

# **Augusta National Exclusionary Practices Shape the Way Society Perceives Golf**

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On my honor as a university student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Introduction**

Augusta National Golf Club, located in Augusta, Georgia is one of the most prestigious and exclusive courses in the world, exemplifying the complex and contradictory impacts of the golf industry. It is known for its Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) tournament, known as "The Masters." This is one of the biggest golf tournaments in the entirety of the country, so there are a lot of eyes on the PGA, specifically Augusta National, and is known for its deeply rooted history. To give context on the exclusivity of this golf club, there are generally around 300 members at any given time, and there is no application process to join, strictly by invitation. To add on the exclusivity of this club, once one is inducted into Augusta National, the "joining fee" is estimated to be anywhere from \$100,000 to \$300,000, while annual dues are approximately between \$30,000 to \$50,000 (Perry, 2024). While the perfected greens and iconic status portray an image of success, this facade masks the environmental and social strains it places on local communities. The club requires intensive maintenance, strains many natural resources, most notably water and land. It is estimated that Augusta National relies on more than one million gallons of water daily (McCord, 2011), and spans around 365-acres. The extensive water and land use disproportionately affects those who rely on shared natural resources. While Augusta National brings economic success and opportunities for others, it simultaneously exacerbates economic and physical hardships for others, deepening the divide between different social groups and socioeconomic perspectives catered towards golf courses as a whole.

This paper seeks to explore how Augusta National, alongside golf courses as a whole, continue to resist change and inclusivity, specifically catered towards African Americans and

women, and contributes to the divide between different socioeconomic classes and how they perceive these spaces. The first section of this paper, the literature review, will cover background information that is necessary to understand while exploring this topic. The history and traditions of golf, its exclusive nature, the natural resource it strains, and theoretical framework will be outlined in this section. Next, the methods section will showcase how the information on Augusta National, the PGA, and other datasets that were found and used to incorporate into this paper. In my analysis, you will find an in-depth analysis on how the exclusive nature of Augusta National has ruined common marginalized groups perception of golf and golf courses, as well as a breakdown on the differences between perception of those in different socioeconomic statuses using the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). The conclusion will provide concrete outlooks on the game of golf, what society should do in the future, and how others could build off this paper to conduct their own research.

## **Literature Review**

While the world we live in today is trending towards progress, the golf industry remains stubbornly resistant to change, clinging to tradition despite growing calls for sustainability and inclusivity. Golf is a game that prides itself on its history and tradition (Bartlett, 2000). While physical changes to golf such as different grass, new obstacles such as bunkers, watery holes, and mounds are constantly changing, the underlying progressive social issues move at a pace much slower. As noted by a senior golfer and journalist, “They like their historic, characterful clubhouse, they like the senior section’s jacket and tie lunches, they like bridge night on a Thursday, they like the draw system for the Saturday medal... They like how it is.” (Bisset, 2024). This deep-seated attachment to tradition creates a barrier to meaningful progress, leaving

many golf clubs and golfers reluctant to embrace social changes. While many golf clubs are pursuing to continue to see golf grow and flourish, golfers are hesitant to change, and content with how the game is already established (Bisset, 2024). The game's resistance to broader societal shifts underscores a cultural inertia that prioritizes familiarity over inclusivity and sustainability. It is also noted that "Augusta National and the Masters ignore environmental issues, including climate change, is as behind the times as it is predictable" (Blaustein, 2016).

As golf courses continue to expand and consume vast amounts of land, water, and resources, they not only strain the environment but also exacerbate housing shortages and land-use inquiries, prioritizing recreation for the few over essential needs for the many. The primary resources that golf courses use are: water and land. Augusta National, alone, relies on more than one million gallons of water daily (McCord, 2011). The club has also not made efforts to reduce the amount of water and toxic landscaping chemicals used to treat the 365-acre course (Blaustein, 2016). Golf courses do rely on artificial ponds and springs to irrigate their course, however city water or local rivers are still relied upon to keep the course green. On the other hand, the United States alone contains about two million acres of land reserved by golf courses. That's enough land for more than 200 million units of medium density housing, solving California's current housing crisis (Jack, 2022). Augusta National does contain philanthropic donations for its local communities. As noted by community leaders, Augusta National alongside its corporate partners donated a total of \$10 million to build a nonprofit community center known as "The Hub" and a new headquarters for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Augusta (Cline, 2020). They also donated \$5 million to Hurricane Helen relief (Colgan, 2024).

