

Research Paper

Symbolic Marriage in Paradise: How a Supposedly Memorable Experience Turned into a Negative Tourism Event

Aishath Thashkeel, Ali Najeeb and Byju Koreth Puthanveetil Madhavan
Villa College, Maldives

© The Author(s) 2023. This article is published with open access by Taylor's Press.

Abstract: This paper is about an incident in which a Swiss couple who purchased a wedding renewal package at Vilu Reef Beach and Spa Resort in the Maldives, where they were holidaying, was vilified with abusive and abhorrent language with religious bigotry and sexual profanity. A video on this incident was uploaded to YouTube on October 24, 2010. The 15-minute video depicted a horrendous incident where the couple received a cascade of heinous abuse and derogatory humiliation. The celebrant briefed the couple in English that the ceremony would be conducted in the local language Dhivehi and in Arabic according to Islamic norms. However, he took advantage of the language barrier and went on a rant of profanity-laced insults, with religious slurs and sexual obscenities. As the video went viral, the local and international pressure was mounting on the Maldives government, and the image of Maldives as a “tranquil heaven on earth premium honeymoon destination” became increasingly tarnished. Why did the negative tourism event have minimal impact on tourist arrivals? Were the actions taken by the local stakeholders adequate? What different actions could the key stakeholders take to ensure that such incidents do not repeat in the future?

Keywords: Crisis management, destination marketing, nation brand image, negative tourism incident, services marketing

Suggested citation: Thashkeel, A., Najeeb, A., & Madhavan, B. K. P. (2023). Symbolic marriage in paradise: how supposedly a memorable experience turned to a negative tourism event. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Innovation in Hospitality and Tourism*, 12(2), 25–47.

Correspondence: Koreth Puthanveetil Madhavan Byju, Villa College, Maldives.
Email: b.k.p.madhavan@villacollege.edu.mv

Introduction

Brief Overview of Case

On October 30, 2010, the President of the Maldives made an unconventional phone call to a Swiss couple. This call was made to personally apologise to the couple, due to a predicament they were inadvertently involved in while they vacationed in the Maldives. The incident that led to this phone call took place on October 11, 2010, at Vilu Reef Beach and Spa Resort, one among the hundreds of resorts in the country. This incident sparked a fierce outcry and condemnation from local and international media and viewers, which placed the Maldives on the hot seat and threatened the lifeline of the country — the tourism industry. The incident was extensively publicised in the global media in October and early November 2010. By January 2012, the YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVSIGsLLeP0>) had been visited 429,347 times and attracted 2,429 comments.

The Incident

The Maldives has always positioned itself as a tranquil “heaven on earth” premium honeymoon destination. However, this image was heavily tarnished when a video was uploaded to the online video sharing platform YouTube on October 24, 2010. The 15-minute video depicted a horrendous incident — an unsuspecting Swiss couple who were renewing their wedding vows were at the receiving end of a tirade of abuse from the celebrant of the ceremony. The unwitting couple had purchased a wedding renewal package¹ at Vilu Reef Beach and Spa Resort, where they were holidaying. The expectation and hopes from the ceremony was to renew their vows “hand in hand against a golden sunset backdrop” sealed by a “kaleidoscope of romantic hues” that covers the sky during the sunset, as picturesquely described in the resort website.

Instead, the couple received a cascade of heinous abuse and derogatory humiliation. The celebrant of the ceremony was a full-time employee from the Food and Beverage Department, who was surrounded by other employees of the resort. The celebrant briefed the couple in English that the ceremony will be conducted in the local language Dhivehi and in Arabic according to Islamic norms. However, he took advantage of the language barrier and went on a rant of profanity laced insults, with religious slurs and sexual obscenities. None of the employees presented were seen trying to interject to stop nor seemed astonished by the words of the celebrant.

¹The package which is popular among honeymooners includes conducting a mock wedding ceremony as per the local tradition. It gives the couple an opportunity to shoot photo in a wedding dress (Maldivian traditional dress or the dress of couple's preference) on a beach with a scenic environment.

The image of Maldives as a “tranquil heaven on earth premium honeymoon destination” was tarnished. This resulted in the intervention by various public and private sector stakeholders to curb the repercussions, including the apologetic phone call that the Maldivian President made to the couple.

Were the actions taken by the local stakeholders adequate? Was there more that could have been done to prevent the incident? Or, what different actions could the relevant stakeholders take to ensure that such incidents do not repeat in the future?

Background

Overview of Maldives

The Republic of Maldives is an archipelago of approximately 1,190 low-lying coral islands stretched across the equator in the Indian Ocean. Only 192 islands are inhabited, and more than 150 islands are exclusively developed as self-contained tourist resorts (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The Maldives is a homogeneous society of about 500,000 people who belong to a common race, Maldivian, embrace the same culture and religion, Islam, and speak a common local language, Dhivehi (Department of National Planning [DPN], 2012). The Maldives was a British protectorate until 1965, but unlike many British former colonies, the Maldives did not inherit the British political or legal system. The Maldivian legal system is based on a complex mixture of Shariah law and English civil and common law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MoFA], 2010).

Tourism Industry

The economic and employment landscape of the Maldives started to change in 1972 with the development of two tourist resorts with a total of 280 beds, and the arrival of more than 1,000 tourists (Najeeb, 2011). Tourism created job opportunities and spawned other industries including fishing and construction.

Maldives tourism is synonymous with resorts (Kumar & Tisdell, 1989), which provides 89.6% of its tourism beds (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In 2021, tourism contributed 21.4% to GDP, approximately 48% to government revenue, and 70% of the country’s foreign currency earnings (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture [MTAC], 2012). Tourism is also the largest private sector employer, supporting 44,954 jobs or more than 22% of the country’s labour market in 2019 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023). By January 2023, statistics from the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) indicated a total of 172 resorts in operation, with over 41,000 bed capacity (MOT, 2023). Most were developed under the country’s “one-island-one-resort” policy, based on “enclave tourism” (Kumar & Tisdell, 1988). Resort islands are off-limits to Maldivians, other than employees (Najeeb, 2011). Of the 172 resorts registered in 2023, 47% are operated by local companies, 19% by foreign companies, and 34%

by local and foreign joint ventures (MOT, 2023). As most resorts belong either to a local hotel group or an international hotel chain, they operate as independent strategic business units, employing a largely independent management team.

