Tourism Education for Generation Z: The Application of Service Quality

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Abstract— *The growth of the tourism industry implies a great future for tourism education. Yet, alternative education platforms (i.e. virtual education) continue to develop notwithstanding reduced numbers of newborns. How do we traditional universities stay competitive in the market and be able to respond to the needs of our potential students who are Generation Z? This paper, therefore, provides an insight into the changing society by starting with defining Gen Z and its implication to education context. Next, the paper also offers educators adaptive strategies through the concept of Service Quality. With the SERVQUAL model, service quality has now been redefined in education setting with example indicators. However, the major messages center on three factors: Empathy, Assurance, and Tangibles as they are proven to be the most contributing factors to students' satisfaction. For each factor, various recommendations are offered for both administrators and teachers. While most examples are from the tourism field, these can also be applied in other fields.*

Keywords— **Tourism Education, generation Z, service quality.**

1. INTRODUCTION

With the contribution of tourism to national economy, tourism industry continues to grow rapidly [1]. The industry's expansion has called for more tourism professionals who are skilled graduates from tourism fields. This offers opportunity for universities to develop and provide tourism education [2]. As a result, there is an increasing supply of tourism courses [1]. This trend also benefits the demand side since more options (various tourism programs) are available for students to select. In addition, alternative forms of learning comes with the introduction of virtual universities that have reached out to anyone beyond the limit of geography while offering low cost and flexibility in learning [3]. Yet, abundant supplies have raised the concern of balance between tourism education's supply and demand. Considering amount of demand or potential students in developing countries such as Thailand, we cannot manipulate the phenomenon of reduced numbers of children in our society [4]. The key is thus to find some strategies not only to attract the limited amount of demand in the market, but also to outperform other competitors, both conventional and virtual universities. It is a pronounced challenge for tourism programs to stay competitive and survive in the open market of academics. The challenge also alerts established or traditional universities to undergo transformation and restructuring [3]. Among many, one of strategies adopted by various universities in Thailand is diversification. Just a quick glance to official websites of various private universities in Thailand (i.e. University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok

University, Rangsit University, Sripathum University, etc.), viewers can easily notice many newly launched majors or sub fields related to tourism education, such as Aviation Business Management, Event Management, Hospitality Management for Cruise Lines Business, Innovative Hospitality Management, etc. While some of these are totally brand-new programs, others have been renamed or rebranded for more appealing labels. Perhaps, diversification might be the right direction for different universities to attract potential students.

However, another important concern that tourism (and any other) programs shall consider is the generation gap between education providers and receivers. Students today are what have been termed "Gen Z" [5]. They are not the same as previous generations given the budding technology as a profound effect on the transformation of society including the education sector [5]. Many papers have addressed the generation gap by dichotomizing students today as "digital natives" versus professors as "digital immigrants" [6]. For teachers, digital is still our second language as we sometimes struggle with new technologies [5]. We are not technologically inclined: even with simple classroom equipment, we might not be well equipped to use [7]. Often, we still print out journal articles to read, write comments with pencils, and highlight some main points with highlighter pens. We are still reluctant to adopt technology such as changing from paper-based tests to online exams [7]. We still prefer students to print out their reports and homework for submission and we edit their mistakes with big red circles [5]. Not only these could have been done online, but these are what Gen Z is familiar with and prefers to do [5].

Furthermore, it is argued that the main obstacle to students' learning is when teachers cannot move away from their traditional teaching methods [8]. Most are still practicing teacher-centered [9]. Teachers prefer to stay unchanged. For example, the same teacher would teach

the same courses for years and be reluctant to take on the new courses [7], [10]. Reiley (p.10) says "This attitude is unfortunate because for learning to occur, teachers need to update their teaching strategies" [10]. Educators and administrators must integrate the value of student-teacher interaction with the dazzling charm of digital world [10].

Given the current situation of higher education marketplace, students are to be viewed as customers whose views must be heard and demand must be responded upon [11]. Similarly to other business, higher education institutions need to meet our customers' expectations. We need to take every lesson as a service by which an educator is a service provider and a student is a consumer [12]. With above discussion of generation gap, along with reduced numbers of adolescents, tourism programs need to be adaptive to sustain and survive in the educational arena.

