf, but becomes a constraint if golf is not played. Indeed, Raymore (2002) argues that ‘constraints and facilitators are not always polar opposites [...] suggesting that the absence of constraints does not necessarily facilitate participation’ (Raymore, 2002, p. 40).

This study adopts the facilitators/constraints framework to propose a comprehensive model that synthesises the key perspectives identified in the literature (Figure 1). The model aims to capture the individual, social, and material factors that shape how individuals perceive and respond to the opportunities - or affordances - associated with golf participation. This approach is essential for understanding the behaviours of both participants (interviewees) and non-participants (questionnaire respondents) within the golfing contexts of Andalusia/Costa del Sol in Spain and Portugal.

Figure 1 illustrates the various factors identified for each dimension. Intrapersonal factors to consider include personality, childhood, past experiences, particular life experiences, ability, knowledge, personal fears, motivation, preference for another sport, personal skills, lack of ability and a sense of failure (Reis & Correia, 2013), among others. The following are listed under interpersonal factors: family incentives; interaction with friends and companions; societal expectations and images; lifestyle factors; professional contexts; difficulties in finding a partner to participate with; and negative cultural and social attitudes and images, among others (Reis & Correia, 2013). Finally, structural factors include financial resources, economic conditions, time pressure, geographic location, socio-demographics, course policies, infrastructure, and a lack of facilities (Reis & Correia, 2013).

Figure 1. Facilitators and Constraints for the Decision Process



Source: Adapted from Reis and Correia (2013).

6. Research Design

The data presented in this study are based on a set of six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with golf players and a questionnaire developed from the interview outputs applied to non-players.

The aim of this study is twofold: first, to determine the facilitators and constraints that influence professional and amateur golf players; and, consequently, to use the interview data to design a questionnaire. Second, to determine in light of affordance theory the facilitators and constraints that influence non-golf players.

This is primarily a qualitative descriptive study. This method enables the identification of the most significant conditions or processes within our three-dimensional theoretical model. Additionally, this method allows for a flexible approach. One of the key advantages of conducting interviews is the depth and richness of the data they generate in a given area of research. They are designed to produce narratives that focus on fairly specific research objectives (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Within the three-dimensional framework, the present study aimed to understand the freedoms and constraints imposed on the interviewees' golf practice by their individual, social, and material circumstances. This included analysing how the participants identify with the sport and how they perceive others' identification with it. Additionally, the interview data provided sufficient textual information to be codified within the theoretical frameworks of the three-dimensional model and affordance theory, forming the basis for the design of the questionnaire.

To guarantee the trustworthiness of the qualitative data derived from the interviews, the criteria of credibility, confirmability, and transferability were systematically considered. Credibility was established through careful transcription (and subsequent translation of the illustrative excerpts presented below), several readings, coding of the same data passage by at least three researchers, and the use of verbatim quotations to precisely represent the participants' perspectives. The researchers kept a record of analytical decisions to minimise researcher bias and to ensure the confirmability of the findings. By describing the research context, participants, and procedures (see section 6.1), readers can assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Together, these strategies enhanced the study's overall trustworthiness and rigour.

Nevertheless, the interviews present disadvantages, as they adopt a subjective epistemological approach, and their critics raise questions about the "reliability and validity" of the material (Jennings, 2010, p. 175). Therefore, to validate the interpretation of the interviews, and to test if the interpretations of the authors are exactly what the interviewees state in the interviews, plus deriving from the theories that frame this study, and the statements of the six semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire was built comprising the dimensions and constraints and facilitators highlighted in the literature and validated by the interviewees.

If the initial six interviews identified key themes from the literature that constrain or facilitate the practice of the sport, the questionnaire survey was crucial to confirm why, in fact, the "local communities don't walk the greens", by collecting data directly from the population who could practice the sport and does not do so. The careful coding of the interview data by three researchers, according to the three-dimensional model and the subsequent design of the questionnaire based on those codes, ensured that the study would capture the actual facilitators and constraints within the material and social-cultural aspects, i.e., affordances under study, aligning the research design and tools with the research aims. The questionnaire was based on the key themes identified in Reis and Correia's (2013) map of factors derived from the literature and interview data. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first with 22 questions related to the factors that may act as facilitators or constraints, with a concordance scale of five points (ranging from 'strongly disagree' (=1) to 'strongly agree' (=4) and 5 = 'don't know / no answer'). The second part comprised a set of six questions to build a socio-demographic profile of the participants (age, gender, place of residence, profession, golf practice), and one last open-ended question for participants to define golf in their own words. The questionnaire, made available in Portuguese and Spanish, was applied via a snowball sampling technique using LimeSurvey software (between February and March 23) and was codified with Excel and SPSS. The questionnaire was approved by the University [of researchers] data protection officer, and it included a section on the privacy policy of this institution and authorization for the

collection and analysis of data for the purpose of the study. Its objective was to understand individuals' self-reported perceptions of the game and what would motivate them to engage in playing golf, categorized by the dimensions or factors described above. A pilot test involving ten participants was conducted, revealing the need for minor adjustments to the scale items.