By the end of December 2022, the Maldives had received over 1.6 million international tourists, almost three times its population (MOT, 2023). European long-haul tourists account for 58.4% of tourist arrivals in 2021, making them the leading market generator, but Asian tourists are responsible for the highest growth (Statistical Yearbook of Maldives, 2022). As a tourist destination, Maldives rides on the 3S tourism concept — sun, sea, and sand. As a premium tourism destination, Maldivian resorts have positioned themselves as a luxurious destination for different target markets — the honeymooners, ocean lovers, and even to those who prefer a Robinson-Crusoe experience. With the warm hospitality of the locals, multimillion-dollar investment in the sector, and the natural beauty of the islands, the tourism industry today is the backbone of the country.

Despite the sector's economic significance, and consistent with the adversarial reputation of HR in the hospitality industry (Baum, 2007), unfair dismissal of employees, discrimination, poor wages and service charges for blue-collar resort workers are common in Maldivian resorts (Najeeb, 2013). According to the ILO Regional Office for Asia and Pacific (2020), before the implementation of minimum wage in 2022, employee wages accounted for only 3–7% of tourism revenue, and the basic salary of a blue-collar resort worker's earnings was around USD 250 per month.

Stakeholders' Responses to the Incident

The Maldivian Government

Crisis management and recovery was the central focus of the Maldivian government when the video on YouTube went viral (“Maldives’ hotel apologises”, 2010). This began with the Maldivian Government apologising to the couple. The Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, issued a public apology (“Islamic Minister condemns”, 2010) in which the couple were issued a profoundly humble apology and the minister heavily condemned the incident. The statement also reported the Government's intention to hold discussions with the tourism industry stakeholders.

If we do not receive such reassurance, we reserve the right to take all remedial steps necessary, legislative or otherwise, to ensure that episodes such that which occurred in Vilu Reef Resort never happen again, and do not tarnish the positive image of the country built up over so many years.

(An excerpt from the Minister of Foreign Affairs's statement)

As instructed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Permanent Representative of Maldives to the UN Office at Geneva personally telephoned the couple and offered

the Government's "profound and heartfelt apologies" (The President's Office, 2010). Madam Ambassador also offered the resort management's apologies and shared with the couple the remedial measures which were to be taken.

I informed the couple that the entire country is deeply shocked and saddened by what has happened. The Maldives is renowned for its warm hospitality and this incident has brought great shame upon our tourism industry and our country.
(An excerpt from the call by Ambassador)

The President of the Maldives at the time, also contacted the couple and personally apologised for the incident (The President's Office, 2010). In the telephone call, the President expressed how the nation is deeply saddened and sorry for the couple and invited them back to the Maldives at their convenience as his personal guests. In the same week, in his national radio address, the President expressed his disgust at the incident.

The government would leave no stone unturned to ensure that an incident like this never happens again.
(“Police arrest celebrant”, 2010)

Furthermore, the Islamic Minister at the time, strongly condemned the actions of the individuals (“Islamic Minister condemns”, 2010). The Minister further added that Islam does not teach to treat non-Muslims as enemies and stated that it is the responsibility of the state institution to provide the tourists protection.

Under no circumstance did Islam allow a person to be humiliated or robbed of their money or property if they did not follow the religion.
(An excerpt from the Minister's statement)

Immediately after the news broke out, Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture (MTAC) released a press statement and condemned the actions of the employees, noting that such behaviour is utterly unacceptable, and issued an apology to the couple in question. The statement further added that the Ministry will work with Vilu Reef Beach and Spa Resort to ensure that the couple gets fully compensated for the distress caused and promised to work with the resort and the Maldives Police Service to ensure that the incident is thoroughly investigated (MTAC, 2010c).

[.....] (The Ministry) reserves the right to take all remedial steps necessary, legislative or otherwise, to ensure that episodes such that which occurred in Vilu Reef Resort never happen again, and do not tarnish the positive image of the country built-up over so many years.
(An excerpt from the Ministry of Tourism's statement)

MTAC then proceeded to hold stakeholder meetings with industry leaders and relevant government institutions, discussing ways to mitigate the negative consequences and to ensure that such events do not occur in the future. As a result of these meetings, on November 4, 2010, the Government gazetted stringent new regulations on the conduct of symbolic marriage ceremonies in the Maldives (“Maldives warns”, 2010). This new regulation (No. 2010/R-11) (MTAC, 2010b) drawn up by the Ministry of Tourism sets guidelines and severe penalties for any breach (“Resorts to face”, 2010). The regulation governs that symbolic marriage ceremonies must be conducted under the supervision of a resort’s senior management, in a language that is known to the guest.

In circumstances otherwise, the resort must provide the couple a translation of the ceremony in a language they understand. The regulation further guides the conduct of the official celebrant. Depending on the severity of the breach, the resorts can be liable to pay a fine up to MVR1 million (USD78,000), with the Ministry of Tourism also having the discretion to either cancel or withhold the permission granted for resort operation. Furthermore, all tourist resort operators who are to offer the service of symbolic marriage must register with the Ministry. In addition, Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) also played a critical role in mitigating the potential negative impacts of the incident.

Resort Management

Upon learning that the video was uploaded to social media by one of its employees, the resort management requested to remove it, while the employees involved were suspended, pending an inquiry, and referred to the Maldives Police Service (MPS) for criminal investigation. In October 2010, MPS arrested two employees present in the video. Post scandal, the resort had taken multiple steps to curb the situation and ensure that this incident does not repeat in the future. As reported by the then General Manager of the property, the resort formally apologised to the couple (“Disgust as couple mocked”, 2010). In addition, the parent company of the resort, Sun Hotels and Resorts (rebranded to Sun Siyam in 2020) (“Sun Siyam Resorts”, 2020) reiterated the apology to the guests and reported that the celebrant of the ceremony had been suspended from work. The company further added that they had requested MPS to investigate the matter (“Symbolic wedding”, 2010).

