The Emirates Academy

Do authenticity and experience play a role when choosing Airbnb in Malta?

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Abstract

Despite Airbnb's overwhelming growth worldwide over last decade, there is little research with regards to authenticity in the context of island states like Malta. The study aimed to investigate the factors that influence travellers' decisions to book an Airbnb while visiting Malta and to ascertain whether authenticity and experience play a role when choosing an Airbnb accommodation in Malta.

The quantitative research method was employed to collect data via online surveys from visitors who had recently stayed at Airbnb or had used the platform before Covid-19 travel restrictions. The results of the survey show that the household amenities and convenient location were the most significant attributes for the sample of 72 travellers. The respondents were attracted to the authenticity and other experiential factors as well but to a lesser extent.

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CHAPTER 1. Introduction

Airbnb is a most prominent platform for booking accommodation to date and lately, also an experience provider. Founded in 2008 in San Francisco by two students, it is now the most prominent hospitality platform in providing accommodation in the sharing economy. Airbnb describes itself as "a trusted community for people to list, discover and book unique accommodation around the world" (Airbnb,2020). Airbnb homes range from very modest to extremely luxurious and even quite unusual (boats, igloos, jurte etc.) and it is also known for providing interactions with hosts and authentic experiences at inexpensive prices.

The studies about authenticity originate from the time when the topic was viewed as a synthesis of several ideas (in the philosophical, psychological, and spiritual spheres) pertaining to constructive, objective and existential experiences (Wang, 1999; Kirillova, Letho & Cai,2017; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Kolar & Zabkar,2010).

Authenticity is also considered as a motivation for tourists to travel to far and unknown places (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Naoi, 2004; Wang, 1999; Cohen, 1988). Authenticity may also be looked at as something genuine or real (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), but once subjected to a study, the topic seems to be far more complicated to comprehend, thus requiring to be addressed in a more detailed manner. Many researchers think that authenticity correlates with the idea of self-actualization, or exploring one's own authentic self (Maslow, 1970; Wang, 1999; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006;).

Tourism has gradually shifted to travelling and travellers started to look for more opportunities to interact with locals (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016; Pine & Gilmore, 2011) and as a result, the sharing economy emerged. Sharing is not a new definition but sharing of services or products with total strangers is (Belk, 2010).

Due to rapid development of Internet and especially Web 2.0 we have witnessed the proliferation of sharing economy platforms over recent years. People around the globe are using network technologies in order to do more with less by swapping , renting , lending and gifting products and services (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). Sharing economy platforms particularly have flourished within the tourism and hospitality industry (car sharing, bike-sharing, home exchange etc.) and Airbnb has appeared to be one of the most successful platforms. With 5.6 million active listings in over 220 countries (Airbnb,2020), the company's strong focus is on experience-based trips while staying in accommodations with "personalized home appeal", rather than a traditional lodging.

In the context of the sharing economy, authenticity has a special significance (Guttentag, 2015; Paulauskaite et al., 2017; Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Through sharing, one experiences different cultures, different ways of living and maybe this is what mainly attracts users of the online home-sharing platform Airbnb (Liang et al. 2017). Lamb (2011) in his study identified some of the reasons why Airbnb customers prefer sharing accommodation when compared to traditional lodgings, i.e. hotels. Another empirical study conducted by Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) included literature on sharing economy and included a survey about reasons why people choose peer-to-peer (P2P) short term rental accommodation.

Airbnb claims to have authenticity as one of five central pillars (safety, security, fairness, authenticity, and reliability) in ensuring safety and foster belonging. The team believes that "since community is built on trust, authenticity is essential—it requires a balance of shared expectations, honest interactions, and accurate details" (Airbnb,2020). It concerns both hosts by providing accurate information about themselves and their place and guests by adhering to host's rules.

Guttentag (2015) and Tussyadiah (2015) state that the popularity of Airbnb has an influence on tourists' behavioural pattern, destination management and revenues. Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) point out that tourists' behaviour changes if they share with a host as they tend to prolong their stays, take trips more often and their spending power increases by far.

Indeed, destinations have come to realise the positive impacts of Airbnb.

One may note that low-cost tourist accommodations are in direct competition with Airbnb and high-end hotels are bound to adjust their rates (Zervas et al, 2014). Currently covering over 6 million active listings in 100.000 cities in over 220 countries (Airbnb,2022), Airbnb offers an affordable way of visiting a destination when compared to traditional hotels. Some destinations have been impacted by the addition of Airbnb listings – for example, Iceland reported that Airbnb doubled the number of beds in Reykjavik only (Sheivachman, 2016).

