

# Authenticity and Commodification of Cultural Events for the Maldivian Tourism Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Authentication and commodification of cultural events for the tourists has been practiced for a long time. These practices have had both positive and negative effects on the host community and its cultural heritage. Tourism deals with experiences sold to tourists which has had to be authentic. Therefore, this paper aims to look at the authenticity and commodification of cultural events presented for the benefit of tourists throughout the resorts in the Maldives and its implications on authenticity of cultural products offered to the tourists. Authenticity played a wide role in tourist experiences and repeat business for the destination. Commodification on the other hand is a byproduct of making the events authentic in order for it to be presented to the tourists since these events cannot be presented in its original form or length. Hence, the events are 'staged' for the benefit of the tourists because cross cultural encounters drive authenticity of the tourism experience and create more business to the destination.

## KEYWORDS

Advantages, Authenticity, Commodification, Cultural, Disadvantages, Events, Maldives, Staged, Tourism, Tourists, Travel

## INTRODUCTION

Maldivian tourism popularity has been built from the introduction of tourism in the country in 1972. In the early stages of development of the tourism industry in the country resorts were built using the local materials and local architecture. Later during the process of modifying and commodifying cultural assets for use in tourism, authenticity was risked. This is due to presenting the cultural events by the tourism industry for the benefits of its customers rather than by those responsible for the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

Local culture generally serves as a principle example of commoditization (Cohan, 1988). Usually the local attire, customs, rituals and architecture becomes touristic commodities since they are produced for the benefit of tourists and become touristic consumption. Commoditization destroys the authenticity of local cultural products and become 'staged authenticity' (Cohan, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). Therefore, cultural products lose meaning for the locals and more attractions are needed to present to the tourists (Boorstin, 1964). Contrived cultural products are 'staged' for tourists to make it look authentic.

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Travel motivations for tourists visiting Maldives is influenced by the environment such as beach, underwater, and weather (CDE Consulting, 2014). However, the purpose that tourists visit are for honeymoon, health and wellness, diving and relaxation. During which the tourist takes part in some form cultural event such as island hopping, fishing or visiting a nearby island to experience the destination and its culture.

Maldives does not have an extensive cultural presence compared to the other countries within the region. The tourism offerings included are mainly based on the three S's, sun, sea and sand. Services offered by the resorts range from different wedding ceremonies to renewal of vows and engagement or proposal with a choice of having the ceremony at the beach, a sand bank, an island or undersea (Renewal of vows by Club Rannalhi, 2015: Anantara Hotels, Resorts and Spas, 2015: Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts, 2015: Ayada Maldives, 2015: Bandos Island Resort and Spa, 2015: Centara Hotels and Resorts, 2015: Coco Bodu Hithi, 2015: Conrad Hotels and Resorts, 2015).

Though there are events such as the marriage ceremony, renewal of vows and dances performed for tourists. The dances have similarities to the Asian and African dances due to ancestral relations and seen as purely Maldivian. According to (Sawad, nd) in developing a new kind of tourism suggests that the archaeological findings indicate that the islands were inhabited as early as 1500 BC and that the permanent settlements were established around 500BC by Buddhists and or Hindus migrating from India, among them Marco Polo, Ma Huan the Chinese historian, and the famous Arab traveler Ibn Batuta.

Since Maldives is highly dependent on the tourist trade it is essential to see if the tourism offerings by the industry is authentic and commodified. Therefore, this paper explores whether cultural events presented to the tourists are authentic and whether commodified using an objectivist approach.

## **THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF AUTHENTICITY AND COMMODIFICATION**

There has been a lot of research on tourists and their motivation for authentic experiences has been debated by scholars since 1960's (Timothy, 2011). There are a number of deviating assumptions regarding authenticity in tourist experiences such as that it is intrinsic in components of the location visited or that it is the perception and experience of the tourists, and some suggests that authenticity is not as important as the tourist having an enjoyable experience.

The earliest critic of authenticity Daniel Boorstin, claimed that tourists did not visit destinations for their authenticity and went to suggest that all tourism offerings are artificial and fake and that is the way tourists liked it (Boorstin, 1964). Although, years later MacCannell (1973; 1976) disputed Boorstin's view and proposed that tourists pursue authenticity but they are deceived into experiencing imitated tourist offerings devised to profit from the tourists.

Unlike Boorstin and MacCannell, Urry (2002) claims that tourists can recognize that the touristic environment or offering is genuine or not. Although due to the fact that some tourists are motivated by fun and enjoyment rather than discovering authentic experiences. This may also be influenced by disposable income or time, as seekers of authentic experiences has to invest money and time for research and buying the touristic offerings even if they realize that what is offered is not authentic.

Cohen (1988) agrees with Urry and suggests that tourists are able to distinguish between authentic and staged authenticity, and created a matrix that expresses the of tourists awareness of the encounter. They are (1) authentic experiences where the tourists come across accurately genuine situations and believe the experience is real. (2) staged authenticity, where the tourists are confronted by a staged reality and cannot make up their minds of it being genuine or not. (3) denial of authenticity, the tourist denies the situation is authentic even if it is. (4) contrived authenticity, tourists are aware that the situation is staged and accepts it as such.

Cohen (1998) also suggests that tourism research and its impacts on host communities operate under three assumptions. Firstly, tourism leads to commodification and usually it is the local culture that is commodified. Secondly, commodification damages the authenticity of the product or service

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