[...] The management of the resort is deeply saddened by this humiliating event..... We sincerely apologize for the damage and serious repercussions this incident could cause to the tourism industry of the Maldives, the image of the country, the Maldivian people and their government. (AFP, 2010)

In terms of taking preventive measures, the resort issued some changes to the policy governing the way symbolic ceremonies were to be conducted. Where there were no stipulated celebrants of ceremonies before, the resort now selects employees as celebrants and trains them accordingly. Additionally, a Celebrations Manager was also recruited, whose responsibility is to plan and oversee such events on the resort. The medium of language of the ceremony was also changed from Dhivehi to English, unless otherwise requested by the guests. The new policy also ensured that the Celebrations Manager met with the couple prior to the ceremony to go through the plans, and more importantly, the script of the ceremony. In compliance with the gazetted regulation on symbolic marriages, the resort also assured that a representative of the top management would attend all the ceremonies.

Local and International Media

This incident was widely reported by the local media, with one online news outlet providing explicit English translation of the profanity heard in the infamous video. Overall, the incident was reported in 43 local and 120 international sources. This included 75 newspaper articles, 50 blogs, 21 discussion boards, and 17 videos. Over 12,000 comments were posted in these sources, where commentators predominantly voiced their shock and horror while calling out to the local authorities to punish the perpetrators. Research on this incident shows that Maldivians were ashamed of the behaviour of the men in the video, with many commentators expressing their sympathy and sadness towards the guests (Shakeela & Weaver, 2012).

Local Residents

While many locals condemned the incident and empathised with the tourists, there were some locals who defended, somewhat justifying the actions of the men in the video. There could be many reasons for this justification — including unfavourable HR terms and conditions in Maldivian resorts for their employees and the fear of acculturation to something locals see as “an evil from which their community should be insulated” (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018). The fear of acculturation stems from the belief that tourism has the propensity to change or erode the existing religious and sociocultural fabric of communities, resulting in antagonism.

Aftermath and Lessons

Though the incident triggered a social media outrage, there was no immediate visible consequences that affected the tourism in the Maldives. Travel agents also confirmed that there were no requests for cancellations by customers and no dip in bookings. In fact, according to records from the Ministry of Tourism, 2010 was described as a “remarkable” year for Maldivian tourism (Tourism Yearbook, 2011). Tourist arrivals

reached and exceeded the expected target of 700,000 for the year, with a total of 791,917 tourists by the end of 2010 (Tourism Yearbook, 2010). This was a record figure in tourist arrivals to the Maldives at that time (Tourism Yearbook, 2012).

Even on a month-by-month basis, tourist arrivals in 2010 were higher in all months compared to previous years from 2006 to 2009 except for April 2010. A comparison of January-September 2010-2011 arrivals revealed an 18% increase in international arrivals (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, 2011). Despite the couple involved in the incident being Swiss, Europe was the leading market generator of tourists. Similarly, in comparison with 2009, 2010 saw tourist arrivals from Asia and the Pacific maintaining an average growth rate of nearly 31% while the Americas and Middle East registered a growth of 22.7% and 22.1%, respectively. Switzerland also made it to the top 10 markets (tourist arrivals and market share) of 2010 for Maldives. Records show Switzerland in 8th place, with an increase in arrivals from 26,783 to 27,766. This represents a market share growth from 2.4 to 3.3%. Switzerland has remained one of the leading markets in the Maldives over the years.

Teaching Notes

Learning Objectives and Intended Course Use

The learning objectives of the case study are to:

- Understand the issues and challenges this negative tourism event has had on:
 - managing nation-brand identity and image
 - hospitality destination marketing
- Identify the organisational and sociocultural factors that led to this incident and understand how micro, meso, and macro-level factors can affect the nation-brand identity and image, and destination marketing.
- Examine the crisis management and public relations strategies of the resort, government, and industry in relation to the incident.
- Develop strategies (organisational and national) to regain the confidence of tourists and other international tourism stakeholders
- Understand the significance of people management in the tourism industry to alleviate negative tourism events.

This case study is suitable for marketing management, service marketing, international marketing, hospitality management, risk management, crisis management, human resource management, social psychology, and cross-cultural management curricula.

Immediate Issues

- Going forward, what more should the key stakeholders of the hospitality industry have done to come out of this crisis?

- What should have been done to regain the tourists' and other stakeholders' confidence and rebuild its image as a customer-centric tourism industry?
- What should the government, industry, and other stakeholders do to ensure that such a situation does not arise again?
- What actions can the resort take on the HR front to enable its staff not to engage in such behaviour or manage such situations if they arise?

Basic Issues

Destination marketing and management, nation branding, destination identity, image, brand and value; service provision as drama; service roles and scripts; servicescape; emotions and moods in services; positive and negative biases; service encounters; crisis management; human resource management – employee incivility; cross-cultural issues

Teaching the Case

The case can be taught in different courses in several ways and to meet different objectives. In a service marketing class, it is recommended that the case be given to the students in the classroom. It will take no more than 15 minutes to read the case and digest the information provided in it. The instructor may also share the video clip of the incident that went viral in October 2010. There may be various versions of the video clip on YouTube or shared through other social media platforms. But we recommend sharing this clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVSIGsILeP0>) which takes around 15 minutes to watch completely.

As the video clip contains some vulgar and slurred language, the instructor may bring it to the notice of the students. The video clip has most of its parts in the Dhivehi language. Hence, students might not understand what is being spoken in conducting the ceremony. There may be alternative news media clips of the news with subtitles which may be more useful for students to watch. The instructor may encourage students to search and watch some of these clips which may be much shorter in length to understand and analyse the situation better to arrive at their conclusions. The instructor may also make available this video clip with English subtitles.