The growth of such a platform has been exponential with over seven million listings worldwide as at 2019 (Airbnb, 2019). Malta is no exception to this. According to Ellul (2019), the number of properties registered in Malta to offer Airbnb accommodation has increased from 813 in 2013 to 6.800 in 2018 and in May 2019, there were over 8,700 spaces available for rent on the website.

However, this rapid growth has also given rise to an increased number of issues such as overcrowding, high prices and underground economic activities, all of which have to be faced by countries' governments and their citizens (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018).

The lack of government regulations for peer-to-peer accommodation (P2P) such as Airbnb is still a controversial subject in some countries and many describe Airbnb as a disruptive element for traditional lodging (Hall & Williams,2020; Guttentag, 2015). Zervas et al. (2016) estimated that Airbnb was responsible for taking about 8 to 10% of the revenue of budget hotels while analysing Airbnb's impact on hotels in Austin, Texas. Bashir and Verma (2016) state that hotels in New York City had a 2 billion dollars deficit due to Airbnb lodgings.

However, the negative effects of Airbnb can be debated. Swig (2014) attributes the growth of this P2P platform to the millennial travellers who are after either authentic or budget accommodation. Apart from providing extra income for Airbnb hosts, it was discovered that the number of Airbnb rentals had little bearing on hotel earnings in Seoul, South Korea (Choi et al,2015).

1.1 Purpose Statement

Despite Airbnb's overwhelming growth and disruptive innovation caused in the travel accommodation sector, few researchers have studied authenticity related to the listings on Airbnb platform as mainly authenticity is applied to heritage objects and cultural sites.

The importance of authenticity in modern tourism was highlighted by Yeoman et al. (2007) and the authenticity was identified as a decision influencer in Scotland, Australia, China and Canada. Thus, the role of authenticity as branded by Airbnb and identified as a major component of the travelling experience, can be researched further.

Hosts also will also benefit from having a clearer picture on how to provide an authentic experience (Tussyadiah, 2016) and the study will attempt to identify why tourists choose Airbnb accommodation over any other kind of accommodation when coming to Malta. Once this is established, Airbnb accommodation providers will be able to recognize the concept of authenticity and will be able to create an environment that triggers it. It is also important for other stakeholders like Destination Management Companies (DMCs) and policy makers to know the motivation of travellers because they can use it to their advantage once they are aware of customers' needs and wants. By doing this survey one can also figure out disadvantages of other kinds of accommodation and improve on them

making them more attractive to the customers and eventually to overcome this fear of Airbnb.

It appears that there are few studies concentrating on Airbnb's hosts and how the hosts market and promote local authentic experiences. Which is quite astonishing considering that in this type of accommodation the value proposition for local authenticity is shaped and delivered in large part by the hosts of accommodations (Tussyadiah,2016).

The phenomenon of tourist behavioural changes might be also of an interest to travel agencies who can benefit from recognizing those changes and adapting them to their agenda.

During the research main motivators that influence Airbnb users have been identified and based on this, the research statements have been designed.   The aim of this research is to establish whether the sharing platform Airbnb in Malta offers the travellers a way to experience a destination in a more authentic way. The following research questions will be addressed in the study:

1. What makes customers choose Airbnb when travelling to Malta?
2. What makes the Airbnb experience in Malta authentic?

The research questions focus on the subject of authenticity in general and in the context of Malta and the reasons of visitors to choose Airbnb when selecting accommodation in Malta.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

Herein, an overview of the structure of the study will be given.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This is the first chapter in which the sharing economy's most prominent accommodation booking platform, Airbnb, and the concept of authenticity are introduced. The researcher explains the study's aims as well as its purpose and scope. In order to summarize the methodology and show how this study will be carried out and organized into a logical, accessible text, a chapter outline is also supplied.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter intends to examine and provide the results of research pertinent to the themes of interest, mainly Airbnb as the sharing economy, Airbnb in Malta, along with authenticity aspects and reasons to use Airbnb. There are four main sections to the review: Section 1 provides a general overview of the sharing economy and its drivers, as well as background information on Airbnb and a brief review of tourism in Malta by mentioning the growing significance of private accommodations; section 2 provides some background information on authenticity and continues on to highlight the importance of authenticity in Airbnb; Including why people choose Airbnb houses, section 3 discusses the key theories and research in this area. Section 4 also looks into the effects of Covid-19 on short-term rentals in Europe and Malta.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research methodology will therefore be the main topic of this chapter, which will acknowledge all the steps taken by the author to carry out the research.

