Narrative study: Travelers' perception of Maldives 'one island – one resort' setting

- Recognizing its Missing Cultural element

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ABSTRACT

Maldives is a well-known leisure travel destination with the rich natural resources and the uniqueness of topology. The country is formed by 1,190 small islands which are connected by 26 atolls. This "one island – one resort" type of resort distinctively developed by the Maldives for the purpose of environmental protection and becomes an iconic resort setting. Most of the previous studies are mainly focusing on Maldives' environment sustainability, the mass tourism impact on the environment, and the global warming impact on this low elevation of the island, therefore the author would like to focus the paper on the traveler's perception on Maldives as a destination. As tourism is their primary source of economic growth and development, understanding the traveler's perspectives will help the Maldives Ministry of Tourism to improve their policy settings and its sustainable competitive advantage. It is a practical review of traveler's perception on the Maldives' 'one island – one resort' layout and understands how it differential from the other similar destinations such as Bali, Thailand, Fiji, Hawaii and etc…

This qualitative research paper has adopted the narrative approach by interviewing the participants through an open-end question. The participants must have traveled to Maldives before and stayed at the 'one island – one resort' settings. The benefits of email interview allow the participants to have enough time to think and openly describe their experience and feelings toward Maldives, particularly on this 'isolate' setting. Thirteen out of eighteen respondents had been replied. From these rich and descriptive data, content analysis is used to study the intended message and discover the missing elements of its distinctive. Majority of the participants have positive holistic feelings and experience. They are all pleased with the service; and felt exclusive and a sense of belonging due to the high privacy of settings. Some have mixed feeling that they may feel restricted if they stay longer, and commented the essentials to select a resort with nice beach, different food variety and selections of activities. One participant felt disappointed because of the missing of local culture in comparing to other resort destination and believed it is over-rated by the media.

Overall, the result is very similar to the Maldives Visitor Surveys (MVS) conducted by the Maldives government to investigate the tourist satisfaction. The purpose of the visit is for relaxation or a get-away. The tourists are very satisfied with the hotel service and their dining experience. The author recommended the Maldives Ministry of Travel to encourage the investors to add more local element at the resorts, such as performing Bodu Beru or other

local entertainments to increase the travelers' authenticity experience. This may help Maldives to sustain their competitive advantages to other similar destinations. Corresponding to the comment of over-rated by the social media, a further study may conduct. As well as the pricing in comparing to the other similar destinations as a few respondents' comments that it is expensive travel to Maldives.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Travelers' perception of the Maldives' uniqueness of the "one island – one resort" setting; they find this "isolated" environment creates a sense of seclusion and belonging.
- Travelers' experience related to the resort types, variety of activities and food choices, which corresponds to their length of stay.
- Missing cultural elements that set the Maldives apart, which the Maldives Ministry of Tourism may need to pay attention to in order to be more competitive than other similar resort destinations.

KEYWORDS: Maldives; One Island – One Resort; Culture; Narrative Approach; Content Analysis

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rich natural resources and the archipelago make the Maldives a unique and popular travel destination. Interestingly, back in the 1960s, the United Nations did not recommend the Maldives as an ideal destination for tourism due to its landscape structure (Kundur, 2012). The first hotel was only built in 1972, but ever since, tourism, which now more focuses on the luxury market segment, has become an important source of economic growth ("World Travel Guide - Maldives Travel Guide and Travel Information," 2017).

Sustaining the Maldives' national resources has become an important government responsibility to aid the developing tourism. To avoid any damages to its reef corals and other natural resources, tourism planning must be carefully phased to balance cost and benefits. The Maldivian government has issued a series of regulations for resort construction, resulting in the unique layouts of each island and the facilities of the resorts. This "isolation" concept, also known as "one island – one resort", makes the Maldives different from other resort destinations, where the resorts are built along beaches or shorelines. Other than its extraordinary topology, the mixture of Indian, Sri Lankan, Arab, and African heritage has established its rich and mixed culture.

