

Impact of Playing Golf in Improving Social Capital, Cultural Capital and Economic Opportunities

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Abstract. Based on the theories of social capital and cultural capital, this study examines how golf plays the role of a method to enhance personal accumulation of cultural capital while achieving economic opportunities in the Chinese social context. Through a quantitative analysis of 86 questionnaires, the results show that the number of years of golf participation shows a significant improvement in the individual's level of cultural capital, and that economic opportunities can be obtained through bonding and linking social capital; however, the relationship with bridging social capital and the number of times of participation is not significant. It is found that long-term and relatively stable sports participation can enhance trust relationships and access to resources via high-level links, thus forming a positive mechanism of economic benefits and social mobility. This study expands the application boundary of social capital and cultural capital theory, reveals the multi-level logical connotations of the transformation of culture, economy, and society in sports and leisure activities, and provides new empirical evidence and policy implications for studying the social function and economic value of golf and other sports social activities.

Keywords: Golf participation, social capital, cultural capital, economic opportunity.

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, the United States has experienced a gradual erosion of civic engagement, political involvement, and social capital; this principal trend has been explored by Robert Putnam in his influential work, *Bowling Alone* [1]. However, contrary to the expectations of the theory of social capital developed in the West, previous empirical research from China shows some surprising results [2, 3].

Previous research on social capital has shown both its broad theoretical importance and its contextual differences between social institutions. In the West, Putnam's [1] famous work *Bowling Alone* documented the erosion of civic engagement and a decline in social trust. It also showed the fragility of social capital in the USA. However, research in China has shown a different trajectory. Recent work has shown the changing role of *guanxi* in China's transition to a market economy, showing that its influence is changing from a primary means of coordination to an ancillary resource as formal institutions strengthen [3-5].

These results demonstrate that although social capital is key to understanding interpersonal networks and economic opportunities, its forms and functions vary across historical and cultural contexts. Much of the existing literature on social capital and *guanxi* has analyzed those previously mentioned in relation to an institutional, political, or business context. However, the dynamics of capital formation also occur in informal and leisure-type contexts. In present-day China, golf presents a particularly interesting case through which to analyze these processes. Golf is generally perceived as an elite sport, as well as a context of social interaction. The normative activities of this sport integrate networking, lifestyle exhibition, and ostentatious participation into one practice. Unlike recreational sports, golf carries social and economic connotations. Participation in this sport may result in the building of trust, access to heterogeneous networks, and the reinforcement of cultural status. Therefore, investigating golf offers a better understanding of how social and cultural capital are simultaneously produced, performed, and transmuted into concrete economic advantages in modern-day China's evolving market, one characterized by a healthy blend of the old and new.

Despite considerable research investigating the processes of social capital, cultural capital and guanxi in numerous socio-economic contexts, significant gaps remain. First, the topics of interest for research are still mainly confined to traditional areas of investigation such as politics, business, or community involvement [1, 2]; little research activity has been devoted to leisure and recreation as generators of these forms of capital. The second gap in the literature on guanxi and social networks in China is that most work emphasizes institutional and organizational contexts of significance [3, 6–9], whereas those areas of informal social life, such as sport that stimulate the production of interpersonal trust, bonding and bridging should also receive attention and research effort. Third, while cultural capital has been previously explored in terms of the educational effects and meanings associated with high culture [10–12], empirical work on the outcomes of modern leisure activities such as golf in terms of their role in the reproduction of cultural capital and cultural distinction, emotions such as excitement or symbolic meaning and status, etc., and access to economic opportunities and benefits, is more limited. Finally, limitations in existing knowledge of the roles of mediating factors such as gender, age, and class in these processes leave many unanswered questions about the inclusivity and differential benefits to be derived from such activities. These gaps in the literature provide a rationale for a contextual study of golf as a unique context for the production of social and cultural capital and its putative translation into economic advantage.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how individuals build and expand their social and cultural capital through participation in golf, and to analyze whether and how these activities contribute to the enhancement of individual economic opportunities. To achieve this goal, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between golf participation (e.g., years of participation, frequency) and the accumulation of cultural capital?
2. What is the relationship between golf participation and the accumulation of social capital (bonding, bridging, and linking)?
3. To what extent do the accumulated social and cultural capital predict individual economic opportunities?
4. How do demographic factors (e.g., gender, age, education, income) moderate these relationships?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Capital and Economic Opportunities