Importantly, we as educators need to recognize and understand characteristics of Gen Z so we can secure the most effective way that enhances students' learnings. As Prensky (p.1) states, "Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach" [6]. This is not to say their world is worse or better than of the previous gen, it is just different [5]. The issues we encounter are not to compete with students' world, rather we need to understand and adjust to the differences [5]. Understanding their characteristics and values is very important for the university since nowadays Gen Z is and will be the majority population in our universities, at least when considering undergraduates. As suggested by Chun and her colleagues (p.1), "The university needs to change its approach to meet the learning needs and other characteristics of this generation" [7].

In this vein, this paper encourages tourism educators to bring the core foundation or our greatest strength; tourism as a service, to be applied in bringing the changes. In attempt to enlighten students' learning needs and satisfaction, the paper revisits the classical concept called Service Quality by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry [13]. This paper suggests that satisfaction derived from service quality will make a difference in the competitive education setting. This presents an important idea for tourism programs to take advantages of Service Quality concept which would be useful for tourism faculty and administrators for gaining some insight on their educational implications. The next section will introduce readers to Gen Z's characteristics, followed by the application of Service Quality in tourism education.

2. DEFINING GENZ

The birth of Gen Z is defined differently by different authors. Chun and her colleagues [7] define Gen Zers as individuals born from 1995-2010 while Lancaster and Stillman define them as those born since 2000 [14]. Generation Z, or in short as Gen Z, is also being called with various names, most commonly known as Gen Tech, Internet Gen (IGen) or "Digital Natives" [15]. Throughout the paper, Gen Z is used interchangeably with Gen Zers and net gen.

Gen Z is a generation that was born with internet [10]. Chun and her colleagues [7] have offered detail insight into characteristic of Gen Z and summarized in this paper as follows. Gen Z grows up with their electronic devices in hands accessing internet and social media anytime. In fact, the devices and internet become their necessity of life. This group is a product of our changing society towards more technological dependency. Their distinctive characters impact their expectations and learning behaviors in various ways. Books become less interesting as information can be as a quick click away. Traditional way of teaching and providing instructions might no longer be effective. In addition, with easy access to unlimited information available 24 hours. Gen Z expects to receive immediate/constant feedbacks as to response to their curiosity and become less patient towards waiting time [7].

Access to abundantly available information on internet influence Gen Z is to trust whatever appears on searching engine, in which some may not be reliable [7]. Gen Z is then often lack of critical thinking skills to evaluate reliability. Moreover, types of data that Gen Z often obtained are usually in constant and short segments of information. Gen Zers tend to be more of a multitasking nature [16], such as reading Facebook, watching YouTube while chatting with friends online. These behaviors positively affect Gen Z to be well adapted to visual/multimedia type of information, yet negatively result in Gen Z's shortened attention span or "acquired attention deficit disorder" [16].

Furthermore, the net generation's perceptions towards school would be something boring [5]. Students often feel bored, unmotivated and detached from the classroom [17]. As often experienced in many classes, students are more active on their own digital devices either chatting with their buddies, surfing internet, listening to iTunes playlist, or scanning through notifications and posts on Facebook [5]. Such behaviors may discourage educators to conduct a productive class.

This challenge alerts the urgency for us as educators not only to understand the nature of our students, but also to adapt ourselves to co-exist happily in the education world. This section has brought into light more understanding of today students that all educators need to realize, accept, and be understanding. Various strategies will thus be discussed in the next section onwards with the application of Service Quality concept. It will offer educators how to apply Service Quality in education setting to potentially enhance students' satisfaction. The discussion is meant for both university administrators to see a bigger picture at the policy level needed to prepare and implement, and also for each individual teacher to consider for changes. Definitely, the center of discussion is more towards each lecturer' ways for improvement with examples provided from tourism field. Altering lecturers' teaching apporaches will help universities to be more competitive in the education maket.

3. SERVICE QUALITY AND EDUCATION

The term "Service Quality" has first been introduced by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1985 [13] when the authors listed ten dimensions under service and then later

regrouped them (in 1988) into five dimensions known as the SERVQUAL model [20]. The five dimensions include Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness. SERVQUAL model is brought into business practices to attract customers, making them satisfy, and become loyal to the business, and this will in turn enhance business' positive image and performance [21]. Hasen, Illias, Raman, and Razak (p.169) say, "Service quality has been widely accepted as an antecedent of satisfaction and neglecting it may jeopardize the competitiveness of an organizations as satisfaction and competitiveness of a service related organizations are inter-related" [18].