6.1 Interview Participants

Participants were chosen by purposeful sampling. The interviewees, comprising five men and one woman, provided extensive information about their life trajectory as golf players: one golf professional (António, hc1.2), one municipal golf course manager (Filipe, hc 6), two regular players (Dolores and Eduardo, hc 7.9 and 17.8) and two amateur players (Bernardo and Carlos, hc 36). Since there are no municipal golf courses in the Algarve, it was essential to solicit the manager's opinion to assess the course's performance. The golf professional works for a company that owns five of the best golf courses in the Algarve, and he manages one of them. The two golfers play regularly every week/weekend, and the two amateurs also play on a consistent basis, but not so often. Table 1 details the interviewees' profiles.

Table 1. Profile of Interview Participants

Participant (aliases used)	Age	Gender	Country	Handicap (hc)	Occupation	Initial Experience/Learning
António	45	Male	Portugal	1.2	Golf Manager in the Algarve	Golf Clinique near his house
Bernardo	18	Male	Portugal	36	Student	Grand Father
Carlos	47	Male	Portugal	36	Teacher	Golf Clinique in Algarve; Uncle in Lisbon; now plays with 2 sons (8 and 12)
Dolores	51	Female	Spain	7.9	An architect in Granada, but plays in Almeria	Family, since 12 years old; Group of 8/10 friends
Eduardo	55	Male	Spain	17.8	Family business	Brother and cousins
Filipe	52	Male	Spain	6	Managing director of Municipal Course	A friend who worked at a golf course

Source: Survey's Data

The interviews were conducted in colloquial Portuguese or Spanish and subsequently translated into English. The interview guideline was composed of questions concerning demographics and background, participation and habits such as frequency, engagement, and practical aspects of the interviewee's golf activity, social influences and preferences, such as role of the interviewee's social network - family, friends, and acquaintances - in their participation, as well as their preferred playing company, and finally, perception and accessibility, e.g., views on the social and economic nature of golf, its accessibility, and the barriers to participation.

The interviews took place at the clubhouse or at a location of their choice; two were conducted via Zoom. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours. All interviews were recorded, and the verbatim transcripts were translated into English, becoming the object of interpretative and comparative analyses. Participants received information about the purpose and procedure of data collection when they were asked to participate. Informed consent was obtained in oral form at the beginning of the conversation. The right to refuse answers to inconvenient questions and the anonymity of data were assured.

6.2 Questionnaire Respondents

6.2.1 Brief profile of the questionnaire participants

The majority of respondents were Portuguese, comprising 63.1% of the sample, while Spanish respondents constituted 36.9%. This distribution ensures a fairly balanced representation of both nationalities,

allowing for a comparative analysis of cultural influences on perceptions towards golf participation. The gender distribution among the respondents reflects a nearly equal split, with 44.8% identifying as male and 55.2% identifying as female (Table 2).

Table 2. Profile of Respondents (N = 306)

Variable	Profile	
Nationality	Portuguese	63,1%
	Spanish	36,9%
Gender	Male	44,8%
	Female	55,2%
Age	Mean	21,3
	Median	36
	Mode	18
	Minimum	14
	Maximum	99
Practice of golf	Never tried	59,2%
	Tried once or twice	29%
	Practice once in a while	7,9%
	Other & no answer	4%

Source: Survey's Data

The age distribution within the sample (Tables 2 and 3) is characterized by a mean age of 21.3 years. The median age stands at 36, indicating a potential presence of outliers that skew the distribution. The mode, representing the most frequently occurring age, is 18. The age range spans from a minimum of 18 years to a maximum of 89 years, providing a broad spectrum for assessing attitudes towards golf across different life stages. The age distribution reveals a diverse representation, with a substantial portion of respondents falling within the 18-29 age group, making up the largest segment at 43%. This reveals a significant presence of younger individuals in the sample, offering potential insights into the attitudes and preferences of the younger demographic regarding golf participation. The 30-49 age group, comprising 27% of the sample, reflects a substantial but comparatively smaller segment. This group's perspectives bridge the gap between the younger and older cohorts, providing insights into a transitional phase of life. The ≥ 50 age group, accounting for 20% of the sample, indicates a notable presence of older individuals. Their perspectives display long-term trends, potential barriers, and facilitators to golf participation among the more mature demographic. Table 3 illustrates the age distribution.