While testing the case in an actual classroom, the instructor starts the flow with this opening statement: *“Unfortunately, acts of incivility by employees are on the rise and have become common in organisations. Did you hear of any such cases in the news lately local or global?”*

This serves as a warm-up question, encouraging everyone to be drawn to the discussion. As it was done in the Maldives, students start discussing several cases of this nature. Some of them had also mentioned global negative tourism events (Su

et al., 2022, p.6). In a class like this when a question of this type is thrown to the students, it is very likely that they will talk about the instances of employee incivility that they have experienced from different hotels/resorts.

The brief opening discussion puts the students at ease and opens the class for a good discussion. Following this, the instructor could ask: *“What happened in this case?”* The simple question allows students to recall the incident and a series of reactions and responses from various stakeholders to the exposure of the incident on social media. This discussion should not take more than 5 minutes and it sets the stage for asking the remaining questions starting with the first major question listed. *“Do you expect the incident to have an adverse effect on the Maldivian tourism industry?”* and then to proceed with the other follow-up questions as shown in the session plan.

Session Plan

Question number	Details/Question	Time
	Introduction	05 mins
1	What happened in this case? Do you expect the incident to have an adverse effect on the tourism industry in the Maldives?	15 mins
2	Could this incident have been averted?	15 mins
3	Critically analyse stakeholders’ crisis management and PR efforts following the video clip about the incident going viral.	15 mins
4	What actions would have been taken by the resort, Maldivian government, and tourism industry to come out of this crisis? How did the Maldives regain tourists’, tour operators’, and travel agents’ confidence? What could have been done differently in this situation?	20 mins
5	Summary and debriefing	05 mins

Analysis (Questions and Answers)

1. What happened in this case? Did you expect the incident to have an adverse effect on the tourism industry in the Maldives or Maldives as a destination?

This incidence was a public relations nightmare and the image of Maldives as a popular tourist destination was threatened when a 15-minute video, depicting a horrendous incident — an unsuspecting Swiss couple who was holidaying at the Vilu Reef Resort and Spa, Maldives with a purchased package of renewing their wedding vows was verbally abused by the celebrant of the ceremony — was uploaded to YouTube on October 24, 2010. The expectations and hopes of the ceremony were to renew their vows “hand in hand against a golden sunset backdrop” sealed by a “kaleidoscope of romantic hues” that covers the sky during the sunset. Instead,

the couple received a cascade of heinous abuse and derogatory humiliation. The celebrant of the ceremony was a full-time contracted employee from the Food and Beverage Department, who was surrounded by other employees of the resort. As the video went viral, local and international pressure mounted on the Government, and the image of Maldives as a “tranquil heaven on earth premium honeymoon destination” was being substantially tarnished. (There can be many interpretations of what happened, why it happened, and who is to be blamed. This can be discussed at a later stage).

Will this incident have a negative effect?

Assessment of risks — Yes

- The hospitality sector expects high-quality service and experiences with credence qualities to be offered to guests. How guests evaluate the actual experience of the service will affect their decision to continue being repeat guests. Seeing or hearing a fellow guest being treated so badly is bound to be viewed seriously by potential guests who have heard the news or viewed the video shared across media channels.
- It is an expectation of the industry and guests that services offered in luxury tourist resorts to be heavily scripted. Service scripts consist of sequences of actions associated with actors and objects that, through repeated involvement, define what the guests expect. Even a small deviation from the service script can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction. So the incident at Vilu Reef Resort and Spa is bound to create a lot of dissatisfaction for the customers in question, when they come to know exactly how it was carried out and the intention of the employees carry it out, and those who viewed the video clip or heard about the way the guests were treated.
- Following their evaluation of a service encounter, guests determine to a large degree whether they will return or continue to associate with the resort or destination. Even a single employee can ruin the service experience of guests (and in turn, the evaluation of the service) by failing to perform his/her role correctly, through acts of incivility, or by projecting the wrong image of the resort, and in this case, even the destination, Maldives.
- Word-of-mouth communication has a strong influence in service. With the advances in information and communication technology, guests are now able to seek more non-personal information about services in the form of visuals, photographs, videos etc. In addition to these tangible representations of the service experience, guests also seek the opinion of others over social media channels and access guest reviews such as those on online travel agencies (OTAs) such as Booking.com, Tripadvisor etc., online ratings, and customer complaint

boards. The social media backlash that the Maldives faced led to a lot of tourists and potential tourists witnessing what had happened at the resort. Thus, there is bound to be a negative effect on their evaluation of services in the resorts of the Maldives. As mentioned above, guests evaluate hotels and destinations based on the information available on the internet. So, their decision to come to Maldives would have been affected by this incident and the negative media coverage of it.

- Adoption of the Stimulation- Organism -Response model could be an ideal way to discuss how this incident stimulated the individual's intention and behaviour (Asyraff et al., 2023).
- Extant research in tourism psychology and tourist behaviour suggests that people remember negative events more than positive ones and are more influenced by negative information than by positive information (Su et al., 2022). Thus, it is easier for guests to remember the negative service experience they have had than to think of the many routines, and positive experiences. Employee incivility to a guest is a serious issue and can generate significant negative word-of-mouth for the resort and the Maldives.
- Public memory is short-lived, and a negative guest experience shared widely on internet platforms can break all the positive brand associations that the customers have had with the destination (resort or the Maldives).