Social capital theory focuses on the social network structure of interpersonal connections, reciprocal trust and resource acquisition. According to Passeron et al. [10], Social capital (SC) was first introduced by Bourdieu in the 1970s; he is widely regarded by academics as the term's originator. The concept of social capital flows into a mass of other social sciences, such as political science, anthropology, and economics [1, 11, 13–16]. Across these fields, social capital is generally understood as a relational resource that shapes access to power, opportunity, and well-being. In this regard, Soundararajan et al. [17] discover that unequal allocation of social capital along caste lines can distort economic well-being and impede upward occupational mobility.

Recent research increasingly emphasizes the importance of social capital in how human capital resources are developed, deployed, and converted into organizational performance. In their fundamental work, Lengnick-Hall et al. [18] highlighted the multiformity of social capital which generates, occupies a position in, and is an outcome of HR activities. On this basis, Ray et al. [19] advanced social capital theory to clarify how the forms of social interactions create human capital resources. Wolfson and Mathieu [20] have gone further still, to show how social capital resources (shared experiences of teams) are also able to predict performance, a prime determinant of economic opportunities. Thus, the interrelations between these evaluative processes [21] are such that Sytch and Kim point out, are very stable. Together these studies indicate a point of intersection regarding

human capital and social capital theories, which point out how personal relationships govern the success of organizations and economic opportunity.

2.2. Social Capital and Cultural Capital

Recent research on Bourdieu's theory of capital has shown how social and cultural capital can interact with economic capital to reproduce existing forms of inequality. For example, low levels of symbolic capital, due to mismatched social understandings, were found to inhibit individuals suffering from mental illness from being able to use their educational capital adequately in the workplace [22]. According to Tang & Jiang [23], it is social and cultural capital, rather than simply economic capital that largely mediates and explains the educational disadvantages suffered by children from non-two parent homes. This emphasizes the idea that inequality is not simply a matter of differences in income levels, but rather in terms of familial networks and cultural transmission. By extending this logic to the digital arena Calderon Gomez [24] examines how capital is transferred into and out of digital capital (DC). The findings show that cultural capital facilitates the development of digital capital, and that social capital facilitates digital participation making the digital realm a mere reflection of the existing social hierarchy.

2.3. Social Capital, Guanxi, and Economic Activities in China

Extending this discussion, China's unique economic transition has shaped a business environment with underdeveloped market-supporting institutions and high state ownership, fostering low trust among strangers and making connections (guanxi) to officials highly beneficial [3]. Yang and Zhang [25] show that social capital reduces income disparity in China while guanxi increases it. Feng and Patulny [26] further discover that strong, face-based guanxi ties are effective for mobilizing resources but are rarely converted into broader social capital.

At a broader theoretical level, when analysis shifts to the interactions among people and groups, cultural capital and social capital are no longer distinct constructs. Rather, they overlap and interlock empirical and theoretical accounts across sociology, so that cultural assets operate through and are validated by social ties.

H1: Participation in golf enhances an individual's cultural capital, including lifestyle taste, social recognition, international understanding, and elite identity.

H2a: Participation in golf significantly increases an individual's bonding social capital (e.g., close friends and team support).

H2b: Participation in golf contributes to the formation of bridging social capital (e.g., inter-group relationships and heterogeneous networks).

H2c: Participation in golf promotes linking social capital (e.g., access to higher-level social resources and power).

Drawing from research on social capital and economic development, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The social capital and cultural capital accumulated through golf will positively impact an individual's economic opportunities (e.g., career advancement, project collaborations, client expansion, and income growth).

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study used a quantitative research design with a structured questionnaire survey to collect data from participants in golf. The survey used standardized instruments so statistical testing could be accomplished on the suggested hypotheses.

3.2. Sample Design

Participants in the research were sourced from individuals aged 18 years or over with at least 1 years' experience in golf. The research used snowball sampling in the first of several phases, so that the sample could be expanded and recruitment via the internet could be maximized. This was particularly appropriate given what is a relatively small and specialized golf community, where personal networks go a long way to providing potential participants.