Table 3. Age of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-29	133	43
30-49	82	27
≥ 50	91	20
Total	306	100

Source: Survey's Data

6.2.2 *The practice of golf*

Exploring the respondents' engagement with golf, the data reveal that a substantial portion of the sample, 59.2%, has never tried golf; those who have tried once or twice account for 29%, while 7.9% practice golf once in a while, whereas 4% either provided other responses or did not answer, as Table 2 summarizes.

7. Findings

The following section focuses primarily on the interview results. The data is organised according to the three dimensions. This is followed by the e analysis of the questionnaire results, which support and validate the qualitative findings.

7.1 Interviews

The data were analysed using the constant comparative method outlined by Creswell and Poth (2017), by which the researcher simultaneously codes and analyses data in order to develop concepts, and then “refines the concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent explanatory model.” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 126).

The data analysis followed a five-step process adapted from McCracken (1988), which included: (a) preparing the interview transcripts; (b) reading each transcript in-depth; (c) generating general themes supported by direct quotes; (d) comparing themes across transcripts to extract salient excerpts and define sub-themes; and (e) interpreting the general and sub-themes. To ensure rigor, three researchers independently reviewed each transcript. Any minor discrepancies identified were resolved through discussion to achieve full consensus.

The researchers independently coded the interview responses using the three-dimensional analytical framework (see Figure 1) and engaged in an iterative process of homogenization to ensure consistency and reliability in the coding scheme. For instance, a statement such as “At the beginning, when you take lessons and you need a membership club and you need a lot of money, golf is a little expensive” was classified under the structural or material dimension, within the financial resources factor. The extracts were translated while remaining as close as possible to the original wording, which sometimes results in an odd reading in English.

7.1.1 *Intrapersonal factors*

Golf as a source of mental and emotional well-being

A primary theme that emerges from the interviews is the significant role golf plays in promoting mental and emotional well-being. Participants explicitly describe the activity's setting as conducive to mental peace and introspection. The environment is “very quiet, very peaceful, then your problems are forgotten, it's just you or you with your mates playing, you are there, listening to the birds, the wind, the crickets, all that is very attractive to me, you forget everything” (Bernardo).

The benefits are holistic, as it is considered “very good for your heart and your mind [...] in a beautiful scenery” (Carlos). This introspective quality is further emphasized by the sport's nature as being “not as intensive as other sports, you can be more thoughtful, calmer, more introspective, in a state of mind, you talk to yourself or with others” (Bernardo). As respondent Dolores clearly states: “I relax playing golf, I go quietly enjoying the company, the course, and you escape from everyday life. [...] you get physically fit and there are also older people who find it helps them to be active, to be with their friends, to stop thinking about things.”

Yet another participant highlights a different benefit: “and one thing that seems tremendous to me is the longevity with which this sport can be practiced. I am over 50 years old, what sport do you think I can practice? Some people say that they go out cycling, but I ask them, how long will you be able to go cycling, play soccer, and tennis?” (Filipe)

Intrinsic motivation and early life influence

The initial attraction to the sport is often tied to an appreciation for the natural setting, which provides a deep, intrinsic reward: "I really like to look at the golf course, there used to be rabbits, birds, fish, and a lot of things that give me a lot of pleasure" (Bernardo). This is combined with the specific, simple pleasures of participation: "I like to walk in the golf course, the beautiful environment and hitting the ball" (Carlos). The ease of access and enjoyment also contribute to this motivation, as "the course is easy to enjoy" (António). "It adapts to any age, you can play very young, very old. When I started there was a deaf man who went every afternoon to play, it doesn't matter how busy your life is, how old you are or how bad you are, you can always go and enjoy the course, go for a walk, watch the birds" (Dolores).

The introduction to the sport during childhood is cited as a key enabler. Both Filipe and António recall a defining moment of early access: "One summer, when I was 11 years old, there was a golf Clinique in Vilamoura, a bus picked us up. I tried it and I met other friends who played, so I talked to my family, and I started that summer, it was a practically free school with the support of the golf courses" (António). "We were practicing, and I fell in love with golf, and we asked him [course manager] what we had to do to start playing golf. [...] That same summer I did my golf course and in September I got my license. From that moment I was hooked on golf" (Filipe). This highlights how accessible early exposure can cement long-term engagement.

The barrier of skill and the role of frustration

The most significant intrapersonal barrier identified is the challenge of the learning curve, which directly impacts an individual's sense of competence and risk of drop-out: "I think the level of emotional satisfaction is very important. At the beginning, when you start playing, it's difficult, but suddenly contact comes and the ball starts to roll, and that gives you a lot of satisfaction" (Eduardo).