Assessment of risks — No

- The effects of such an event will only last for a very short period of time as guests are likely to dismiss this as a “one-off” incident.
- This incident was just an isolated one and does not represent the core values of the resort or the industry/country or destination. Even if many tourists and potential guests were offended by the incident, they are not likely to stop patronising the destination.
- Guests' loyalty to a brand or destination depends on social ties to the hotel or destination, perceived risks associated with obtaining the service, and the satisfaction obtained in the past. Some tourists may avoid coming to the resorts considering these factors, but when these factors are weighed carefully, there is no reason why tourists should not be coming to other resorts in the Maldives. Hence, Maldives as a destination for tourists is unlikely to be affected due to this incident.
- According to Folkes and Patrick (2003), guests tend to attribute positive qualities to the resorts/destination and its employees if they have a good experience with one service employee (positive bias towards service). This is the case in most of the resorts in the Maldives. Most repeaters are particularly attached with employees who served them. They make the decision to come again to the resort based on the excellent service provided by certain employees. Sometimes if the employee moves to another resort within the Maldives, in many cases, the guest makes the

decision to come to the resort where the respective employee is currently being employed. The memorable services provided by employees are often evident in the reviews from guests on different social media and OTA platforms, particularly mentioning the name of the employee(s). When an individual employee whose service is regarded positively, guests' positive perceptions of other employees in the hotel are also lifted. On the other hand, guests who have had a negative experience with one employee are less likely to draw a negative inference about all the employees or the resort/destination. That is, guests are more likely to attribute that negative experience to that individual employee, and not the entire resort or destination. When applied broadly, Maldives as a destination for tourists, an incident of this nature happening one of the resorts out of 172 resorts, it is very unlikely that potential tourists will be dissuaded from coming to other resorts in the Maldives.

- Public memory is short-lived. They will soon forget the incident.
- When considering Maldives as a destination, there are several probable reasons why the incident did not spur significant negative repercussions:
 - (1) History of such incidents — in the Maldives, such incidents are not common or do not recur so often, and there were no incidents of similar nature that had happened recently (just before or closer to the incident in question);
 - (2) the incident happened in a resort which did not have any history of such incidents before, and such an incident happening in one of the 172 resorts cannot be generalised as norm. Hence, potential guests might not attribute it to the whole Maldives or destination;
 - (3) the relationship between Maldives (its citizens and employees as service providers working in the tourism industry) and the international community continues to grow from strength to strength and the strong bond between the guests and employees as well as potential guests (including tour operators and travel agents) and resorts/industry/government could not possibly be weakened by an isolated incident of this nature;
 - (4) trust is built over the years through the relationship and the sustenance of the services and memorable experiences provided by the resorts;
 - (5) the reputation built over time (brand name, brand equity) would act as a shield in this case;
 - (6) just a year before the incident, the MDP (Maldivian Democratic Party) government led by the President held an underwater cabinet meeting which was widely publicised across the globe and the positive vibes of which were fresh and loud resonated well globally when this resort mock wedding incident happened, hence, the impact of the incident was overshadowed by the magnitude of the positive vibes created by the previous positive

- event;
- (7) destination marketing and promotion of the Maldives by the Maldives Marketing & PR Corporation (MPRC) is very strong;
 - (8) the crisis management strategies used by the government and other key stakeholders of the industry were outstanding and managed to mitigate well the repercussions of the incident;
 - (9) most bookings to Maldives are done through the travel agents and tour operators. They are the interface between the resorts and the potential guests. They are the primary contact point through whom potential guests seek and/or verify information about the destinations and products. As resorts sell their rooms months and, in some cases, years ahead to tour operators and travel agents, they cannot afford to receive booking cancellations from guests. Hence, it is very unlikely that they provide any information about the destination or products which would negatively impact the tourists' decision to come to Maldives. Rather, they tend to actively spread positive vibes and portray the positive image of the country in order to mitigate the risks of potential negative impacts of the incident; and
 - (10) the incident was handled so well that the impact wasn't strong enough to trigger tourism boycott etc. hence, the aftermath effect was rested relatively quickly.

Whether the issue will have long-term implications for the resort and the Maldives as a destination or not, the students should be made to understand that the resort as well the industry and the government must manage any crisis well and ensure that such incidents do not happen in future. The behaviour of the F&B and guest relations staff of the resort was unacceptable and the tourists have the right to be treated well. It cannot be emphasised enough the importance of preventing such incidents from happening because repeated negative experiences can have an adverse effect on business, brand, and destination.

2. Could this incident have been averted?

The incident was not a service encounter where customers had exercised any form of incivility. This is an incident where the guests in question had a satisfactory experience during the event that they were unaware of any incivility of the employees involved in the service delivery. They were not aware of the vulgar and erroneous language used by the employees who conducted the wedding ceremony.

To determine whether this incident could have been averted or not, we should first understand the triggers of this event or reasons which actually would have led this event to occur. When we analyse it retrospectively, there are several reasons

which could have triggered this incident. The factors responsible for the incident can be categorised as micro (individual and organisational) and macro (industry and government).

Individual and organisational

Suppression of felt emotions such as anger or frustration can induce emotional exhaustion and increase the potential for deviant behaviour including negative emotional displays (Turner & Stets, 2006). There could be many sources for such frustrations:

- (1) Traditionally, Maldivians have a very negative attitude towards tourism due to cultural and religious reasons. The services provided by resorts according to many Maldivians are not compatible with the values and religious beliefs of Maldivians. They see the environment as evil because alcohol and pork are served, and due to the presence of “scantily clad” people as tourists. The sexual slurs and profanity directed towards tourists reflect these beliefs. In his sermon, the Assistant F&B Manager explicitly stated that he doesn’t believe that it could be considered as valid because the subjects are not Muslims and the children bear out of this marriage could not be considered as legal. Serving tourists who are socially, culturally, institutionally and psychology distant from the employees trigger a flight or fight response. In addition, the asymmetrical and unequal power relationship between employees and guests further fuel mistrust and stereotyping of the tourism industry and the tourists coming to these resorts, leaning employees towards sabotaging the services they offer to guests.
- (2) Besides religious and cultural beliefs, the sermon also reflects the very recent political and legislative developments. There was reference to the new constitution and evidence/procedure, the political system and the President, and the employment contracts. There were statements about their work, referring conduct of such ceremonies as a burden for the employees, but the importance of having tourists as that is the source of their salary and service charge. Hence, the frustration could well be due to the terms and conditions of their employment and about the treatment of employees by the management. In the video clip, when one of the employees asked the Assistant F&B Manager about the video recording of it having sexual profanity and abuse directed to tourists, he responded saying that “*I don’t care ...*”. This suggests the level of dissatisfaction he had with his job and the extent to which he was prepared to compromise his job. The sermon and the talks of employees behind the scene during the ceremony also referred to how they are forced to serve the guests, reflecting on power inequalities between the guests and employees.