Chapter 4 and 5: Findings and Discussion

In this section, the author examines and contrasts the survey's findings to the official data sources and creates an outline of the findings, analysis, and results.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and limitations

The main conclusion of the study is highlighted in this last chapter, which is related to the goals and objectives listed in Chapter 3 and offers a number of suggestions on how to utilize the study's findings. Limitations to the research topic are also included.

CHAPTER 2. Literature review

The purpose of this chapter is to examine and present the findings of relevant research on the areas of interest, namely Airbnb as the sharing economy, Airbnb in Malta, as well as authenticity characteristics and motivations to use Airbnb. The review is broken down into four parts: **Section 1** provides an overview of the sharing economy and its drivers, as well as a background on Airbnb and a brief summary of tourism in Malta, with emphasis on the growing importance of private accommodations; **Section 2** gives some background to authenticity and continues on to importance of authenticity in Airbnb; **Section 3** outlines the main theories and findings related to the customer experience in Airbnb, including motivations behind choosing Airbnb homes, and also **Section 4** investigates the impact of Covid-19 on short-term rentals in Europe and Malta.

2.1.1 Airbnb

Airbnb - what is it?

Founded in 2008 in San Francisco by two students, Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia , it is now a peer-to-peer business hospitality platform in providing accommodation in the sharing economy. The idea itself came about in October 2007 when during the industrial designer conference there was a shortage of beds in the nearby hotels. Having rented out their three air mattresses, not only the students managed to solve their financial problems but they actually saw a possibility to turn this idea of renting out spaces to something which would bring in billions of dollars. They found a way of creating a booking engine where rarely used apartments, spare rooms and all possible rentable spaces would be listed which did not require huge investments to build hotels around the world.

Airbnb is a most prominent platform for booking accommodation to date and lately, also an experience provider. Currently offering over 6 million active listings in 100,000 cities in over 220 countries (Airbnb,2022), the company places authenticity as one of its top values.

Airbnb describes itself as "a trusted community for people to list, discover and book unique accommodation around the world" (Airbnb,2020). Airbnb homes range from being quite basic to being very opulent and even quite unusual (castles, boats, igloos, caves, jurte etc.) and it is also known for providing interactions with hosts and authentic experiences at inexpensive prices. Finding and booking an Airbnb is fairly similar to utilizing an online travel agency (OTA) like Booking.com or Expedia, but with more personalised verification process in order to establish trust between Airbnb hosts and

guests. Before committing to a certain accommodation, guests can view hosts' profiles, property description and photos and their reviews. By having all this information, potential guests can make an opinion about the host and decide if they feel comfortable to stay / deal with that host. For hosts who can list their property free of charge, Airbnb has enabled them to list, post property descriptions and photographs, communicate with future guests and accept reservations and payments from any part of the world. By having full access to their property's online calendar, hosts are in full control over its availability and have the opportunity of declining booking requests without any penalties. In order to further promote trust and security , Airbnb (2022) offers free liability insurance ("Host Protection Insurance"), free property damage protection after several incidents ("Host Guarantee") and protection policy for guests in cases of inaccurate listing descriptions ("Guest Refund Policy").

Airbnb has also been nominated in 2014 as the sixth most innovative company for enhancing and elaborating their services and "for making the most of its hosts" (Fastcompany,2014). Some of the innovations worth mentioning were a "Superhost" status which is given to particularly responsive and with high ratings hosts and an "Instant booking" feature allowing reservations to be placed without waiting for host's approval. The company has also introduced an "Airbnb plus" status for luxurious properties and "For work trips" badge indicating accommodations suitable for business and corporate travel. The most recent addition to the Airbnb's wide spectrum of services is "Experience" filter which promotes authentic tours and excursions by local guides. Guttentag (2015) suggests that anyone having a liveable space to rent out can easily become a competition to traditional accommodations.