Many previous research papers have studied the Maldives' development of tourism, environment, and sustainability, but there has rarely been any discussion on its local cultural elements or cultural tourism. This paper aims to investigate whether the tourists are aware of the rich and distinctive Maldivian culture, which sets this destination apart from other similar destinations. The study applies both constructivist and narrative approaches to achieve this objective. The research question is formulated as an open question to travelers for their perception of the Maldives' unique layout "one island – one resort". The objectives are:

- To investigate and construct the travelers' experience and how they perceived the Maldives' "one island – one resort setting" in a "narrative" format.
- To explore the travelers' ideas of the Maldives and identify any missing elements of the Maldives' uniqueness.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Republic of the Maldives

The Republic of the Maldives is situated in the Northern Indian Ocean (Appendix 1) ("Maldives location," 2017; "Map of Maldives," 2017). The official language is Dhivehi; English is the second language. Its closest neighboring countries are India and Sri Lanka, which are about 500 km away (Kundur, 2012; "Maldives Culture," 2017; "Visit Maldives-Cultures," 2017). The Maldives consists of an archipelago comprising twenty-six coral atolls and 1,190 small islands. "Atoll" comes from the Maldives' word "atholhu", and atolls vary in size ("Visit Maldives - Geography & Location," 2017). The reef structures protect its unique topography with 19 administrative atolls. The chain of these extended islands is about 820 kilometers or 510 miles. Due to the government's protection of the natural resources, only 198 islands out of the 1,190 are occupied, an area of 300 square kilometers ("Culture of Maldives," 2017; Kundur, 2012). Because of the low elevation of the island, the Maldives is endangered by global warming. The Government of the Maldives has worked hard and established numerous regulations to protect the country ("Culture of Maldives," 2017; "World Travel Guide - Maldives Travel Guide and Travel Information," 2017).

2.2 History & Culture

The customs and social behavior of the Maldives' inhabitants are heavily influenced by various cultures including Sri Lanka, Arab countries, and Africa ("Culture of Maldives," 2017; "Visit Maldives- Cultures," 2017). The early settlers came from Sri Lanka and Southern India before 500 B.C., hence the country was originally Buddhist. Later, following the arrival of sailors from East Africa and Arab countries, it became an Islamic country and has remained its religious today. It was controlled by Portuguese government from 1558 to 1573, and became a protectorate of the British government in 1887. In 1968, it announced its independence as The Republic of Maldives. ("Culture of Maldives," 2017; "The Maldives," 2017; "Maldives History," 2017; "World Travel Guide - Maldives History, Language and Culture," 2017). It has a rich and vibrant culture that has evolved into a unique and exclusive character.

Maldives has limited food sources, hence most of the food for tourists are imported. Since it is an Islamic country, their main foods are rice and fish. Alcohol and pork are not permitted for the local communities, except tourist resorts. Tourists are allowed to consume alcohol,

therefore the local residence produce the brew from the coconut palms, which is known as "raa", as a source of income ("Culture of Maldives," 2017).

Music and dance are the way to entertain their guests, particularly during the festival seasons. The dance stories are associated with their folk stories. As the island is surrounded by sea, most of their old folk stories depict fearsome sea demons and spirits that haunt the islands ("Visit Maldives- Cultures," 2017). One of the famous Maldivian traditions is "Bodu Beru", which involves a group of dancers and musicians. "Bodu" means big and "Beru" means drums; they are made of coconut wood and manta ray skin, nowadays they use goat skin ("Boduberu the local Maldivian music," 2017). The wild and frantic movements of the dancers with the rhythmic beating of drums demonstrate the heavy African influence. The dancer's costumes are the traditional garb of sarongs, and white long-sleeved shirts. Other kinds of traditional music and dance entertainment are Dhandi Jehun, Langiri, Thaara, and Gaa Odi Lava. There are also exclusive performances by women, e.g. Bandiyaa Jehun, Maafathi Meshun, and Bolimalaafath Neshun ("Culture and Tradition in the Maldives," 2017; "Maldives Culture," 2017; "Visit Maldives- Cultures," 2017).