Government and industry

The tourism industry over the decades witnessed a private sector-led growth meaning that there were minimal interventions from the government. Hence, many key and critical aspects of tourism were unregulated. Similarly, there were no industry standards locally set and enforced for key guest related services and offerings. This type of incidences would have not occurred if the industry is well-regulated or standardised.

3. Critically analyse stakeholders' crisis management efforts following the video clip about the incident going viral.

The affected guests, the resort management, industry, and the government came to know about the incident when the video clip went viral on YouTube. Hence, all the stakeholders only had the opportunity to deal with the situation when the issue was blown up to certain extent out of proportion by the media and when there was some kind of backlash against the resort or the Maldives in the social media. As the issue would have likely had implications for the Maldives tourism, the government had to take the lead. The government acknowledged that the world is recovering from a financial crisis and the tourism is a very vulnerable industry prone to shocks from the negative tourism events of the host country. It also understood that tourists are strongly influenced by the personal opinions of others, and it is imperative to understand and control word-of-mouth communication and the negative vibes being spread. The government acted immediately and promptly released a statement, followed by statements from the resort management and from MATI (tourism employer association) reinforcing the government's statement and its position on this matter. Interestingly, through engagement with the media, the government took over the control of the media narrative and mitigated the crisis.

The government took a proactive approach to take control of the media circus. The formal apology from the President sent a strong message to the international community that the country was taking a serious stand about the incident and the international community felt that the government was genuine and sincere, rather than merely trying to do damage control. The President personally calling and apologising to the couple, followed by the resort reaching out to the couple and offering compensation, demonstrated the government and the resort's resolve and commitment to prevent such an incident from happening in the future. The strongly worded statements from all the key stakeholders of the tourism industry, condemning the incident and apologising to the couple rather than being defensive about it, reassured the international community as well as existing and potential guests, tour operators and travel agents that such incidents will not take place in future. The reassurance was reinforced by forming a committee to determine actions,

highlighting the actions taken, following up on them and updating the progress to the media in subsequent statements. There were specific spokespersons appointed to regularly update the media for a considerable period on the actions taken and progress made on the promised actions to prevent such incidents happening in the future (Su et al., 2023).

The government, the resort and other stakeholders of the industry also become more visible and active on social media, trying to manage their online reputation by not only refuting unjustified criticisms but also positively portraying resorts, the industry and the Maldives as a tourist destination. While the resort management reached out to the couple and resolved the issue and promoted guest-centric practices employed at the resort, the government together with MPRC, through social media content, led a campaign to show that the issue had been resolved to the satisfaction of the affected couple.

4. What actions would have led the Maldives tourism industry out of this crisis? How did the Maldives regain tourists', tour operators', and travel agents' confidence? What could have been done differently in this situation?

The incident clearly shows that there was a failure in the service delivery system at Vilu Reef Resort and Spa. In such a case, the resort needs to have a service recovery strategy. Although the incident had happened in an isolated resort, it had the potential to significantly impact the tourism industry in the Maldives which is the backbone of the Maldivian economy; hence, in the service recovery efforts, the government of the Maldives was heavily involved. All the stakeholders including the resort management and the government acted promptly after they came to know about the incident. The resort management called the Swiss couple and apologised and offered them compensation and tried to resolve the issue up to their satisfaction. They also assured the tour operators and travel agents that such events will not repeat in the resort. The resort also conducted an enquiry and sacked the concerned employee and all those involved in and responsible for the incident within the same day. The government also acted swiftly by issuing statements condemning the incident and apologising to the Swiss couple for the incident. The President himself called the couple and personally apologised to them. The statements from the government reassured the public and potential tourists that they will take necessary actions to prevent such incidents from happening in the future.

According to Wilson et al., (2016), in a service recovery, one needs to acknowledge the problem, explain the causes, apologise, compensate, or upgrade the customers affected, lay out options and take responsibility for what happened. This was very promptly done by both the resort management and the government for this particular incident.

To regain customer confidence, closure is vital i.e., people must be informed about all the steps that have been taken in connection with the incident and how systems have been made safer and more guest-friendly than ever before. The parties concerned must also acknowledge that a mistake has been committed and identify reasons why it had happened.

Moreover, while short-term crisis management is required, it is vital for the company concerned to focus on actions it needs to perform in the long-term so that such incidents do not recur. It also needs to seek feedback from tourists to understand to what extent unacceptable behaviour is displayed by its service personnel. The popular “tip of the iceberg” analogy prevails in service industries when it comes to service failure and customer complaints. According to this concept, only 5% of customer-encountered failure situations are visible, a major chunk of these failures goes unnoticed. So, the incident that happened at the resort could be the cumulative result of several instances of poor service practices by service personnel at the resort.

With hospitality placed so high in experience and credence qualities, the resort should focus on creating and managing effective processes and experiences. It is the process — steps, actions, activities — that lead to the experience that is finally evaluated by customers (Pike, 2015). Whether a resort wants to control it or not, the customer will have an experience — good, bad, or indifferent. So, the resort cannot leave matters to chance. The development of databases to record, track and scrutinise such incidents should allow managers to analyse patterns, trends, and the frequencies of different forms of deviant acts. The insights gained should be fed into company procedures and policies, as well as used to redesign systems and servicescape (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). The identification of uncivil behaviours and their effects can also be helpful for staff training to identify and manage such actions as well as devise strategies to mitigate them (Torres et al., 2017).

Researchers often link service provision to drama — and this provides an effective framework for describing and analysing service performances (Grove & Fisk, 2001; Grove et al., 1992). The skill of service sectors in performing routines, the way they appear, and their commitment to the “show” are all essential to the service delivery. The service actor’s performance can be sincere or cynical (when they view it to an end, e.g., just to get paid) (Porath & Pearson, 2013). The incident at the resort in this case showed that a single actor (an employee) can ruin service experience by failing to perform his role correctly, and that this goes on to project a wrong image for the resort, industry and Maldives.

