Portrayals of Racial Minorities in the 2010 Issues of Golf Digest: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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The word golf evokes a frame which contains images, ideas, and thoughts that give a certain depiction of the game (Lakoff, 2004). When asked to think of golf, many people might imagine manicured fairways, perfectly raked sand traps, and terrifying water hazards. Others may include the perception that golf is a “rich White man’s sport” into their frame. What this frame fails to include, in many instances, are racial minorities, specifically Hispanics and African Americans. Despite the meteoric rise of Tiger Woods (a racial minority professional golfer whose father is of African American and Native American heritage) in the late 1990s into the first decade of the 2000s, these racial groups have historically been and are currently underrepresented in golf participation relative to their percentage of the American population (National Golf Foundation, 2010). Previously explored reasons for this underrepresentation have included, but are not limited to: lack of discretionary income, cultural preferences for other leisure activities, and access discrimination (Cunningham, 20011; Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Etizen & Sage, 2009; Mitchelson & Lazaro, 2004). However, currently there is little research into the specific role marketing might play in this underrepresentation of Hispanics and African Americans in golf. More specifically, not much, if any, research has conceptualized and explored this issue through the marketing mix elements or four P’s: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion.

Marketing can play an integral role in how consumers spend their income. According to the self-congruity theory, consumers are more likely to purchase, remain loyal to, and have favorable attitudes towards goods and services that are reflective or match their own self-image (Kwak & Kang, 2009).

An examination of each of the marketing mix elements could provide us greater insight into why racial minority groups continue to be underrepresented in golf. From a product standpoint, since the game of golf (at both the amateur and professional levels) has historically excluded and denied racial minorities access to participation (except as golf caddies) (Dawkins, 2003), the attributes one might assign to the game of golf is that it is primarily the domain of people of White or European ancestry. Moreover, although we have seen an increase in professional golfers from Asian backgrounds (particularly on the LPGA Tour) and several programs and initiatives (e.g., First Tee Program; PGA Tour Minority Internship Program) have been created to provide racial minorities access to golf participation opportunities and involvement at different levels, it could be argued that golf continues to be a sport that is predominantly for White people. From a price standpoint, access to the golf product has typically favored people who come from affluent backgrounds, and these people have traditionally been people from White families (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004).

The price tag or value placed on greens fees at public courses, initiation fees and membership dues at private country clubs, and golf clubs and other equipment (e.g., balls, shoes, clothes) might limit and inhibit the ability of people with less discretionary income from participating in sports like golf (National Golf Foundation, 2009; Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). From a place (distribution) standpoint, the physical location of certain golf courses as well as the policies related to who has playing privileges at these courses could speak to the underrepresentation of racial minorities in golf. As an example, some research has found that golf courses are located farther away from African Americans than Whites (Mitchelson and Lazaro, 2004). As such, racial minorities might have more travel time and costs to get to a golf course than Whites. In addition, although there are currently public golf courses, which are available to any paying customer, many give the impression of being exclusive, like country clubs. According to Mitchelson and Lazaro (2004), many public courses have dress code requirements that can include collared shirts, slacks, no t-shirts, and no denim pants. These requirements can create an environment that favors patrons who have the discretionary income and who prefer to dress in this manner.

Finally, from a promotion standpoint, the messages that are communicated about the product to consumers are integral to whether or not various consumer groups will relate to or identify with the product. Therefore, the role played by the sport media—which includes television, internet, radio, newspaper, and magazines outlets—in
conveying certain images and messages about the game of golf could be instrumental to whether or not racial minorities are involved in the game of golf as participants, spectators, or employees within organizations within the golf industry segment. Drawing from self-congruity theory, this paper seeks to analyze the potential role promotion plays in the underrepresentation of Hispanics and African Americans in golf. More specifically, in this study we seek to explore this issue by analyzing how Golf Digest, a popular golf specific magazine, portrays Hispanics and African Americans as golfers, and if these racial groups are underrepresented in Golf Digest articles and advertisements compared to their percentage of the American population.

Taking a similar methodological approach to the analysis of Golf Digest that Apostolis and Giles (2011) employed in their study of gender, we sought to conduct a critical discourse analysis of 11 of the 12 issues published in 2010 (the February edition was excluded due to its content largely focusing on golf equipment). With a circulation of 1.65 million, Golf Digest has a significant influence on how golf is viewed in North American society (Apostolis & Giles, 2011). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) concerns itself with relations of power and inequality in language (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). In CDA, the researcher looks for the historical, cultural, and political contexts that enable the legitimization of certain discourses and not others (Apostolis & Giles, 2011). The data we derive from our analysis of the articles and advertisements are being coded and interpreted to create overarching themes. To ensure reliability and trustworthiness of the data analysis process, the researchers will: (1) use multiple perspectives to analyze the data, (2) utilize peer review and debriefing, and (3) utilize double coding (Creswell, 2007; Boyatzis, 1998).

Based on our initial, preliminary analysis of the 11 issues, our findings reveal that: a) with the exception of a few professional golfers of color (e.g., Tiger Woods, Vijay Singh, Angel Cabrera, and Camilo Villegas), Hispanics and African Americans are rarely portrayed in articles or golf specific advertisements as players, instructors/teaching professionals, or opinion leaders, b) when non-professional golfers of color were the topic of an article, the story dealt with how golf saved their lives. For example, the Golf Saved My Life article in the April 2010 issue describes how Keith Anderson, an African American male, was able to go to college and escape the ghetto through golf, and c) when racial minorities were portrayed in pictures or images throughout the issues, they tended to be characterized in stereotypical terms. For example, the January issue, which featured Tiger Woods and Barack Obama on the cover, contained several caricatures of Woods and Obama in roles traditionally assigned to African Americans (e.g., playing basketball against each other). As we get into the heart of this study, we will continue to critically analyze the 11 issues and discuss the practical, theoretical, and future research implications this important research has in terms of marketing and sociocultural issues in the field of sport management.