Participants acknowledge that the activity requires some degree of initial success to prevent discouragement. For Bernardo, ability is a prerequisite for continued interest: "If I was really bad, I wouldn't want to play. I wouldn't. You need a bit of skill. If you swing and you don't hit the ball, it makes you a bit bored."

Golf is recognized as having a "high learning curve" (Bernardo), where the initial difficulty (doing "the swing in the air") can lead to significant frustration. The data strongly suggest that overcoming this barrier depends on external support and patience. Bernardo reflected on how critical familial support was in his early days: "If my grandfather hadn't been there...Yes, I would have been frustrated, why am I going to do this if I can do something else that I can enjoy more...". The presence of a supportive figure mitigated the internal sense of failure. However, another view suggests that persistence outweighs innate talent: "You need a lot of practice and a lot of patience, you don't need any skills" (Carlos). Filipe, who manages a golf course, tries to overcome this obstacle: "We provide [beginners] with the equipment, we leave the clubs with them throughout the beginners' course, and they can come and practice whenever they want at no cost to them. We try to make it easy for them".

7.1.2 Social or interpersonal factors

The gateway role of family and socialisation

The most powerful initial factor identified is the influence of family and/or friends' incentive, suggesting that the activity is largely introduced through close relatives. For many participants, the activity is not something they have discovered spontaneously, but rather a legacy or pre-existing fixture in their family network.

Family members serve as the primary initiators and companions. Participants were introduced to the sport by their grandfather, uncle, or because of pre-existing family engagement. António noted "My family plays golf and my house was 5 km from golf courses", highlighting both social and physical proximity (structural) as factors. The grandfather-grandchild relationship is particularly prominent, where the activity was a vehicle for connection: "I used to play with my grandfather, who is the one who introduced me to golf [...] I liked it and we played and had fun together, to play golf was a pretext to be with each other"

(Bernardo). Another interviewee has good reasons to play: "My mother, my father, my three brothers, one of my sisters-in-law, and my 6 nephews and nieces. Two aunts, two uncles, and two cousins play. We are about 20 people playing in the family, sometimes we do family tournaments" (Dolores).

Companion interaction and the social function of golf

Once initiated, the activity is overwhelmingly valued for the opportunities it provides for social interaction and companionship, suggesting a strong social function beyond the mere physical pursuit. Participants frequently describe the activity as "a very social sport". The nature of the game - with its inherent "pause time" - facilitates conversation: "You hit the ball and you walk to the ball and talk to your family or your friends" (Bernardo). For many, the main purpose is social enjoyment: "The player who just pushes the ball, to be with friends and have a good time" (António) or "the vast majority have started through a friend, have tried it and have seen how much fun it is. I think there is a lack of information about what golf is, how it works, its health benefits, and above all, how much fun it is" (Filipe). This social need is so strong that the inability to find a partner factor is identified as a barrier, as one participant stated, "it was difficult for me to play alone" (Bernardo).

One of the respondents brought up a gendered point of view: "Women take golf as a time with girlfriends...They go out to spend time with friends; they don't care about the handicap, as it is more like a social event for them [...] Men, even if they don't play a tournament, go out to play and compete with friends, even if it's just for a beer. However, women don't care, they play golf to be together, their main objective is not to compete as in the case of most men" (Filipe).

However, there is one contrasting view, showing that while preference is social, playing alone is possible: "I don't mind, I usually play alone" (Carlos); "I play with a group of 8,10 friends, half of them I knew before and others I made in golf. Having a group to play with encouraged me to continue playing, although I also like to play alone" (Eduardo). "I usually play with my nephews and nieces but I don't mind playing alone, I have been playing alone for many years" (Dolores).

Eduardo highlighted a new factor: "I made good professional relationships with some friends I met at golf, helpful for work. At the end of the day, you make friends from different professions, and if you need something...".

Lifestyle and socio-cultural barriers

While golf is a source of connection, participation is often constrained by lifestyle factors and domestic situations, and it is also challenged by external cultural and social attitudes.

Lifestyle constraints related to work and family schedules present a major practical barrier. Golf often requires playing "very early, at 8 o'clock in the morning" (Bernardo), which conflicts with work or class schedules, leading to temporary cessation: "if I have classes or I have to work, I can't play" (Bernardo). Similarly, a spouse's commitment to work and weekend sleep patterns can prevent joint participation, as one participant noted: "My wife doesn't play because she has a lot of work, and I usually go to play early in the weekends, while she is sleeping" (Carlos).

Cultural and social attitudes also act as constraints, particularly among younger cohorts. The sport suffers from a negative image or lack of popularity among peers, leading to disbelief and judgment: "I spoke to some friends and asked them what they thought of golf, and they were astonished, they looked at me with a face... who at our age plays golf? That's it, disbelief" (Bernardo). Eduardo states: "Some people think it's not a sport, associated with people who are a bit special. Non-players are skeptical, and this has been influenced by the image of overweight players, smokers. ... From the outside, it's not seen as a sport".