The resort should do the following:

- **Selection of personnel** — this activity should be viewed as auditioning the actors. Personnel should be hired for personality, appearance, gesture, and demographic profile, to identify the right fit with the company’s desired customer-centric culture. The chances of the incident that happened at

the resort occurring will then be minimised, if not, totally avoided. The disposition of the candidate must be carefully assessed by the HR team before he/she is hired to ensure that he/she will be a problem-solver and not a problem-augmenter.

- **Onboarding** —The incident in this case happened as a result of having values inculcated through upbringing and the exposure to the Maldivian culture, values, and beliefs. If a resort is recruiting Maldivians, probably, the resort will have access to candidates with similar or same set of values and beliefs. Hence, besides a stringent screening process, it is important to have a well-thought-out onboarding process which lasts long through which the desired set of norms and values are inculcated and reinforced. As the Maldives and the tourist source countries are institutionally and culturally distant, the onboarding strategy is critical.
- **Defining roles and servicescape** — Roles could be clearly defined. The service carried out by the staff was an event and a celebration. The standard operating procedure with the scripts of each step should have been written in advance so that employees involved in such events strictly follow them and perform their roles and responsibilities accordingly. If the service has been conducted in English, a translation would have been provided. It would also have been posted at the site where the event had taken place.
- **Training** — Employees should be constantly trained to provide a seamless and a memorable experience to the guests. The emphasis needs to be high in settings such as the hospitality industry or resorts in the Maldives as the cultural and institutional distance of the tourists and hosts are high so that the gap can only be bridged through training through which customers are able to understand the tourists' culture and what they value so that employees can serve to meet or exceed guest expectations. Cultural sensitivity training is essential for employees working in resorts. Respecting other culture, values and beliefs should emphasised and reinforced through training. Training on managing stress and managing emotions is equally important. This is the only way we can avoid cultural clashes and incompatibility that led the incident in this case.

Characteristics such as loyalty, discipline, and circumspection should be inculcated in the service personnel through training. Customer-centricity can be achieved only if the employees of the organisation understand its benefits and accept customer satisfaction as a core business value. Their performance of their roles will then be sincere, rather than cynical.

Behavioural training is imperative in resorts and so is brand storytelling to inculcate the desired culture of the company. To develop a desired culture or change in the existing culture, training, and other practices such as monetary

and non-monetary incentives that reinforce the values are required to be implemented.

- **Scoring** — one of the most compelling ways to show how much civility matters to the organisation is to recognise and reward it (Porath, 2022).
- **Monitoring and supervision of employees and their work** — This incident highlighted the importance of continuously and closely monitoring employee behaviour and supervising their work in service settings such as in resorts. A continuous observance and monitoring of guest events, celebrations and ceremonies not only help managers and supervisors to prevent such incidents from happening, but also help the employees involved and concerned managers to improve these critical services offered to the guests. As highlighted on page 2 of the case that “none of the employees present at the ceremony were seen trying to interject to stop nor seemed astonished by the words of the celebrant” suggests that it had happened before and probably has become a routine. Close supervision of employee work would certainly prevent such incidents recurring.
- **Manage emotions and moods (emotional labour)** — positive emotions play a significant role in creating a memorable tourism experience (Tung & Ritchie, 2011), that lead to consumer satisfaction and behavioural intentions. A high level of emotional labour influences positive responses through empathy and assurances (Berry et al., 2002). A very high level of emotional labour is at display in this case. The Assistant F&B Manager who conducted (led) the ceremony had not even made a mere deviation, in term of emotions, from a typical traditional ceremony conducted several times before in the resort. Moreover, throughout the ceremony, the other staff listening to the Assistant Manager remained expressionless.

Final Comment on Destination Brand, Identity, and Management

This is a perfect case to teach destination brand, identity, and management. Every country has its own brand reputation, brand image, identity, and brand value. The destination brand represents the promise of memorable experiences that are distinctly associated with the destination. This case highlights the importance of managing nation branding through which the gap between the brand identity (projected by the country) and brand image (perceived by the rest of the world) can be bridged. The case illustrates an excellent example of public relations and crisis management through the collaborative effort of private organisations (resort in question in this case), country’s people and the government. It shows how the country’s people, culture and tourism can contribute to the brand image. The case depicts how well the resorts, industry and the government consolidated and reinforced the brand

image by reassuring tourists that they will have memorable experiences that they can associate with the destination, the Maldives.

Open Access: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0) which permits any use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.

References

- AFP. (2010, Oct 29). Hotel remorse as tourists abused at Maldives love ceremony. *Times of Malta*. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/hotel-remorse-as-tourists-abused-at-maldives-love-ceremony.333607>
- Asyraff, M. A., Hanafiah, M. H., Aminuddin, N., & Mahdzar, M. (2023). Adoption of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model in hospitality and tourism research: Systematic literature review and future research directions. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Innovation in Hospitality and Tourism*, 12(1), 19–48.
- Baum, T. (2007). Human resources in tourism: Still waiting for change. *Tourism Management*, 28(6), 1383–1399.
- Berry, L. L., Carbone, L.P., & Haeckel, S. H. (2002). Managing the total customer experience. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 43(3), 85–89.
- Disgust as couple mocked during Maldives wedding ceremony. (2010, Oct 28). *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/traveller/travel-news/disgust-as-couple-mocked-during-maldives-wedding-ceremony-20101028-174qy.html>
- Folkes, V. S., & Patrick, V. M. (2003). The positivity effect in perceptions of services: seen one, seen them all? *Journal of Customer Research*, 30(1), 125–137.
- Grove, S. J., & Fisk, R. P. (2001). Service theatre: An analytical framework for service marketing. In C. H. Lovelock & J. Wirtz (Eds), *Service marketing: Text, cases, and readings* (5th Ed) (pp.78–87). Prentice-Hall.
- Grove, S. J., Fisk, R. P., & Bitner, M. J. (1992). Dramatizing the service experience: A managerial approach. *Advances in Service Marketing and Management*, 1(1), 91–121.
- ILO in Asia and the Pacific. (2020). <https://www.ilo.org/asia/lang--en/index.htm>
- Islamic Minister condemns humiliation of tourist couple . (2010, Oct 31). *Minivan News*. <https://minivannewsarchive.com/society/islamic-minister-condemns-humiliation-of-tourist-couple-12933>
- Maldives Bureau of Statistics. (2012). *Statistical yearbook of Maldives 2012*. Republic of Maldives.
- Maldives Bureau of Statistics. (2020). <https://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/>
- Maldives Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Statistical yearbook of Maldives 2022*. Republic of Maldives.
- Maldives Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Island & Atoll Level Indicator Sheets*. <https://census.gov.mv/2022/island-atoll-level-indicator-sheets/>