Notably, the concept of service quality has been largely emphasized in the hospitality field [19]. For educational sector, particularly in higher education, various studies have used SERVQUAL to measure students' satisfaction [18]. These studies show a strong correlation between overall service quality and students' satisfaction [22], [23]. Accordingly, this paper employs SERVQUAL as a foundation in providing tourism educators adaptive strategies to service Gen Z. Below, each dimension of SERVQUAL model is redefined in education context (Table 1).

Table 1. Defining SERVQUAL Dimensions in Education

Dimension	Redefinition
Reliability	University's ability to provide its promised services accurately and adequately
Assurance	University's credit in delivering trust and confidence to the public
Tangibles	Physical appearance of the institution through its physical facilities and observable objects
Empathy	University's individualized attention and caring services to students
Responsiveness	University's ability to provide prompt services to assist students in need

As shown in Table 1, definition of each dimension can be summed as follows: 1) Reliability refers to accuracy of promised services; 2) Assurance concerns with the university's credit and reputation; 3) Tangibles are university's physical appearance; 4) Empathy is all about caring services; and 5) Responsiveness refers to prompt response. Further examples on SERVQUAL application are in Table 2. This table offers practical examples on how university administrators could utilize SERVQUAL dimension to serve students.

While the table above offer example indicators of SERVQUAL dimension in a broader scope (hence at administrative level), specific recommendations for each individual teacher are still needed, starting with the first dimension, *Reliability*. Here, teachers must operate classes regularly as scheduled in the course syllabus. Also, score and grading criteria must be clarified among students and transparently evaluated. For *Assurance*, teachers must be qualified to teach the class considering their knowledge and/or experiences. In addition, teachers must be able to explain class contents and materials well. For *Tangibles,* teachers must always hold professional image i.e. through appearance and body language. Also, teaching materials must be attractive and well designed as to attract students' interest and attention throughout class sessions. For *Empathy*, teachers need to take time to know students individually (i.e. names, interests, preferences, talents) and continuously monitor students' learning progress. In addition, teachers should always be supportive to students' needs and make an effort to become students' friend. For *Resposviness*, teachers have to respond to students in a timely manner as well as pay immediate attention to students' requests.

Table 2. Indicators of SERVQUAL Dimension

Dimension	Example Indicators
Reliability	▪ Error-free registration system ▪ Students' accurate records ▪ Accuracy of bill ▪ Consistency of marketing
Assurance	▪ Health and safety standards ▪ Transparent rules and measures ▪ Qualifications of lecturers ▪ Accreditation/ degree recognition
Tangibles	▪ Good infrastructure and facilities ▪ High-speed internet connection ▪ Clean and green environment ▪ Professional appearance of university personnel
Empathy	▪ Attention to special request ▪ Genuine or courteous service ▪ Fair and unbiased treatment ▪ Student-first education policy
Responsibility	▪ Effective communication ▪ Prompt response to students ▪ Efficient management of students' queries/issues ▪ Timely correction of any errors

When looking at each dimension separately, previous research found that main contributing factors to students' satisfaction include Empathy, Assurance, and Tangibles [18], [19]. Maushart [24] also mentions that students' satisfactions with their college experiences are mainly contributed by their contacts with the lecturers (hence empathy). In addition, other studies show the strongest relationship to students' satisfaction is derived from empathy, followed by assurance and tangibles [18]. With the three factors (Empathy, Assurance, and Tangibles) on

the spotlight, an acronym of each term yields the word "EAT". Similarly to the fact that all of us need to "eat" to survive, this paper proposes "EAT" strategy as a survival approach for all educators to sustain our career in the long run. The next section is therefore to provide recommendations on how to apply each of these three constructs into education setting.

4. "EAT" STRATEGY

This section offers applications of Empathy, Assurance, and Tangibles, respectively in educational context. While "EAT" strategies can be utilized in all fields of study, most examples are directly for tourism-related fields.

Empathy

Research has shown that students' satisfaction is mostly contributed by empathy, which is expressed through university personnel's caring and individual attention to serve students with genuine and courteous service. Empathy also implies that university's policy must accommodate different needs of students. For example, opening hours of supporting facilities (i.e. study rooms and computer labs) should be flexible to students' convenient schedule.