With the abundant natural resources, the livelihood of many inhabitants of the islands is based on making lacquered shell vases, small wooden boats, braided mats, and shell jewelry by hand. These handicrafts will be sold to the tourist as the additional income for the local communities.

2.3 Maldives' development of 'One island – One resort' concept

Due to the open access of the natural resources and the nature of activities involved by the tourists, policymakers need to plan the infrastructure and control tourism carefully and sustainably, to avoid any damages in the environment and social impacts of mass tourism. It requires a balance between the economic cost and benefits of tourism. As a result, only a small number of islands is selected to build resorts. According to the researchers Sathiendrakumar and Tusdell, the tourism development is based on the concept of "isolation" (Sathiendrakumar & Tisdell, 1989). In other words, the country's geographical features are utilized in order to develop the small islands into tourist resorts. The first resort with 280 rooms was opened in 1972, but saw fewer than thousand arrivals (Brown, Turner, Hameed, & Bateman, 1997; Kundur, 2012). Ever since then the Maldivian tourism industry has had a five-phase plan for tourism development in place (Kundur, 2012). The Maldives' government has issued policies and regulations restricting the development of buildings. For instance,

only a maximum of 20% of the total land capacity may be utilized for buildings. Water bungalows are allowed only to enhance the appeal of the resort; they are not an alternative solution due to the lack of land space (Brown et al., 1997). Therefore, every resort's design and layout is determined by the island's landscape, which makes it unique.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, the accommodation is categorized into four types: resorts, hotels, guesthouses, and safari vessels. The "resort" type is built on an isolated island setting, which is also known as "one island – one resort" concept (*Maldives Ministry of Tourism - Tourism Yearbook*, 2016). In the first half of 2017, there were 657,540 arrivals in total, an increase of 6.3% when compared to 2016. (*Maldives Ministry of Tourism - Tourism update*, Jun 2017). The top travelers are Europeans with a share of 48.7%, whereas the Asia Pacific region ranks second (with a share of 42.8%) and Americans rank third with a share of 3.2% (*Maldives Ministry of Tourism - Visitor Survey*, Feb 2017). As of September 2017, the average occupancy is 59.7%, with an average length of 6.2 nights' stay (*Maldives Ministry of Tourism - Monthly Report*, Sept 2017).

2.4 Visitor Information & Satisfaction

The Ministry of Tourism conducts Maldives Visitor Surveys (MVS) to investigate tourists' motivation and satisfaction, and to identify where improvements can be made. According to the report of February 2017, international visitors are mainly motivated by the unique natural beauty of the beaches and the marine biodiversity of the coral reefs (*Maldives Ministry of Tourism - Visitor Survey*, Feb 2017). The purpose of visits was either relaxation (51%), honeymoon (25%), or diving and snorkeling (11%). In terms of satisfaction, over 85% ranked the hotel service as "excellent" or "very good", including cleanliness and management. A score of "excellent" and "very good" was awarded for more than 82% of the dining experience, and for more than 80% of the activities (such as snorkeling, diving, and sightseeing). Among the activities, only 16% of the visitors visited the cultural and heritage sites.

Furthermore, about one out of three visitors in the participant survey said they have visited a similar destination, such as Mauritius, Thailand, the Seychelles, Bali, Fiji, the Dominican Republic, Hawaii, Zanzibar, Australia, and the Caribbean countries (*Maldives Ministry of Tourism - Visitor Survey*, Feb 2017). The Maldives' beaches and underwater experience were ranked 63% and 56% better respectively than those destinations. Overall, 94% of the visitors

stated the holiday met their expectation and 92% will re-visit the Maldives. About 98% would recommend the Maldives to others.