3.3. Data Collection Method

The electronic questionnaire was distributed via Wenjuanxing for efficiency and accessibility. In order to ensure diversity in the sample, a number of modes were used to recruit participants. First, the questionnaire was distributed in golf clubs and sporting communities to reach active participants. Second, it was distributed via digital platforms (WeChat and QQ groups, LinkedIn, Xiaohongshu and Douyin) to reach digitally active users and younger people. Third, personal networks were used to initially recruit participants who were encouraged to pass on the questionnaire to people in their golf communities (snowball sampling). Finally, the questionnaire link was passed around on public social media platforms to reach as wide an audience as possible. This variety of means ensured the acquisition of a sufficiently diverse sample.

3.4. Questionnaire Structure Design

The questionnaire was structured into four major sections based on known theory and validated instruments.

Part A: General information consisted of demographic data (age, gender, education, occupation, annual income, and city) which were necessary control variables.

Part B: Golf participation profile was devoted to the various methods of golf participation of the respondents (years of participation, frequency of playing and type of participation) in order to see how various degrees of participation influenced the accumulation of the various types of capital.

Part C: Measurement of social and cultural capital was used to measure various aspects of the concept of social capital, bonding, bridging and linking social capital, by means of the Social Capital Scale of Onyx and Bullen [27] to measure social capital. This section also examined cultural capital and involved a measurement of factors such as taste in lifestyles, cultural literacy and social recognition.

Part D: Measurement of economic opportunity was a measurement of the economic benefits (employment, project, collaboration, increase in salary, etc.) using a five-point Likert-type scale.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The present study complied with ethical requirements pertaining to research. The first page of the questionnaire indicated the purpose and scope of the study. Electronic informed consent was acquired from all respondents, so that participation was completely voluntary and their right to withdraw at any time was established. All data collected were anonymized and securely stored under restricted access for purposes of academic research, so that the privacy of the subjects was assured as well as the integrity of the work.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The study consisted of 86 valid questionnaires. Of the subjects, 58 (67.4%) were males, 28 (32.6%) were females; the mean age was 40 years (standard deviation 12). The majority had a college education, namely 42 (48.8%) had received a bachelor's degree or above, and 29 (33.7%) had graduate degrees. Occupational distribution was diverse, including 29 (33.7%) corporate/company employees and 18 (20.9%) self-employed/entrepreneurs. Yearly income was high: 26 respondents (30.2%)

received from 100,000 to 300,000 RMB, 16 each (18.6%) from 300,000 to 500,000 RMB and from 500,000 to 1,000,000 RMB. Regarding residence: 70.9% lived in cities with more than 10,000,000 inhabitants. Regarding years of golf participation, the highest proportions were those with 3-5 years (25.6%) and 11-20 years (29.1%). Regarding frequency of golfing, 53.5% of respondents indicated no fixed schedule. Overall, this sample was predominantly male, highly educated, corporate employees, with high incomes, and residing in first-tier cities, reflecting the typical characteristics of Chinese golfers.

4.2. Description of the Reliability Results of the Main Variable Scale

First, reliability tests were conducted on the scales for each dimension of the main variables. The results showed that the Cronbach's α for Bonding was 0.853, Bridging was 0.884, Linking was 0.928, Cultural Capital was 0.924, and Economic Opportunity was 0.933 — all greater than 0.80, indicating that each scale has good internal consistency and reliability.

Further descriptive statistical results show that the average score for bridging social capital was the highest ($M=3.93$, $SD=0.74$), while the mean score for economic opportunity was relatively low ($M=3.39$, $SD=0.87$).

4.3. Testing H1: The Relationship between Golf Participation and Cultural Capital

This study used multiple linear regression analysis to test Hypothesis H1. "Cultural capital" was the dependent variable, and the independent variables included "years of golf participation," "frequency of golf play," and demographic controls. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Cultural Capital.

Variable	Unstandardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t-value	Significance (p)
constant	3.990	.521		7.661	<.001
Years of playing golf	.201	.091	.289	2.211	.030
Playing frequency	-.074	.068	-.134	1.090	.279
gender	-.207	.222	-.114	-.935	.353
age	-.016	.008	-.242	1.956	.054
income	-.004	.078	-.007	-.053	.958
Education level	.049	.114	.051	.431	.667

Note. Dependent variable: Cultural Capital.