For an individual teacher, empathy is wholly centered on the lecturers' attitude and behaviors towards students. We should not focus solely on teaching, but also make attempt to become friends with students which can start with remembering their names and taking time to know each student. Educators must also maximize a learning environment of learner-centeredness, allowing students to learn by using their strengths and learning styles. Therefore, we have to be very understanding and accepted towards the nature of Gen Z. As previously mentioned, Gen Z's world centers on their smartphones and Sandars and Morrison argue that students learn better when they do not need to divide their attention between device usages and class activities [8]. However, educators often perceive students' use of smartphones in classes as sign of being disrespectful. Educators need to let go our ego and the belief that all students must respect us. Many of us believe that it is students' responsibilities to do whatever it takes (follow teacher's or university's order) to complete the degree [10]. Consequently, teachers are still reluctant to change. Yet, Gen Z believes that respect is not derived from the traditional norm of seniority level, rather one has to earn respect [10]. Instead of being offended when students do not pay attention at us, educators should alter students' behaviors by teaching the importance of listening through an open discussion in class. We should educate students properly to reduce their sense of entitlement and increase their critical judgment and righteousness towards institution's rules and orders [10].

To educate students properly, we must teach student the way they learn [25]. Customized experiences are needed to keep students thriving [10]. With Gen Z as a visualized leaner with a short attention span, educators must incorporate technology in learning and a variety of teaching techniques. This can be executed through students' homework and projects assignment. Class projects should give Gen Z opportunities to work on something that they are good at and to show their diverse skills, such as, writing, speaking, drawing, performing, media advertising, photographing, VDO making, editing, etc. For example, tourism educators can assign them to work on their own tourism blogs or making travel documentary VDOs. This will enable teachers to notice students' behaviors, importantly, their interests and hidden talents. In addition, teachers could launch quizzes on line by posting questions on Facebook after watching YouTube VDOs on any specific topic, We could also quiz them online through game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot.com.

In addition, educators should avoid conducting long hours of classes. Unless unavoidable, educators must assign a break time in between. To create a productive yet fun break, we can assign students to take turn each week in presenting their hometown's specialty through food and music. Then, students can enjoy tasting local cuisine and listening to folk music together. This way will also enhance students' pride of their roots. Alternatively, teachers can ask students to vote on activities during the break and/or topic of interest that should be brought into the class discussion. By doing so, students would feel ownership to the class and perceive that their opinions are being valued or respected by their teachers. As Weinberger and McCombs suggest, students who perceive that their teachers care for them perform better than those who perceive oppositely [26]. In addition, collaborative learning can be a productive way to engage students in the classroom. This can be done through group discussion, group works and projects, team competition, etc. For example, each group of students can be assigned roles as tour leaders who need to lead games (ice-breaking activities) on the tour bus. After all groups lead their games, students can cast their votes online for their favorite team and the winner will receive some prizes from the course instructor. In this way, students are given opportunities to be physically active and it fits to their nature as being competitive.

As previously stated, empathy is the extent to which lecturers are sympathetic and supportive to the needs of students. Educators should also allow students to submit their class assignments through students' preferred or convenient channels such as Facebook or Line group. Educators' communication channels should be paralleled with students. Apart from classroom-related matters, teachers should offer opening channels for students' personal communication and always be sensitive to their personal matters.

Assurance

In a broad picture at the administrative level, assurance concerns with the university's accreditation and public recognition. It also refers to university's health and safety measures (i.e. insurance, health, safety and security control), accuracy of student's supporting systems (i.e. registration and finance), and university personnel' professionalism expressed through knowledge and job performance.

For each individual teacher, assurance means that we should start building trust and confidence to our students.