The deeply rooted history and traditions of golf have long upheld exclusive practices that have hindered the socioeconomic success and participation of many marginalized groups,

reinforcing barriers to accessibility, diversity, social progress, and exclusivity. To begin, private country clubs and golf courses have served as primary networking hubs for building and maintaining careers. Certain groups were denied access to these spaces until very recently. Augusta National took almost 60 years to induct their first African American man, Ron Townsend, in 1990 (Diaz, 2020). The first African American women were inducted in 2012, Condoleezza Rice and Darla Moore (Boyette, 2012). African Americans were also only allowed to be caddies for Caucasian golfers during tournaments from 1934 to 1982 (Graham, 2024). Certain groups were denied access to these spaces as seen in the history of golf, specifically, Augusta National. The PGA (Professional Golfers Association) and LPGA (Ladies Professional Golfers Association) implemented nondiscrimination standards for all tournament sites to follow (Hanna et. al, 2012). However, researchers found that after these standards were implemented, most private country clubs refused to share their breakdown of race and gender. Moreover, the clubs who decided to share their data mentioned that less than three percent of each club's memberships were African American, and less than ten percent were Asian or Hispanic (Hanna et. al, 2012). It is even noted that the tournament name for Augusta National, "The Masters never felt good- or even sounded good - when you ask Black golfers to weigh in on the name of the tournament. Also, tradition and history substantiate its rooted in slavery, it shouldn't be preserved and honored" (AAGD Staff, 2023).

The theoretical framework used in this research paper will be the Social Construction of Technology, also known as "SCOT." The SCOT framework developed by Wiebe Bijker and Trevor Pinch, argues that technological artifacts do not develop in isolation but are shaped by social groups with different interests, needs, and values. SCOT emphasizes that technology's meaning and impact are constructed through interactions among these groups, revealing how

various social, cultural, and economic factors influence a technology's development, use, and societal impact. In the context of Augusta National or golf itself, SCOT can illuminate how different social groups, such as developers, local residents, tourists, and environmental advocates assign distinct meanings and purposes to golf course environments. By illustrating the intersections and tensions between perspectives, a SCOT diagram can clarify how these competing values shape decisions around golf course design, environmental practices, and community access.

## **Methods**

The research conducted used a systematic approach to ensure thorough analysis and replicability, incorporating most of the review with Augusta National literature, followed by academic journals on the history and traditions in golf, as well as datasets that have race membership breakdowns of country clubs that choose to share. The framework of Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) will be used to generate a diagram and make conclusions on the perspectives that certain social groups hold towards the “artifact” or technology, of Augusta and golf. The diagram legend is as follows: oval represents social group, hexagon represents artifact, rectangle represents problem, and pentagon represents solution. The diagram is a mind map that connects each social group, artifact, problem, or pentagon to each other in any way that represents the interconnectedness of this issue.

The main component of the methods used in this research paper is a case study, or pieces of literature on or about Augusta National. Augusta National is a widely known golf course, and therefore a simpler way to analyze how different socioeconomic groups perceive and interact with golf courses. The deep history on both the traditions and discriminatory practices gives insight to not only this course, but golf as a whole. Because there is not a singular document with

all the information needed for this case study, much of the information comes from academic journals such as African American Golfer's Digest, The Augusta Chronicle, The Washington Post, Golf, Augusta, and independent research papers.

However, in tying this information to golf as a whole, academic literature on the history and traditions of golf in general will also be used to create connections between Augusta National and golf culture nationwide. Many problems have arisen from the presence of Augusta, however not all of them are covered and therefore need more general information.