It is perceived as a niche activity: "I started when I was 12, and when I played golf, we looked like Martians, and on top of that, I was a girl. I have classmates who, when they went to university, didn't even say they played golf because they were looked at strangely" (Dolores).

Maturation as a temporary interruption

For adolescents, maturation and the associated life changes act as a strong, but often temporary, constraint on participation. The data suggest a common pattern of abandonment of the sport around the age of maturity, with participants often stopping, as "when they turn 18, they stop playing golf for many

reasons" (António). Crucially, the data suggests this interruption is not permanent, as individuals "tend to return to the sport as time goes by and they have a stable life" (António). Filipe, the other course manager being interviewed, confirms: "University age is bad...many go out to study and stop playing because they don't have a golf course to go to, they don't have their clubs, or they simply want to do another activity and then, when they enter the labour market, many come back". This highlights golf's endurance and enduring value despite life-stage interruptions.

7.1.3 Structural or material factors

Economic barriers: The cost of entry and participation

The most immediate and universally cited obstacle to engagement is financial constraints and economic factors, which severely limit accessibility for the general population, particularly youth.

Participants repeatedly emphasize the prohibitive cost, noting that the sport is "for young people, it is completely prohibitive" (Bernardo). This issue is intensified in specific regions, such as the Algarve, where courses are perceived as better but "more expensive than the rest of the country" (Bernardo). The barrier is multi-faceted, encompassing initial expenses: "At the beginning, when you take lessons and you need a membership club and you need a lot of money, golf is a little expensive. When you start out, it's a sport that you need a lot of money for equipment and for learning" (Carlos).

Yet, other opinions emerge: "In the past, it was understood as an elitist sport, associated with economic level or social class. Today, you can play for a reasonable price. You can also play with a lot of money or with less money, as there is a significant second-hand market and a range of public and private courses with affordable prices (Eduardo). Dolores speaks about the "myth" of being too costly, as "everyone is willing to pay between €60 and €100 a month for a gym they don't go to. It's not for posh people, it's not for older people, and it's not expensive. There are people who cycle and spend more on their bikes than on playing golf. And cycling is not considered a posh sport, nor is it an expensive one. At the Federation level, a lot more could be done to promote it" (Dolores).

This high cost reinforces a widespread negative cultural and social attitude that "golf is only for the rich" and "a sport of the rich, very elitist" (António). Although some participants mention more accessible courses and argue against the elitist tag, the prevailing public mentality that the sport is solely for the wealthy remains a significant non-monetary barrier. Filipe states peremptorily: "It's for rich people and it's for old people. You need to eliminate those two aspects that were true years ago but are no longer true today. For example, thanks to facilities like the one I manage, which is a public course, we offer popular prices. When people come here, they realize that they spend the same on golf as they do on any other sport".

Time commitment: A double-edged constraint

Time emerges as a dual-natured factor: a necessary barrier to entry but also the ultimate reward for established players. "On holidays, I play almost every day. However, working every day makes it difficult to play golf; some golf courses have a practice area with floodlights for nighttime play [...] but I don't have any nearby, there are none in Granada and none in Almeria either. This would make it easier for many people who work during the week" (Dolores).

The activity demands a significant time-pressure commitment to achieve competence. Participants note that to start playing on a course, it "takes a long time... It is necessary to dedicate at least six months to start playing" (António). This substantial requirement leads to attrition, as people "know you need a long time to learn, and normally they leave" (Carlos). Furthermore, the actual time required to play a full round (18 holes) is considerable: "If it were the 18 holes, it would be 4 to 5 hours; it is a game that takes a long time" (Bernardo). But solutions are being met: "Alternatives are already being sought, for example, in the USA, there are proposals to make the game in blocks of 6 holes and tournaments, for example, of 12 holes" (Filipe).

Paradoxically, this time commitment is highly valued by regular players. The lengthy period spent on the course is celebrated as the "best" aspect: "The time spent disconnected from the world, 4 or 5 hours without a phone and in connection with nature... Time is the disadvantage, but it is also what the player values most" (António). Strategies to mitigate the time barrier include playing shorter rounds, such as "9

holes" (Bernardo) or using smaller "city" courses where one can play in "one hour" (Carlos). As Filipe says: "It's funny because I think it's an advantage. If there is something I enjoy doing in my free time that brings me great satisfaction, and if it's 5 hours instead of 2, I think that's great".