Since the first class, we should inform students verbally and by written about rules and policy i.e. attendance, make-up classes and exams, grading and evaluation, etc. In tourism-related courses, students may have additional uniform requirement apart from their student uniform. Instructors must therefore clarify when to wear in the classroom. Furthermore, we should always convey our academic credential to our students. By communicating our background (knowledge and/or experiences) that are related to the assigned course, educators can earn trust and confidence from students. For example, teachers in a specific course, such as cruise or aviation management, shall acquire extensive practical experiences in the field prior to teaching the course. Occasionally, an instructor should integrate special lectures or sharing experience section from tourism practitioners as to provide students updated insights from the industry. Furthermore, since many tourism-related courses require understanding of English and some curricula are operated as international programs, the responsible teachers must demonstrate their teaching qualifications and prove their English proficiency. Apart from teaching qualifications, teachers must be able to transfer knowledge to students. While effective verbal communication through speaking is important for all educators, non-verbal communication should not however be neglected.

Tangibles

At the administrative level, attention is needed for providing basic infrastructure and good physical environment in the university including the following: 1) accessibility and availability of buildings and parking lots that sufficiently accommodate students' needs; 2) cleanliness and comfort environment surrounding the university; 3) a decent condition of each classroom's considering lighting, temperature, smell, cleanliness, comfort seating, and well equipped facilities (such as audio and computer system); 4) proper classroom size that allows students to learn effectively; and 5) professional appearance of all university personnel.

For each individual teacher, our professionalism can simply demonstrate through good gestures and characters. Also, teaching materials should be well-written and designed. We can design our curriculum to be more interesting and trendier. For example, an instructor of health tourism class can integrate the illustration of Zumba and Yoga exercise by assigning students into groups to demonstrate various gestures. In addition, with more practical-based courses such as *Tourist Guide* and *Tour Planning and Organizing*, students should not just learn theoretically from books or lecture notes, but they must have opportunities to practice guiding and leading the tour in a practical situation. Another example is the course *Information Technology in Tourism Industry*; showing students only the images and simulation is never adequate. Educators must provide practical trainings that students can directly see and experience using those programs. This implies that educators themselves must continuously be updated with the latest versions of programs popularly used in the tourism industry, such as Opera Property Management System for hotel and Amadeus for airline reservation.

Moreover, educators should make use of visual-based teaching materials such as those available on YouTube, Netflix, reality programs, etc. As Gen Zers are less analytic and more holistic, therefore extensive (not intensive) readings are recommended. Furthermore, reading materials should be visually appealing and thought-provoking [10]. Also, students' assignment should be challenging and more technologically based. However, to which extent to apply technology in the classroom activities, course developers must consider the learning needs before determining whether technology-based teaching is needed. It should be the means to an end not an end in itself [26]. Teaching ought to drive the technology and not vice versa [27]. Hence, technologies should serve as the complementary to our teaching [28].

5. CONCLUSION

Just like any other business, tourism education needs a transformation to survive in an open competitive market. Furthermore, the educational provider as a supply side is facing a profound challenge to adapt ourselves in the digital society and to the new generation of students, or the so-called Gen Z. This paper presents the discussion on generation gap between teachers as digital immigrants and students as digital natives. In order to respond to the challenge, the author provokes educational providers to view education in the same perspective as the tourism industry, hence a service industry. Students should be viewed as customers and educators are service providers. In this sense, educators can apply the concept of Service Quality to heighten students' satisfaction. Among the five dimensions of SERVQUAL model, previous studies show that the most contributing factors to student's satisfaction are Empathy, Assurance and Tangibles. Taking abbreviation of each word, this paper presents "EAT" strategy. The paper discusses EAT in detail with examples offered for the university where both administrators and individual teachers can benefit from. It is important to university administrators to facilitate educators' teaching through a good establishment of the unit that supports and provides trainings and workshops on teaching with technology on a regular basis. Definitely, this evolution requires much effort. However, it is important to be mindful that not all teachers are open for changes. Suggestions provided throughout the paper may create an extra burden on teachers who are already occupied with overloaded works. Therefore, a university should offer incentives to convince teachers to adapt better modes of teaching that best educate Gen Zers. Though many strategies here focus on technological integration, the author strongly insists that teaching cannot solely depend on technology. Not all approaches are effective and not all are needed at once. We as educators must try different techniques and observe students' responses. Lastly, the dichotomization of generation gap should be interpreted with cautions. Generalization (teachers as digital immigrants vs. students as digital natives) can be misleading. Students are diverse by their demographics which differently influence values, attitudes, and abilities, thus digital tools might not serve all students across nations [5]. Palfrey

and Gasser [29] also noted, technology is less predominant in developing countries and technological access might still be limited to the certain socio-economic structure.

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