Lastly, datasets from golf courses or country clubs will be used to provide membership breakdown by race in order to see the trends that the sport in general is taking. This will help determine where the sport started socially, where it is now, and where it is going. Determining if golf is moving towards a more inclusive and diverse sport is feasible based upon the data collected nationwide. Due to nondiscrimination standards that were implemented, this data will help determine if golf courses and country clubs are serious in progressive nature, or hindered upon their exclusive past.

## **Analysis**

The culture of exclusivity within Augusta and the golf industry at large continues to limit efforts towards greater inclusivity and protection, raising questions about the sports' willingness to evolve. This analysis will explore how Augusta National alongside golf courses as a whole continue to resist change and inclusivity, specifically catered towards African Americans and women, and how they contribute to the divide between different socioeconomic classes and how they perceive these spaces. The main goal of this research paper is to explore how different socioeconomic groups perceive and interact with golf courses, using Augusta National as the main component to complete it.

Augusta National remains firmly rooted in its past, resisting change and clinging to a culture of exclusivity that continues to shape its policies, membership, and broader influence on the golf industry. Augusta National is a perfect example of how marginalized groups in the United States have been denied access to opportunities of growth, specifically economic growth. Private country clubs, including Augusta, have served as primary networking hubs for building and maintaining careers. With Augusta National's history of exclusivity, many people, especially African Americans, were denied access to not only membership, but the ability to network and play golf. From 1934 to 1982, African Americans were only allowed to caddy for caucasian golfers (Graham, 2024), and prohibited from becoming members until 1990 (Diaz, 2020). With the ongoing discriminatory policies from Augusta National, African Americans did and do not perceive the game of golf or Augusta in a positive light. Calvin Peete, the second African American golfer to compete in The Masters stated, "To ask a Black man how he feels about the tradition of the masters is like asking him how he feels about his forefathers, who were slaves" (Crouse, 2020). The perspective that many African Americans seem to hold towards the artifact Augusta and golf in general classifies as discriminatory, ungrateful, and unwelcome. The course itself was built upon the use of enslaved laborers, most of which were African American, yet they are unallowed to participate in this "beautiful perfection" of a golf course. Many years of caddying and waiting tables exclusively shows how little appreciation the owners of Augusta National felt towards their work, and it is seen in many African American golfers that their perspective of the sport and this course has been curated this way. No credit, no participation, and no equity shapes the way that they perceive these spaces. Contributing to this perception, the African American Golfers' Digest and golfer Kenton Makin, noted that even the name of the PGA tournament at Augusta, "The Masters" is inherently racist in itself. Kenton noted that he



refers to the tournament as “that golf tournament” due to the sordid history, and of itself an ideology that ties to white supremacy (Crouse, 2020). Augusta has made no progress in trying to reconcile these perspectives that many African Americans hold, only making matters worse for those who already feel unwelcome in these spaces.

Mirroring broader patterns seen in United States history, not only did African Americans experience systematic exclusion from Augusta, so did women. It took Augusta National almost 60 years to induct their first two African American women in 2012 (Boyette, 2012), it is projected that “at least seven,” women are a part of the club (Easdale, 2024). Out of 300 people, that means the women membership percentage at Augusta National is 2.3% roughly. This continues to be a modern day problem, where Augusta National continues to prohibit different people, race and gender alike, from gaining the opportunity to not only simply play golf, but to network and better their economic opportunities. Women share this perspective of unwelcomeness with African Americans. Unlike the obvious African American discriminatory practices that Augusta used, the exclusionary practices of women was not obvious as to why, and had no real justification. They simply used “culture” to defend themselves and their reasoning was as follows: Augusta National is a private club. As a private club, Augusta gets to set their own parameters on what their membership invites look like (Juckett, 2018). With no other reasoning behind this, Augusta has no real justification as to why they prohibited women from participating in their golf club for so long. With this, again, sparks a feeling of unwelcomeness for women, contributing to their negative connotation of these spaces as a whole. Because Augusta National is a prestigious course and is broadcasted on television for one of the largest golf tournaments in the country, women who learn about the ugly past of Augusta may perceive the game of golf as patriarchal across the country, leading to an unwillingness to support or try to

include themselves in it. Due to the exclusive nature of Augusta National throughout history, common marginalized groups have never gotten a fair chance to participate in the sport, leading to negative perceptions which prohibit the sport from expanding and hinder its progress towards positive change.