Figure 1. Airbnb revenue over the years (Source: https://craft.co/airbnb/metrics)
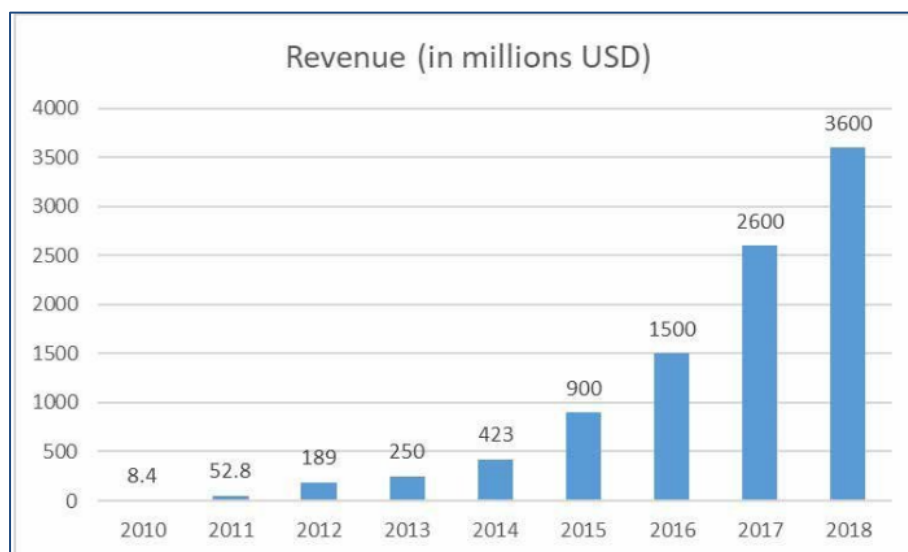
Airbnb as Disruptive Innovation

Airbnb has witnessed such an outstanding growth since its inception in 2008 and it is not surprising that Airbnb is considered by many as disruptive innovation (Guttentag, 2015) and traditional accommodation view the company as a threat (Martin, 2016). As outlined and coined by Christensen (1997) and Christensen et al (2015), a disruptive innovation would initially underperform and attract mainly low-end customers when compared to existing competition. However, over time disruptive innovations introduce a new value proposition (Christensen, 1997) by being cheaper and/or more convenient, thus appealing to mainstream customers and taking up the new market. Eventually the leading competitors recognize the threat and find themselves in difficulties to compete because a good portion of the market share is taken by an once underperformer.

As Guttentag (2015) suggests, the definition of disruptive innovation seems a good fit for Airbnb accommodations as they do underperform on certain points like security or cleanliness when compared to traditional accommodation providers and are often cheaper than hotels (Hockenson, 2013). Moreover, Airbnb listings will likely offer useful household benefits (like a kitchen, washroom) and extra spaces (e.g. a garden, roof terrace) and provide a more unique and authentic local experience (Guttentag,2015).

Airbnb in Malta

According to reports from April 2017 (the Malta Independent, 2017), Malta is "witnessing a huge spread of Airbnb (unregistered and not really talked about)". The Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association has regularly mentioned these issues in recent years (e.g., The Sunday Times of Malta, 2015; The Malta Independent, 2016) and they seem to be mostly unresolved.

The growth of such a platform has been exponential with over seven million listings worldwide as at 2019 (Airbnb, 2019). Malta is no exception to this. According to Ellul (2019), the number of properties registered in Malta to offer Airbnb accommodation has increased from 813 in 2013 to 6.800 in 2018 and in May 2019 there were over 8,700 spaces available for rent on the website.

When compared to **collective accommodation** (hotels, guesthouses, hostels, tourist villages holiday complexes, bed & breakfasts and campsites as per National Statistics Office definition) in terms of nights spent, there was a robust growth from 7.8 million nights in 2008 to 10.1 million nights in 2018. However, the growth in **private accommodation** (rented accommodation, own private residence, staying with friends and other private accommodation) was outstanding. From 3.1 million in 2008 the number of nights increased to 8.5 million nights in 2018 (Ellul,2019) and the total share

of nights in private accommodations grew from 28.7% in 2008 to 45.7% in 2018 (Fig.3, NSO, 2018).