2.5 Research Gap & Aim of this Paper

Many previous papers have focused on the Maldives' tourism development, environmental awareness or sustainability. Kundur discussed how the Maldives developed its tourism, its changes over time and its impact on the economy (Kundur, 2012; Sathiendrakumar & Tisdell, 1989). Price and Friaq assessed how the Maldives' tourism development plan has impacted on its natural resources, particularly on the reef condition (Brown et al., 1997; Price & Firaq, 1996). The scholar Domroes researched sustainable development in the Maldives (Domroes, 2008). However, nobody has inquired into the "one island – one resort" concept of the Maldives from a visitor's perspective. This research question seeks to explore travelers' impressions of the Maldives. For this purpose, the author has adopted a qualitative method with a narrative approach. An open question was sent to 18 participants, asking them to write about their Maldives' vacation, and 13 participants replied. The author then analyzed these rich and thick data descriptions to understand how the travelers perceived the Maldives and its unique layout of "one island – one resort" settings.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Narrative Approach

In qualitative research, there are numerous ways to understand the human experience. The narrative approach allows the researchers to study the human experience in a narrative form through storytelling. The importance of narrative study is to understand the meanings attached to the individual's experience of an event. This approach has been widely used by other disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, health science, social history, and linguistics. For the last 20 years, this approach has also been used in tourism (Mura & Sharif, 2017).

Referencing to Mura and Sharif (2017), "*by analyzing the way individuals construct and represent events of their life, we can take a picture of social phenomena at the macro level as narratives are 'situated' in a particular socio-cultural context*" (Mura & Sharif, 2017, p. 195). This leads to a more in-depth understanding of an individual person or a small group of participants, rather than investigating the stories of a large group (Savin-Baden, 2013). Through the storytelling descriptive, people tend to share true stories. In other words, it is

also a more focused study, hence more in-depth understanding (rich and thick description) is gained and the story is authentic.

According to the book of Narrative Methods for Human Science discipline, narrative approach is defined as:

> "*Narrative researchers generally work within the interpretive paradigm: an approach to research that positions people as active subjects (rather than objects) in a social world where "reality" is "accomplished" or "constructed" through the everyday practices of meaning making. Thus, understanding the social world requires researchers to explore the meanings (and perhaps motives) people bring to their everyday experiences, as well as to develop an understanding or explanation of where those meanings come from, and how they shape "reality"*" (Riessman, 2008, p. abstract).

The adoption of this narrative approach requires data analysis, interpretation, reinterpretation and representation of the participants' perspectives, and meanings through the process of storytelling (Savin-Baden, 2013). As narrative research sees the participants' stories as social products, researchers are considered "outsiders", who collect the "insiders'" stories to communicate their meaning to the audience, concluding with an unbiased result ("Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences," 2008). Interviews are the most common method of narrative data collection.

3.2 Interview as Data Collection

The data collection was done through interviews. Interviewers will strive to uncover facts and develop understandings and interpretations of people and situations. According to Arksey and Knight (1999), "*Interviews are a central data collection method for exploring data on understandings, opinions, what people remember doing, attitudes, feelings and the like, that people have in common*" (Savin-Baden, 2013, p. 358). The unstructured interviews were conducted through an open-end question which permitted the interviewees to elaborate their experience in a more in-depth description of the topic or phenomenon.

The author chose the email interview approach to ensure the participants were not only Hong Kong residents. Another reason was to give the participants enough time to think and refresh their experiences before responding.

3.3 Sample Size

Because the author chose the qualitative narrative approach, unlike quantitative research, with the objective emphasizing on providing a quality in-depth analysis, 18 participants were invited. The participants were chosen through snowball sampling through friends and social media (i.e.: Facebook). The purpose of this study is to understand how the travelers perceived the Maldives's unique "one island – one resort" setting, therefore it was necessary to qualify the participants. Two screening questions were established, firstly the participants must already have visited the Maldives. Secondly, they must have stayed in a resort on an isolated island. A total of 13 participants responded. Their replies were only based on one open-ended question, which allowed them to openly elaborate on their experience without boundaries. This way, there was no leading or influential impact by the author. To avoid too brief responses, the author recommended the participants to write a minimum of 250 words.