Moving forward, golf courses in general reinforce socioeconomic divides by shaping different perceptions of these spaces based upon exclusivity and how these social groups interact with these spaces. It is important to note that different social groups in the vicinity of golf courses perceive these spaces as completely different entities. To prove this claim, the Social Construction of Technology, also known as SCOT, will mostly be used. As a reminder, SCOT is a theoretical framework found by Wiebe Bijker and Trevor Pinch, that argues technological artifacts, in this case golf courses, do not develop in isolation but are shaped by social groups with different interests, needs, and values. SCOT emphasizes that artifacts' meanings are constructed through interactions among social groups, revealing how various social, cultural, and economic factors influence these spaces. In this context, SCOT will illuminate how different social groups in the vicinity of golf courses assign distinct meanings and purposes to these spaces. See the figure below.

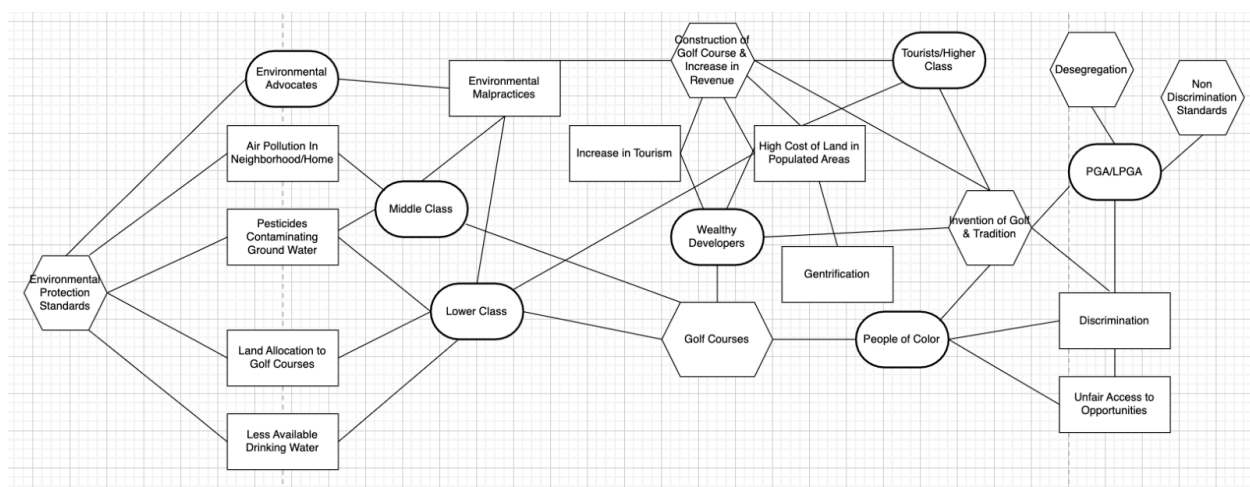


Fig. 1 SCOT Analysis for Golf Course Perceptions

This diagram visually maps out the various social groups involved, and highlights the diverse meanings each group attaches to golf courses. By illustrating the intersections and tensions between these perspectives, the diagram shows how these competing values shape decisions around golf course design, environmental practices, and community access. In other words, developers of these areas believe that golf courses are a way to benefit their local communities economically. Such a scenario is present in Los Cabos, Mexico, where there is the highest percentage (80.7%) of foreign tourists in relation to the total arrivals at the national level (Wurl, 2019). These courses have become a standard component in the development of their coastal tourism, increasing the revenue in the area. According to The Masters website, such is also the case for Augusta National, where The Masters is known for creating thousands of temporary jobs in concessions, hospitality, merchandise operations (Boylette, 2012), and contributing \$120 million to the local economy (Doerfler, 2022). This causes the developers or venue to perceive that these spaces are great for the local economy, helping the community with employment, boosting the amount of tourism in the area, and increasing the price of land. The next perception, such as tourists or the upper class, perceive this space as a peaceful, quiet, and natural environment while on vacation. The Masters brings in around 200,000 tourists, in which most of these people are upper class, ready to enjoy a golf tournament on vacation (Doerfler, 2022). Both the developer and the tourist are in a symbiotic relationship, contributing to the economic success of their higher socioeconomic status. While one may argue that these two parties are essential in boosting the local economy which in turn benefits the local community, in reality these spaces cause some unjustified harm. As noted by the New York's Attorney General, citizens living near golf courses can be affected by dust blow-over and seepage from the golf

course and into their homes. Pesticides then seep into the groundwater, contaminating the drinking water available to them. This in turn creates a negative perception for the middle class, portraying that these areas are a threat to their way of life and overall physical health. When looking for a place to live, most citizens would not enjoy a recreational space threatening their quality of life. The middle class in this case then may feel threatened at not only the golf course, but the people who develop and use these spaces. By harming the natural resources and the environment around them, the middle class does not trust the intentions of the higher socioeconomic classes, leading to a feeling of