Socio-geographic and infrastructural context

The geographical location, existing course policies, and conduciveness also dictate accessibility and participation, particularly in Portugal. A significant cultural and social attitude barrier is the perception that the activity is not Portuguese but a foreign import, historically "brought by the English" and associated with "Nordic countries" (Bernardo). This is exacerbated by the perception that the activity in Portugal is primarily "focused on tourism" with most courses being "for English or Irish tourists". This foreign association contributes to a "barrier" and the feeling that "it is not for us" (Bernardo).

The proximity of facilities is a pragmatic concern. Good access to a course that is "easy to get to" (Carlos) is important, especially for those playing less frequently. For those without a car, challenges like "carrying my clubs" to a course accessible by bus remain a hurdle (Bernardo). Carlos highlights the importance of proximity: "It is important to have a golf course nearby. I play once a week; it is important to have good access to the golf course, which is easy to get to. In the city, there is one that you can reach in 10 minutes by car, although it is small, it is comfortable to go to and play".

In terms of infrastructure and policies, there is a notable lack of facilities in schools: "In my schools, none of them had golf" (Bernardo). However, there are initiatives to offset the economic barrier, such as programs that visit schools to offer introductory sessions, and courses that provide equipment and supplies for children until they are twenty (António).

7.2 Questionnaire Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Table 4 presents the frequencies and descriptive measures for the 20 items, organised by facilitators and constraints within the three dimensions of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors that influence non-players' engagement in golf. Item 15 ('I play golf because members of my family also play') and item 21 ('I play golf because I like nature') were discarded because our final sample of respondents did not play golf. The instrument's validity was supported by the KMO (0.67) and a statistically significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$). After removing five items with communalities below 0.50, an exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis as the extraction method with Varimax rotation yielded five factors, each with an eigenvalue greater than 1, accounting for 62% of the total variance. Factor reliability was indicated by Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.44 to 0.69, consistent with values reported in similar studies (e.g., alpha = 0.42–0.55 in Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). Although the instrument was theoretically structured into three dimensions, the analysis revealed a slightly different factor structure, which will be explored in detail in a subsequent study.

An overall analysis of the results suggests that the greatest constraints on playing golf are not structural in nature, but rather individual or social. On an intrapersonal level, the main constraint identified is the preference for other sports. This perception is particularly relevant given that the respondents are young (average age 21), tending to prefer more dynamic activities and to associate golf with a physically unstimulating practice. However, the majority of respondents recognise the positive impacts of golf on mental health (63%) and physical health (68%), indicating awareness of its benefits as a wellness practice.

Regarding the interpersonal dimension, the main constraint is that golf is not practised among the respondents' circle of friends, a situation reported by 33% of the sample. This aspect is particularly relevant among younger age groups, where leisure choices tend to be greatly influenced by peer groups. Nevertheless, 63% of respondents recognise that golf facilitates meeting new people, which suggests the sport's potential as a space for socialisation among younger age groups.

As for structural constraints, although less significant than the others, the idea that golf is a sport for wealthy people stands out (64%). However, only 64% of respondents consider golf to be a very expensive sport, which, combined with 59% who believe some people play only for status, suggests that the con-

straint is more associated with an elitist perception of the sport than with the actual costs of playing it. Overall, these results suggest there is potential to attract this age group through communication strategies that clarify costs and dispel the sport's elitist image.

Table 4. Frequencies for the 20 items organised by the three dimensions and facilitators, and constraints, and percentage of responses for totally agree/partially agree

		Aver.	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.	Totally agree / Partially agree %
INTRAPERSONAL						
Constraints	Q3. You need to be skilled to play golf	3,05	3	4	1,35	47%
	Q8. I think golf is a very boring activity	2,60	2	2	1,36	30%
	Q10. I prefer to play other sports	4,08	4	5	1,10	75%
Facilitators	Q6. I would like to try to play golf	3,25	4	4	1,45	57%
	Q16. Golf has a positive impact on our mental health	3,76	4	4	1,10	63%
	Q22. Golf has a positive impact on our physical health	3,79	4	4	1,17	68%
INTERPERSONAL						
Constraints	Q1. It is very difficult to find people to play with	3,10	3	3	1,11	34%
	Q20. I don't play golf because none of my friends do	2,61	2	1	1,48	33%
Facilitators	Q7. I would like to play golf if I had company to play with	2,87	3	4	1,45	44%
	Q18. Playing golf helps us meet other people	3,61	4	4	1,12	63%
STRUCTURAL						
Constraints	Q2. Golf is for rich people	3,55	4	4	1,29	64%
	Q4. A round of golf takes a long time to play	3,64	4	4	1,16	59%
	Q14. Golf is a very expensive activity	3,78	4	4	1,07	64%
Facilitators	Q5. A round of golf takes less time than a game of tennis	2,80	3	3	1,14	26%
	Q13. I would play golf if there was a course close to home	2,47	2	1	1,34	29%
	Q17. Golf is not as expensive as riding (horses) or hunting	3,36	3	3	1,02	42%
Not constraints nor facilitators	Q9. Some people only play because of status	3,55	4	4	1,29	59%
	Q11. Golf is for older people	2,31	2	1	1,32	25%
	Q12. Golf has a positive image amongst young people	2,59	2	2	1,18	27%
	Q19. The majority of golf players are British (English and Scottish)	3,15	3	3	1,24	41%

Source: Survey's Data

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in golf engagement between Portuguese and Spanish non-players. Table 5 only presents the variables that showed statistically significant differences at a 5% significance level.