3.4 Content Analysis

In order to derive the meanings from the 13 participants' interview transcripts, content analysis was used. Content analysis is a common method in the field of social science. In recent years, tourism has adapted this to examine the context of feedback by tourists, and/or to identify different understandings of conceptual issues (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). Dwyer et al. (2012) believed this is a very useful application for the tourism industry, particularly in comparing communications about a destination.

The well-known scholar Harold Lasswell states that it is a technique used to describe a specific event at a specific time with optimum objectivity, precision and generality (Dwyer, Gill, & Seetaram, 2012). According to the SAGE Encyclopedia, the Qualitative Research Method "*is a commonly used method of analyzing a wide range of textual data, including interview transcripts, recorded observations, narratives, responses to open-ended questionnaire items, speeches, postings to listservs, and media such as drawings, photographs, and video*" (Given, 2008, p. 120).

Coding is a very time-consuming process, as it is the essential part of the content analysis. "*The coding process refers to the steps the researcher takes to identify, arrange, and systematize the ideas, concepts, and categories uncovered in the data*" (Given, 2008, p.85). The researcher will group the phrases, behaviors, and feelings into different labels. Then they

are broken down further into smaller categories, relationships and patterns, in order to draw the conclusion.

As the respondents replied by email, the researcher was able to use the written responses directly. To analyze the texts, the researcher first needed to read and understand each participant's intended meaning to gain a holistic overview (interpretation in a sense of a whole). The next step was to cluster or code the data set into "categories" or "themes." This process requires re-visiting or re-categorizing each item individually, and combining them to uncover perceptions and insights. It is also important to note that one text or sentence may fall into several categories or themes (Given, 2008). Validity and reliability are essential for any kind of research.

> "*Validity and reliability are key to robust content analysis. In qualitative terms, the researchers doing a qualitative content analysis seek trustworthiness and credibility by conducting iterative analyses, seeking negative or contradictory examples, seeking confirmatory data through methodological triangulation, and providing supporting examples for conclusions drawn*." (Given, 2008, p. 121)

4.0 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

For reasons of confidentiality, all participants are anonymous and thus only identified with the symbol "P". All participants visited the Maldives for leisure and relaxation, with an average length of stay of 5.4 nights. Due to the small number of respondents, the analysis was done manually. It benefits the researcher to have a more in-depth understanding and correlation between each meaning/ theme, whereas computerized coding is based on the definition of words, potentially missing their holistic and underlying meaning.

4.1 Step 1: Holistic Overview

Overall, most of the participants had positive feelings about their visit to the Maldives. See **Table 1** for examples of the holistic feelings of the participants. They really enjoyed their stay and found the Maldives to be a very peaceful and secluded place. One respondent believed that the "one resort– one island setting" could create the feeling of "ownership" and "belonging." Some had mixed feelings relating to their length of stay, the resorts' size, the variety of activities, and the food choice. The visitors were excited about this unique

experience; however due to the island size, the activities and food choices, they may also have felt restricted by the private island setting.

Only one respondent felt disappointed and could not find any difference to other similar destinations. This particular respondent stated that he/she is a frequent traveler who travels about four to five times a year and has been to many destinations, his/her knowledge and experience may be comparatively higher than others. He/she furthermore specified that the media impact that creates fantasy perceptions of the Maldives may have caused the disappointment. In other words, one's expectations and feelings may also depend on advertising and on that person's traveling experience.