distrust. In addition, just the United States alone contains about two million acres of land reserved by golf courses. That's enough land for more than 20 million units of medium density housing, solving California's housing crisis (Jack, 2022). This raises questions, specifically those in less fortunate financial situations, about whether or not this space could be used more equitably, especially when considering community parks, affordable housing, or community centers that would cater towards their needs, instead of recreational spaces for the wealthy individuals. The working class then perceives these spaces as a way to push them out, abandon them, and a way for the wealthy individuals to continue to ignore the societal needs that are largely at hand. After noting the less fortunate parties, golf courses do increase revenue for the local community from tourism or recreational fees, however the quality of life for the lower socioeconomic classes do not get some sort of benefit financially or physically. A temporary boost in the local economy does not benefit the local community as a whole, but yet continues to benefit those in the higher class.

By using SCOT, I find that golf courses have different meanings to different people, whether that be common marginalized groups or different socioeconomic classes. They continue

to raise different questions for those in less fortunate situations, leading to an imbalance of equity for those who do not benefit from these spaces.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion with this paper, it is necessary to understand that certain “artifacts,” spaces, or technology shape the way certain social or socioeconomic groups perceive and interact with certain spaces. While others may find success, others are hindered by an exclusive past that lingers within them today. It is important that we have recreational spaces, but we need to ask ourselves: Is it worth it to hinder others’ success and well-being for my own happiness? Or do we want to create a space that incorporates all, and tries to better the world? Since Augusta National is such an iconic and prestigious course, it sets an example on the rest of the sport, as well as different clubs across the country. We must move towards progressive change that benefits those who want to integrate themselves into a sport, culture, or circle that historically has been exclusionary and notoriously has hindered success from those who have been affected by history, financial situations, or social class.

As a construction engineering and management major, I hope those within the development and design industry of golf courses can read this paper and understand the implications of the spaces we build, and how they affect those who are not asking for these spaces, those who don’t benefit from them, or those who have been affected negatively through societal exclusion. We must empower ourselves to create spaces that allow everyone to have an equitable chance at success, and promote progressive innovation to create a better society.

To build off this research and project, I find it wise to dive into the history of the PGA. Since Augusta is one of the most famous tournament sites for them, I wonder if the same

situation persists through the PGA. They did incorporate nondiscrimination standards for all tournament sites to follow, however clearly Augusta has not been following them. I wonder if the policies that the PGA implements are taken with a grain of salt for these private country clubs. Or, is the PGA also putting on a facade and doesn't actually want to see progressive and positive change to help all? Regardless, the lessons we can learn from golf are not how to shoot five under or birdie a hole, but how to empower others to take a leap of faith into a field that has notoriously prohibited their success.

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