Table 5. Significant t-test differences in golf engagement between Portuguese and Spanish non-players

Items	Independent t test					
	Portuguese		Spanish		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Q3. You need to be skilled to play golf	3,27	1,3	2,67	1,35	3,87	<0,001
Q6. I would like to try to play golf	3,46	1,4	2,9	1,49	3,26	0,001
Q12. Golf has a positive image amongst young people	2,73	1,15	2,36	1,2	2,69	0,007
Q13. I would play golf if there was a course close to home	2,59	1,34	2,26	1,32	2,1	0,036
Q16. Golf has a positive impact on our mental health	3,63	1,08	3,99	1,11	-2,82	0,005
Q17. Golf is not as expensive as riding (horses) or hunting	3,23	0,27	3,57	1,07	-2,88	0,004
Q19. The majority of golf players are British (English and Scottish)	3,38	1,13	2,77	1,32	4,12	<0,001

Source: Survey's Data

In terms of interpersonal aspects, the observed differences indicate that Spaniards are less willing to try playing golf than the Portuguese, probably because they place greater value on the required skill. Spaniards also believe more strongly in golf's positive impact on mental health.

As for structural issues, Spaniards seem more inclined to play when a course is nearby. Finally, regarding items that are neither constraints nor facilitators, Portuguese respondents have slightly more faith in golf's positive image among young people. Similarly, given that the Algarve is a popular destination for British tourists, it is not surprising that the Portuguese mainly associate golf with this nationality.

Deconstructing the image: lay definitions of the game

The results for the open-ended question, in which participants were asked to define golf in their own words (3 or 4 words), were categorised into 12 topics and organised according to relevant factors and dimensions (Table 5). Since some participants chose to write more extensive statements or more than 3 or 4 words, focusing on more than one aspect of golf, their occurrence was counted under each factor/question touched upon. Null answers such as "a ball, a club, and a hole" were excluded. A total of 387 occurrences were categorised. The intrapersonal /constraint dimension has the highest number of occurrences, followed by intrapersonal facilitators and structural facilitators. Interestingly, structural constraints such as the perception of golf as an expensive, elitist, and high-status sport did not seem particularly salient in this open-ended question.

Table 6. Describe the sport of golf in your own words (3 to 4 words)

Dimension	Factor	Sample extracts	Nr. occurrences
Interpersonal	facilitator	helps to socialize	6
	constraint	skills; difficult technique; testing your patience; concentration and focus boring; uninteresting; not challenging; non-attractive	65 53
Intrapersonal	facilitator	mental and physical health; nature; beautiful scenery; open air walking	51
		calming; relaxing; quiet	41
	constraint	I don't know the game; can't say; if I could, I'd play; I'd like to try	25
		spending many valuable resources; not sustainable	4
Structural	constraint	it's a luxury; expensive	37
		takes too much time	19
		good image; positive perception; elegant; passionate; interesting;	51
	facilitator	enjoyable; challenging; success; fantastic; classic; for everyone	
	neutral	to make contacts	3
Total nr. of occurrences			387

Source: Survey's Data

Aligning these results with the findings from the interviews can lead to a plethora of valuable guidelines for the golf managers and marketers to adopt strategies to attract new players to the game.

8. Discussion

The current study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the facilitators and constraints influencing golf participation by integrating the lived experiences of current players (qualitative data) with the perceptions of non-players (quantitative data). The synthesis of these findings reveals both alignment and contrast across the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural dimensions, offering crucial insights for the future development and marketing of the sport.

Intrapersonal factors: value recognition versus skill barrier

The intrapersonal dimension highlights a duality: while current players report golf as a significant source of mental and emotional well-being, this inherent value is largely recognised by non-players, with 63% acknowledging its positive impact on mental health, somewhat contradicting Huth & Breitbarth (2020) findings. This suggests that the core benefit of golf is broadly accepted across the population. However, despite this recognition and a substantial 57% willingness to try the sport, non-players face major intrapersonal constraints rooted in perceived competency. The most significant barriers identified were a preference for other sports (75%) and the perception of the required ability to play (47%). This aligns directly with the interview data from players, who noted that the barrier of skill and the role of frustration are significant early hurdles. This suggests that while non-players value the outcome (mental well-being), the perceived effort, difficulty, and fear of initial frustration are the primary psychological deterrents preventing them from trying. Addressing the skill barrier through accessible, low-pressure introductory formats is therefore crucial for converting latent interest (57% willing to try) into actual participation.