The analysis provided partial support for H1. The overall model was not significant ($F(6, 78) = 1.308$, $p = 0.264$), indicating weak explanatory power (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.022$). However, as hypothesized, "years of golf participation" emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.289$, $t = 2.211$, $p = 0.030$). In contrast, "frequency of playing golf" was not significant ($p = 0.279$). This suggests that long-term, stable participation, rather than brief or frequent involvement, promotes the accumulation of cultural capital.

4.4. Test H2a

This section tests Hypothesis H2a regarding bonding social capital. A multivariate linear regression analysis was conducted, using independent variables of "number of years in golf participation" and "frequency of golf", controlling for demographics. Table 2 details the findings.

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Bonding Social Capital.

Variable	Unstandardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t-value	Significance (p)
constant	3.894	.462		8.437	<.001
Years of golf participation	.133	.080	.217	1.655	.102
Playing frequency	-.019	.061	-.039	-.315	.754
Gender (new code)	.005	.196	.003	.025	.980
age	-.016	.007	-.267	-2.153	.034
Education level	-.031	.101	-.037	-.309	.758
income	.083	.069	.149	1.206	.232

Note. Dependent variable: Bonding Social Capital.

Hypothesis H2a was not statistically supported. The overall model was non-significant ($F(6,78) = 1.274, p = 0.279$). While "years of golf participation" showed a positive trend, it did not reach significance ($p = 0.102$), and "frequency of participation" was also not significant ($p = 0.754$). This suggests that golf participation alone does not significantly enhance close-knit social capital. Notably, "age" showed a significant negative impact ($\beta = -0.267, p = 0.034$).

4.5. Test H2b

This section tests Hypothesis H2b regarding bridging social capital, using the same set of independent and control variables. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Bridging Social Capital.

variable	Unstandardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t-value	Significance (p)
constant	4.481	.457		9.811	<.001
Years of golf participation	.068	.080	.112	.857	.394
Playing frequency	.006	.060	.012	.098	.922
Gender (new code)	-.052	.194	-.033	-.268	.789
age	-.019	.007	-.313	-2.528	.014
Education level	.000	.100	.000	.003	.997
income	.007	.068	.012	.096	.924

Note. Dependent variable: Bridging Social Capital.

Hypothesis H2b was not statistically supported. The overall model was not significant ($F(6,78) = 1.292, p = 0.271$). Neither "years of golf participation" ($p = 0.394$) nor "frequency of participation" ($p = 0.922$) significantly impacted bridging social capital. This suggests golf may not effectively foster cross-group social bridging. As with bonding capital, "age" again showed a significant negative relationship ($\beta = -0.313, p = 0.014$).

4.6. Testing H2c

This section tests Hypothesis H2c regarding linking social capital. A multiple linear regression model was used, with the results presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Linking Social Capital.

Variable	Unstandardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t - value	Significance (p)
constant	4.116	.474		8.676	<.001
Years of golf participation	.200	.083	.302	2.418	.018
Playing frequency	-.079	.062	-.149	-1.271	.207
Gender (new code)	-.243	.202	-.140	-1.204	.232
age	-.026	.008	-.407	-3.440	<.001
Education level	.102	.104	.111	.981	.330
income	.011	.071	.018	.153	.879

Note. Dependent variable: Linking Social Capital.

Hypothesis H2c was statistically supported. The overall model was significant ($F(6, 78) = 2.696$, $p = 0.020$) and explained approximately 10.8% of the variance ($\text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.108$). Crucially, "years of golf participation" had a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.302$, $t = 2.418$, $p = 0.018$), indicating that long-term participation helps individuals access higher-level social resources. "Frequency of play" was not significant ($p = 0.207$). "Age" also had a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.407$, $p < 0.001$).

4.7. Testing H3: The Impact of Social and Cultural Capital on Economic Opportunities

This section tests Hypothesis H3, examining whether accumulated social and cultural capital impact individual economic opportunities. The independent variables include the three types of social capital and cultural capital, controlling for demographics. The full results are available in Table 5.

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Economic Opportunity.