Table 1: Examples of Holistic Feelings & Experience

Positive	P1 - "*It was wonderful. Felt very secluded and safe* the "
	P6 - "*In one word – Awesome. Being the only resort on the island there were no-guests/ visitors around and very exclusive*"
	P12 - "*Experience was awesome, the resort was newly opened, beautiful and tranquil…. Not too many tourists at that time, so had great privacy*"
Mixed	P11 - "*I was on a break from work which is very high pressure and hectic. So it was a blissful respite to just get away to a remote island where there is only one resort and nothing else…. I loved my 4 nights stay, however any longer, I would've started feeling a bit restless to get out.*"
	P10 – "*as for the one island setting, it is a quite unique and exciting experience to take a round trip along the beach…. But private island resort has its limitation on food variety, not much choices on meals and snacks due to transportation inconvenience*"
Negative	P18 - "*I have been in many resort destinations including The Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, Sri Lanka etc…. I was a little disappointed about Maldives when I arrived. I think it is over-rated*

	by the media. The scenery and experience were not as unique as I expected…."

4.2 Step 2: Cluster into Category & Re-categorize

After getting the "sense of whole", the researcher first attempted to categorize the feelings of the participants into "themes", however the respondents' responses were more factual and very technical. Their replies were more or less related to their dining experience, hotel service, hotel layout, environment, activities and costs, therefore the author decided to categorize them into the following items:

Accommodation	including layout and types, such as beachside villa or overwater villa
Food	Options, variety and quality
Hotel Service	Staff friendliness
Environment	Beaches, coral reefs, sky, and other natural settings
Activities	Options, variety such as snorkeling, diving etc the …
Value for Money	Cost

Almost all participants felt the hotel service was friendly, which is also one of the reasons for their memorable stays. The natural scenery was magnificent. Security was never mentioned as being an issue during their stays. P10 stated "*there is no traffic noise, no beach vendors compared to those hotels/ resorts squeezed in one island…. Security is almost a non-issue in private island*". Due to this high privacy of the resorts, and the accommodation layout with immediate access to the sea, which is different to where they came from (cities with high rise buildings and noise pollution), they felt exclusive and unique. Furthermore, the purpose of their traveling to the Maldives was to relax and re-charge after exhausting work. They also enjoyed the number of activities and the quality of the beach, which helped them to quickly pass the time. See **Table 2** for the examples of themes quotes from the respondents.

These resorts are set on private islands; hence they depend on the beaches, the variety of activities and restaurant options. There is also interconnectivity between each category, as P1 stated that "*the island itself was lovely and it's a nice feeling to be able to walk around the*

whole island freely and easily. However, it is very dependent on whether or not that island has nice beaches." Another respondent, P4, also made a comment that the restaurant variety is one of the important factors to enjoy his/her stay. There are also some educational elements involved. He/ She appreciated the nature more after learning from the marine biologists how they take care of the sea turtles and coral reefs. The same respondent stated "*it could be a memorable journey but educational. We do now stop using straws, bring our own bottles all the time and no plastic bottles.*"

Five out of 13 respondents commented about the pricing and found it expensive. Respondent P8 stated that "there was a price to paid to get this feeling!" The experienced traveler, P18, found it is not worth to pay this price and commented that he/she is able to get a similar experience in other similar destinations at a lower cost.

Table 2: Examples of each Category

Accommodation	P3 – *"I like the exclusivity, the fact that we stayed in a free standing house, as opposed to an apartment or detached house is important to me. We are getting away and I like the privacy, a beach area that belongs to ourselves, the peace and security that I can basically leave my things outside the house and there is no need to worry about theft."*
	P8 - *"We stayed at a water villa, which was built on top of shallow water. This definitely gave me a feeling of getting away from normality."*
	P6 – *"immediate access to the sea and the views were fantastic"*
Food	P4 – *"resort must have good choices of outlets and food quality is truly important, I have experienced one resort which has a limited choice of food and quality is leading me want to go home asap..."*
	P6 – *"Although a seclusive island... very high quality of food and service"*