- Maldives hotel apologizes over marriage blessing abuse. (2010, Oct 28). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/28/maldives-apology-marriage-vow-couple>
- Maldives warns of 'tough' new rules to govern weddings. (2010, Nov 4). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11696919>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2010). <https://foreign.gov.mv/index.php/en/>
- Ministry of Tourism (MOT). (2023). <https://www.tourism.gov.mv/>
- Ministry of Tourism (MOT). (2023, November). *Tourism Statistics - November 2023*. <https://www.tourism.gov.mv/dms/document/53f18eae3aac17c28ed98f3775fff08e.pdf>
- Ministry of Tourism. (2023). Daily updates. <https://www.tourism.gov.mv/dms/document/51b9d0a840168ecf091138d46b6c5272.pdf>
- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MTAC). (2010a). *Tourism Ministry promises action over "wedding vow" incident*. https://archive.tourism.gov.mv/downloads/press/press_statement_wedding_vow.pdf
- Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture (MTAC). (2010b). *MV law gazette notification*. <https://www.mvlaw.gov.mv/pdf/gavaid/minTourism/R11-2010.pdf>
- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MTAC). (2010c). *Tourism Yearbook*. https://archive.tourism.gov.mv/pubs/tourism_yearbook/tourism_year_book_2010.pdf
- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MTAC). (2011). *Tourism Yearbook*. https://archive.tourism.gov.mv/pubs/tourism_yearbook/tourism_year_book_2011.pdf
- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MTAC). (2012). *Tourism Yearbook*. https://archive.tourism.gov.mv/pubs/tourism_yearbook/tourism_year_book_2012.pdf
- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MTAC). (2012). <https://www.tourism.gov.mv/>
- Najeeb, A. (2011). HRM in paradise: Similar or different? A study of tourist resorts in the Maldives. *Employment Relations Record*, 11(1), 1–18.
- Najeeb, A. (2013). The role of HR actors in designing and implementing HRM in tourist resorts in the Maldives. *Employee Relations*, 35(6), 593–612.
- Pike, S. (2015). *Destination marketing: Essentials* (2nd Ed). Routledge.
- Police arrest 'celebrant' as President expresses disgust over false wedding ceremony. (2010, Oct 30). *Minivan News*. <https://minivannewsarchive.com/society/police-arrest-celebrant-as-president-expresses-disgust-over-vilu-wedding-ceremony-12881>
- Porath, C. (2022). Frontline work when everyone is angry. *Harvard Business Review*, November, p. 9.
- Porath, C., & Pearson, C. (2013). The price of incivility. *Harvard Business Review*, 91(1–2), 114–121.
- Resorts to face fines and suspensions for future 'wedding ceremony' foul ups. (2010, Nov 4). *Minivan News*. <https://minivannewsarchive.com/date/2010/11/04>
- Reynolds, K. L., & Harris, L. C. (2009). Dysfunctional customer behaviour severity: An empirical examination. *Journal of Retailing*, 85(3), 321–335.
- Sathiendrakumar, R., & Tisdell, C. (1989). Tourism and the economic development of the Maldives. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 16(2), 254–269.

- Shakeela, A., & Weaver, D. (2012). Resident reactions to a tourism incident: Mapping a Maldivian emoscape. *Annals of Tourism Research, 39*(3), 1337–1358.
- Shakeela, A., & Weaver, D. (2018). “Managed evils” of hedonistic tourism in the Maldives: Islamic social representations and their mediation of local social exchange. *Annals of Tourism Research, 71*, 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2018.04.003>
- Su, L., Jia, B., & Huang, Y. (2022). How do destination negative events trigger tourists’ perceived betrayal and boycott? The moderating role of relationship quality. *Tourism Management, 92*(2022), 104536.
- Su, L., Pan, L., & Huang, Y. (2023). How does destination crisis event type impact tourist emotion and forgiveness? The moderating role of destination crisis history. *Tourism Management, 94*(2023), 104636.
- Sun Siyam Resorts unveils new brand identity heralding new era in crafting guest experiences. (2020, Sep 23). *Maldives Insider*. <https://maldives.net.mv/43656/sun-siyam-resorts-unveils-new-brand-identity-heralding-new-era-in-crafting-guest-experiences/>
- Symbolic wedding at Villu Reef: Resort management requests police to investigate as a serious case. (2010, Oct 27). *Sun Shiyam Media*. <https://sun.mv/3049>
- The President’s Office. (2010a, Oct 30). *Maldives government apologizes to wedding vows couple* [Press release]. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/1589>
- The President’s Office. (2010b, Oct 30). *President Nasheed personally apologises to ‘fake wedding vows’ couple* [Press release]. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/1590>
- Torres, E. N., van Niekert, M., & Orłowski, M. (2017). Customer and employee incivility and its causal effects in the hospitality industry. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 26*(1), 48–66.
- Tung, V. W. S., & Ritchie, J. B. (2011). Investigating the memorable experiences of the senior travel market: An examination of the reminiscence bump. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 28*(3), 331–343.
- Turner, J. H., & Stets, J. E. (2006). Sociological theories of human emotions. *Annual Review of Sociology, 32*, 25–52.
- Wilson, A. M., Zeithaml, V. A., Bitner, M. J., & Gremler, D. D. (2016). *Service marketing: Integrating customer focus across the firm* (3rd Ed). McGraw Hill.