Variable	Unstandardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t - value	Significance (p)	Tolerance	VIF
constant	-.187	.522		-.358	.722		
Close-knit social capital	.311	.135	.268	2.298	.024	.367	2.724
Bridging social capital	.046	.164	.039	.277	.782	.254	3.943
Linking social capital	.340	.151	.315	2.253	.027	.255	3.926
Cultural Capital	.222	.123	.216	1.805	.075	.347	2.884
Gender (new code)	-.038	.141	-.020	-.269	.789	.881	1.136
age	-.007	.006	-.103	1.243	.218	.728	1.374
income	.128	.051	.197	2.505	.014	.806	1.240
Education level	.014	.076	.014	.187	.852	.845	1.184

Note. Dependent variable: Economic Opportunity.

Hypothesis H3 was partially supported. The overall model was highly significant ($F(8, 76) = 15.572, p < 0.001$) and demonstrated strong explanatory power (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.581$). As predicted, "close-knit social capital" (Bonding) ($\beta = 0.268, t = 2.298, p = 0.024$) and "linking social capital" (Linking) ($\beta = 0.315, t = 2.253, p = 0.027$) both showed a significant positive effect on economic opportunities. However, "bridging social capital" ($p = 0.782$) and "cultural capital" ($p = 0.075$) were not significant predictors. Among the control variables, "income" also had a significant positive effect ($p = 0.014$).

4.8. Robustness Test

A hierarchical regression analysis was used to verify the robustness of the H3 model. Model 1 included only participation and demographic variables, while Model 2 added the core social and cultural capital variables. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Robustness Test (Dependent Variable: Economic Opportunity).

Model	Variable	B	Standard error	Beta	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
1	constant	3.515	.527		6.672	<.001		
	Years of golf participation	.131	.092	.184	1.432	.156	.680	1.470
	Playing frequency	-.019	.069	-.033	-.273	.786	.771	1.297
	Gender (new code)	-.153	.224	-.082	-.684	.496	.783	1.276
	age	-.025	.009	-.357	-2.929	.004	.759	1.318
	income	.147	.079	.227	1.870	.065	.766	1.305
	Education level	.049	.116	.049	.423	.673	.833	1.201
	constant	-.204	.534		-.383	.703		
2	Years of golf participation	-.031	.066	-.043	-.468	.641	.594	1.683
	Playing frequency	.033	.048	.058	.690	.492	.718	1.393
	Gender (new code)	-.017	.154	-.009	-.112	.911	.749	1.335
	age	-.006	.006	-.089	-1.002	.320	.652	1.535
	income	.118	.054	.182	2.189	.032	.736	1.359
	Education level	.010	.079	.010	.128	.899	.798	1.253
	Cultural Capital	.234	.126	.227	1.858	.067	.340	2.943
	Close-knit social capital	.314	.137	.271	2.288	.025	.364	2.749
	Bridging social capital	.015	.172	.013	.088	.930	.236	4.244
	Linking social capital	.363	.156	.337	2.325	.023	.242	4.139

Note. Dependent variable: Economic Opportunity.

The results support the robustness of Hypothesis H3. Model 1 (demographics and participation) had weak explanatory power (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.052, p = 0.115$). However, when the capital variables were added in Model 2, the model fit improved significantly (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.573, p < 0.001$), explaining an additional 52.1% of the variance. In Model 2, "close-knit social capital" ($p = 0.025$) and "linking social capital" ($p = 0.023$) remained significant positive predictors, confirming they are key mechanisms promoting economic opportunity.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Discussion of Findings

The findings regarding H1 suggest that the gain of cultural capital is not the product of brief or frequent engagement but lies in the extended and continued process of socialization through which the participant learns the symbolic and cultural meanings inherent in the game.

The findings regarding social capital dimensions (H2a–H2c) revealed different trends. The non-significant impacts on bonding social capital (H2a) and bridging social capital (H2b) indicate that participation in these golf social networks does not necessarily produce a significant increase in close social support or wider cross-group connections. However, the significant result for linking social capital (H2c) suggests that the social function of golf communities is much more directed toward vertical connections and the integration of resources, that is upward extension of high-level networks through different professions and social resources. This also serves to uncover the underlying structural properties of golf as an ‘elite social platform’ in the social context of China.