	P7 – "*we enjoyed a drink in a lovely restaurant, in which the central part of the floor was made of glass, and we could sit on the ring-shaped sofa at the center of the restaurant, watching various marine organisms swim under our feet…*"
Hotel Service	P2 – "*With regards to the people and service, they were extremely polite and courteous.*" P10 – "*since the public is not allowed on the island, we find a quiet atmosphere anytime during the day, employees working for the resort could remember each guest's name and provide customized services (ie : display our names on the café, handwriting welcome and farewell cards in the room) …*" P9 – "*the staffs there are not only helpful but also very friendly, since you will see them every night and day. There was a staff sort of taking care of us for the whole stay. We mentioned to him on the last day morning that we did not have time or energy to visit the club of the resort that opens only at night, he then opens the club for us and even gave us some free drinks.*"
Environment	P3 - "*There is always something along the paths that intrigued. That time there was a small bird that tried to get bread from us, and we recorded this sound and video. Another occasion, I was pleasantly surprised by the sunset with the accompanying sound of the waves approaching the seashore. I record the sound as a way to remember the atmosphere and mood at that time.*" P4 - "*The environment, the ocean around, the coral reef and if resort can really maintain a great quality and being environmentally friendly are what I do care. 6 marine biologists within Laamu who taking care of sting rays, sea turtles and the coral reef can help us get to understand the nature more.*"

Activities	P6 – "*we would never get bored at the resort…. They had the use of the whole island for a number of activities and also provided excursions to the sea…. They had more activities than a normal hotel or resort….*" P10 – "*we went to other resort in Fiji before while 2 resorts shared 1 private island, it has similar level of privacy but our activities only limited for the half side.*" P5 – "*if the resort would like to get a longer length of stay guests they must provide enough and good variety of activities*" P4 – "*Options of excursion and activities for kids or adults, they can enjoy themselves separately, have their private time and then family time.*"
Value for Money	P2 – "*To sums it up; it was amazing to see the abundance of marine life, great friendly people, but it was a big headache when we check-out and see the bill!*" P8 – "*To summarize, each island gave a different experience, and the price does dictate the exclusivity and enjoyment you can experience.*" P18 – "*…these resorts often cost much less than those in Maldives…*"

4.3 Step 3: Identify the missing element

After reviewing the correspondents, again and again, the author identified the missing element which these leisure travelers perceived is the local culture elements. It is the

Maldives' authentic sensation. From all the 13 respondents, only two mentioned the "local culture".

> P11 – "*it is not like the usual beach resort holiday where you do have the option of stepping in and soak in the local culture and also the cuisine.*"

This statement talked about the uniqueness of the Maldives resort and indeed is different to other destinations' resort settings, however he/she found the missing of local culture and cuisine in the Maldives.

> P18 - "… *in Thailand, there are beautiful cliffs and caves scenery and elephants. In Bali, I can have a taste of local culture through the food, architecture, ethnic dance, music and handicrafts. In the Philippines, there are lagoons no less spectacular than Maldives. Moreover, these resorts often cost much less than those in Maldives. The one island one resort setting does not particularly appeal to me. Its land is flat, and there is a lack of local culture and heritage.*"

Specifically, this frequent traveler P18 has further elaborated and provided examples of how he/she was able to find local cultures from other destinations. He/she was not able to find any local distinctiveness from the visit to the Maldives.

The natural landscape of the Maldives cannot be changed, but the local elements may be added to make the Maldives more competitive with other similar destinations. It is also because of the private setting that the travelers were not able to explore the local culture. In other words, the access to local culture or heritage is absent. As mentioned in the literature review, various countries influence the Maldives. Its history and culture are more related to music and dance, such as Bodu Beru, which was not mentioned by any of the participants.

According to Fyall and Garrod, heritage tourism is part of the socio-cultural assets to attract visitors (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003). Chhabra, Healy & Sills (2003, p.703) explained that an important attribute of heritage tourism is authenticity and defined it as follows:

> "*In terms of demand, heritage tourism is presentative of many contemporary visitors' desire (hereafter, tourists) to directly experience and consume diverse past and present cultural landscapes, performances, foods, handicrafts, and participatory activities. On the supply side, heritage tourism is widely looked*

at as a tool for community economic development and is often actively
promoted by local governments and private businesses."