Interpersonal and social dynamics: the need for guided entry

Both data sets affirm that golf is fundamentally a social activity, but the mechanisms of entry differ. Players emphasised the gateway role of family and socialisation, as well as the importance of companion interaction for the game's social function. Non-players overwhelmingly echoed this need, with 44% expressing a desire to play if they had company, and almost two-thirds agreeing that golf helps to meet other people.

Despite this strong social facilitator, non-players cited the challenge of finding playing partners (34%) and the absence of friends in the golfing community (33%) as constraints, as already noted by Portugal et al. (2020). This creates a participation paradox: people want to play for the social element, but the lack of existing social ties prevents them from starting. The data strongly support the conclusion that the industry must clearly communicate the structured social opportunities available at golf clubs. By highlighting that the group of players is organised at the golf club—thereby eliminating the requirement to have a partner before arrival—golf clubs can effectively mitigate this crucial social entry barrier.

Structural factors: cost, time, and accessibility

The structural constraints, less prominent than the former two, represent the most aligned findings across both groups of participants – interviewees and questionnaire respondents. Players cited explicit economic barriers and the inherent time commitment as key constraints. This supports McGinnis et al.'s (2021) findings regarding the increasing lack of leisure time. Non-players mirrored these concerns, viewing golf as an exclusive sport for the wealthy (64%) and citing the perceived expense (64%) and time-consuming nature of rounds (59%) as major deterrents; see Portugal et al.'s (2020) similar findings.

While non-players show some resilience to the cost perception (e.g., 42% concede it is less expensive than horse riding), the overwhelming perception of exclusivity must be addressed. Additionally, the structural context of where to play is a relevant facilitator, as 29% of respondents expressed a willingness to play if a course were close to home. This, combined with the players' observation that maturation often acts as a temporary interruption due to life and career demands, underscores the necessity of proximity and the ability to play short, time-flexible rounds to overcome the established time constraint.

9. Conclusion

This study explored the affordances that golf practice could provide to residents, perceived by both golf players and non-players. It relied on a well-known and well-tested research design (Alexandris et al., 2002) for leisure and sports practice. However, it also introduced the less-explored feature of providing a detailed analysis of the qualitative data, highlighting the positive emotional attachment that the six interviewees have to the sport's practice, and comparing and contrasting the interviewees' perceptions and narratives with those of the questionnaire respondents. Additionally, it surveyed the less-explored population of non-golfers from two distinct counties.

The limitations of this study stem from the fact that the sample comprises only two regions, in Portugal and Spain, thereby limiting the scope of the context. However, this is one of the study's key strengths, as it provides a framework for understanding golf participation among the resident populations of these two major golf tourism destinations in southern Europe. As mentioned earlier, the main focus was on analysing qualitative interview data; therefore, a detailed discussion of comparisons between cohorts is not provided. Having said that, after applying the Mann-Whitney test to compare means for gender and nationality, no gender differences were found. However, as Table 5 illustrates, a few cross-cultural differences were observed between Portuguese and Spanish non-players. Due to space constraints, these findings, which are beyond the scope of this paper, will be presented in detail elsewhere.

As mentioned earlier, both Spain and Portugal offer excellent economic and environmental conditions for residents to play golf (Correia et al., 2006; Madrigal & Lara, 2019; Portugal et al., 2020). This study confirms what other studies have argued: first, there is a negative relationship between perception of constraints and sport participation (Carrol & Alexandris, 1997), and second, that the future appeal of golf hinges on mitigating the perceived barriers of skill, cost, and time (Completo & Gustavo, 2014; Portugal et al., 2020) while strategically capitalizing on the already acknowledged mental and health well-being benefits (Huth & Breitbarth, 2020) and the strong latent desire for social connection and trial. Based on Crawford et al. (1991) explicit propositions that individuals encounter and negotiate through intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints in a sequential manner, we find that even for non-players, this is true: the greatest constraints on playing golf are not structural in nature, but rather intra- or interpersonal.

While certain perceptions, such as golf being a status symbol (59%) or primarily for older individuals (25%), appear to be relatively neutral, the high barrier to entry based on skill and expense remains the primary focus area for industry strategy. The most effective interventions must simplify the entry process, clearly communicate available social structures, and provide accessible, time-efficient playing opportunities to capitalise on the 57% of non-players who are willing to try, viewing golf as a means to promote health and well-being.

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