Finally, for the formation of the economic opportunity mechanism (H3), the dual support from the trust relationship (Bonding) and high-level resources (Linking) plays a key role. The finding does not support the conclusion of bridging social connections; thus, the weak connection capital is relatively deficient in converting to economic benefits. These findings are summarized in Figure 1.

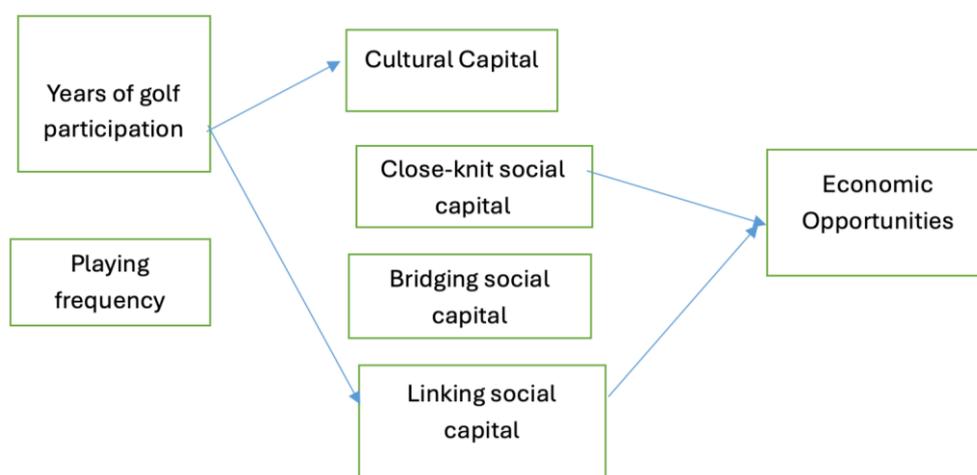


Figure 1. The relationship between golf participation and social capital, cultural capital and economic opportunities.

5.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study expands capital theory into the informal field of leisure, demonstrating that sports are a key area for capital reproduction. This study identifies the specific mechanisms of capital transformation, identifying how bonding (trust) and linking (resources) social capital (but not bridging (breadth) social capital) are transformed into economic profits in this elite context. It also illustrates how a “relations culture” exists in China, providing empirical evidence regarding golf and how it facilitates social mobility and reinforces class stratification [28].

Managers may wish to consider insisting that customers emphasize long-term participation and quality of relationships rather than frequency of participation if economic profits are to be maximized, which may imply lower levels of short-term participation. For the golf industry, this provides a theoretical basis for optimizing membership management and marketing strategies; the data also provide support for justifying golf’s inherent economic and social network value due to reasons of participation.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations, especially with respect to its sample and methodology. The small sample size (N=86) from a middle- to upper-class population results in limited external validity. In addition, the cross-sectional design and subjective perception measures preclude the establishment of causality, and these subjective measures may not reflect objective resource structures.

Future studies need to consider ways to alleviate some of these limitations by using longitudinal designs to assess capital transformation over time and extending the sample to other social strata. On a conceptual basis, future studies should also develop comparative studies of other sports (e.g., tennis, marathons) and study the specific mediating effects (e.g., psychological identity, institutional aspects)

pertaining to the physical culture "leisure-capital-economic" framework. With the foregoing, greater opportunities may exist to discern the nature of social equity in contemporary society.

6. Conclusion

This paper uses theories of social and cultural capital to study how golf participation affects the accumulation of cultural capital and the creation of economic opportunities for individuals in the Chinese context. The study finds that the number of years one has played golf is a significant contributor to the accumulation of cultural capital and the creation of economic opportunities through bonding and linking social capital, thus reaffirming that sport and leisure activities play an important role in cultivating social relationships and in creating the conditions for the transformation of resources. This study also extends the theoretical application of social and cultural capital, demonstrating that golf participates in the "relationship culture" and process of marketization in China, reflecting both social mobility and class reproduction. It provides new empirical evidence and theoretical insights into the social functions and economic values of sport and leisure and illustrates how elite leisure practices act as important sites for the creation, conversion, and negotiation of various forms of capital in contemporary Chinese society.

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