As the Maldives do not have very distinct characteristics, it is important to start focusing on the products and how the Maldivians entertain the travelers. The Maldives' government may need to encourage suppliers or investors to put more local elements in the resorts/ hotels in order to compete with the other resort destinations. It is suggested that the resorts take advantage of the local music and dance as entertainment for their guests. The performance may have held upon arrival and alternatively at the beachside fire in the evening to enhance the travelers' experience. As a local touch, mini-versions of local villages may be built in the resorts. The education about the environment and nature protection may be further enhanced. This will help increase traveler's authenticity experience as a sustainable competitive advantage to other resort destinations.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Over the years, the Maldives has very much focused on environmental sustainability, the consciousness of the impact of mass tourism on the environment, and the impact of global warming on this low-lying group of islands. It is a well-known resort destination, as the government has purposely created the "one island – one resort" design for the benefits of environmental protection, which seems very successful. However, the local culture or element of authenticity is missing.

This paper adopted the narrative approach, which provides the flexibility of analyzing the meanings of individual stories with thick descriptive data. Its disadvantage is the possibility of potential misinterpretation of the participants' underlying meaning (Savin-Baden, 2013). Another limitation of email interviews is that the author missed out on observing non-verbal forms or facial expressions, and on the opportunity to clarify the feedback. Moreover, not everyone has the good writing skills to clearly express what they mean. A total of 18 email interview requests were sent out, and 13 respondents replied. Validation might also be a concern. More in-depth interviews, as well as a higher number of participants would be required to validate the result.

In general, these participants' results match the satisfaction survey conducted by the Maldives Ministry of Tourism. Most of the respondents were very satisfied their stay and impressed by the service. They showed appreciation of the natural environment, as well as

the private setting of the "one island – one resort" layout. As all the respondents were there to relax, the essence of "getting away" to a place of peace and quiet manifested the change from their normal stressful lives. One of the respondents was a frequent traveler who travels at least four to five times a year to a leisure destination (excluding business trips). As an experienced traveler, he/she was knowledgeable and may have had higher expectations, and the media promotion of the Maldives made him/her feel the Maldives is over-rated. It will be interesting to further explore how social media and advertising create expectations (positive and negative), and whether they are related the travelers' experience. Future studies may attempt to analyze how to promote the cultural elements from a marketing perspective. It will be also interesting to find out the pricing strategy related to "value for money" as some respondents highlighted that, potentially these respondents are the ones who paid for the respective trip.

6.0 APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Map of Maldives
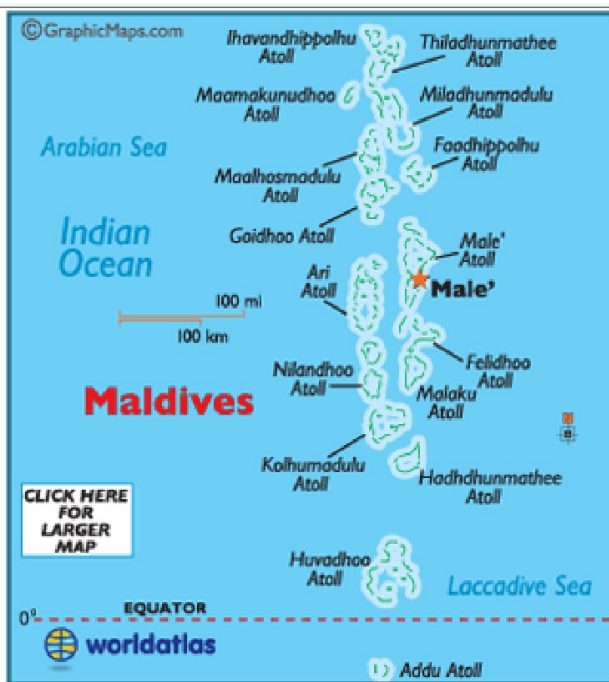
Source: The World Atlas

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