There is a trend of increasing focus on the service quality and customer satisfaction by many organizations. Across various industries, customer service and marketing literature have explored the direct impact of service quality on customer satisfaction. Chang and Lee (2004), Caruana (2002), Spren and Chiou (2002), Spren and McKoy (1996), and Cronin and Taylor (1992) indicated a positive correlation between service quality and levels of satisfaction. A high level of satisfaction can trigger retention (Lin, 2004). Apparently, in a service-oriented business such as golf, identifying the key components that affect customer satisfaction can help the industry and facilities to maximize customers’ satisfaction, hence, to retain them. Therefore, the purposes of this study were to (a) explore the important satisfaction factors among recreational golfers; (b) determine the best predictor for their satisfaction.

A survey was conducted among the recreational golfers at three medium level golf courses in the Gulf Coast region in Mississippi during the summer of 2007. Approximately 500 survey questionnaires were distributed and 308 valid questionnaires were received with a return rate of 61.6%. The instrument was adopted from two validated measures of Petrick et al. (1999) and NGF (2003), with the help from a panel of experts including golf professionals and sport management faculties. The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) of SPSS (13.0) was used to examine the instrument. The items with factor loading higher than .40 were kept, while the others were dropped. The EFA revealed 3 factors (1) ‘Course Service’ including items such as pro-shop, amenities, practice facility and staff; (2) ‘Course Quality’ including quality of the greens, fairways, and tees; and (3) ‘Pace management’ including being pushed or slowed by other golfers. The instrument had an alpha value of .80 for internal consistency. Overall, the three factors accounted for 65.3% of the total variance explained.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine how well the three independent variables predicted overall satisfaction for the surveyed golfers. Results revealed three significant overall models. Model one (R² = .569, p < .01), indicating that approximately 57% of the variance of the overall satisfaction could be explained by the ‘Course Service’ factor alone. Model two (R² = .593, p < .01), indicating that approximately 59% of the variance could be explained by combining ‘Course Service’ and ‘Course Quality’ factors. Model three (R² = .603, p < .01), indicating that approximately 60% of the variance could be explained by all three factors combined: ‘Course Service’, ‘Course Quality’ and ‘Pace Management’. Apparently, the strongest predictor was the ‘Course Service’ factor. This findings were different from the results reported by Petrick et al. (1999), which maintenance of greens, slow play management, and maintenance of tees were the significant predictors for satisfaction for golfers who played at the middle-level golf courses in a different region in the United States.

The finding of this study provided clear and practical implications to the surveyed and similar golf courses. This study suggested that the golf courses need to provide some extra amenities on and off the course that would exceed golfers’ expectation, hence, to effectively leverage customers’ total satisfaction. On the other hand, expensive investments such as improvement on the course itself and GPS system to monitor slow play might not have a significant impact on customer satisfaction given the small predicting power of the ‘Course Service’ and ‘Pace Management’ factors. These findings are extremely helpful for golf managers and the industry to make sound investment decisions when experiencing current economic difficulties. Recommendations for future study including to analyze golfers’ satisfaction based on general demographics and playing behavior such as membership status, skill level, and frequency of play.