Figure 2. Nights stayed in collective and private accommodation (Source : NSO)
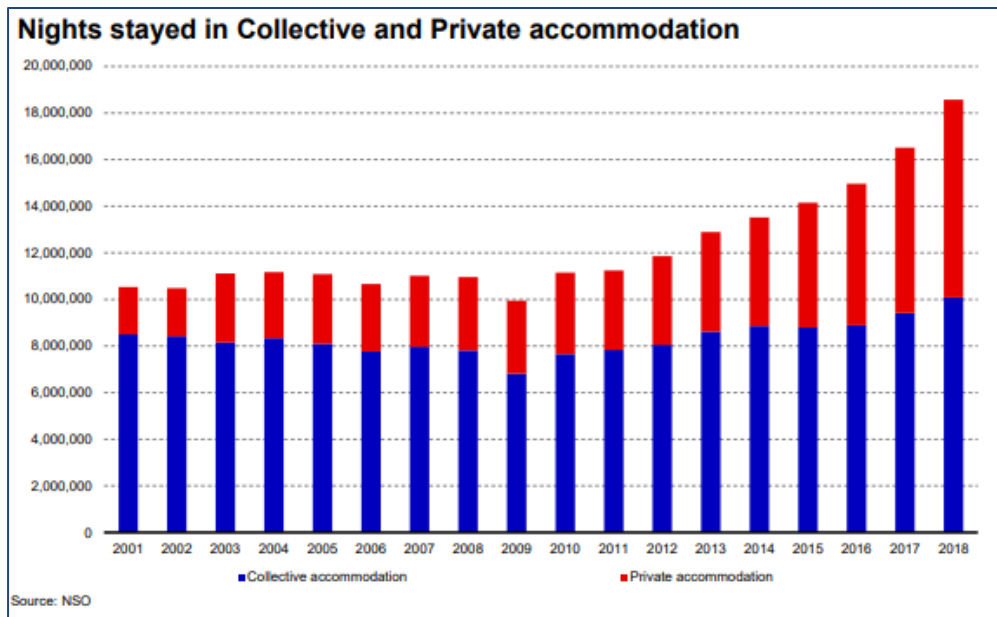
Attard in his study (2018) notes that in recent years there has been a major shift in customers preferences favouring private accommodations over collective accommodation establishments. Due to advanced technologies the changing trend has also been visible in Malta due to seamless online booking process and direct communication with the host. He also suggests that the shift towards private accommodation might be reflecting the urge for more experiential tourism and local authentic experiences.
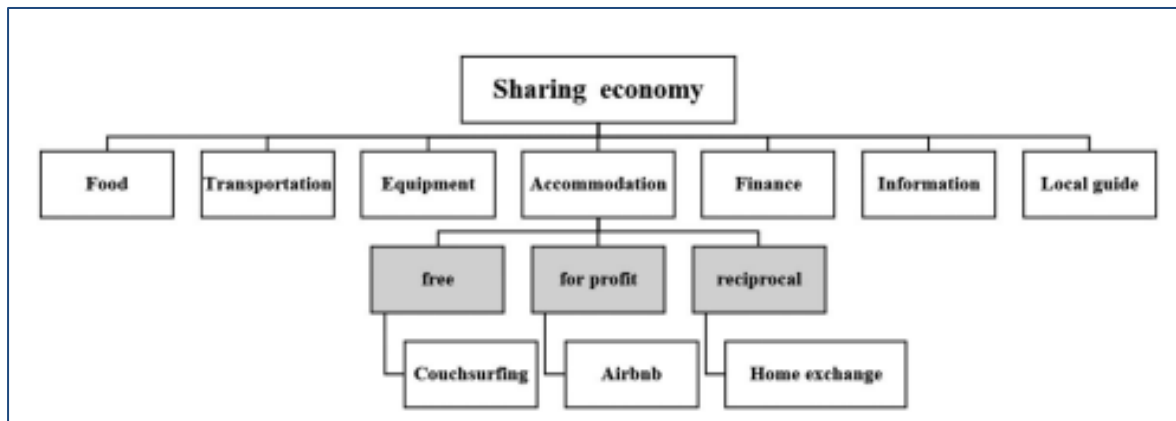
2.1.2 Sharing economy

Sharing economy – what is it?

The term "sharing economy" was coined originally in the United states, however the phenomenon has spread globally and ,in particular, in cities in Europe (Schor, 2016). In fact, it was Amsterdam that was got a label of a sharing city in 2014, followed by Paris, Barcelona and London (Boecker and Meelen, 2017).

Sharing economy has been described by Hamari et al. (2016) as "the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services." In a nutshell, sharing economy is represented by online marketplaces managed by a third party that manages exchange of underutilized goods and services. According to Palgan et al. (2017), peer-to-peer accommodation (P2P) can be divided into three groups (Figure 3) when one considers

the type of interaction between platforms' users : non-profit (Coachsurfing), for profit (Airbnb) and reprocical (Home exchange).

Figure 3. A typology of P2P accommodation (Source: After Palgan et al., 2017)

Main drivers of Sharing economy

It was acknowledged by Boecker and Meelen (2017) that motivators for using sharing economy are not quite homogeneous. Most scholars like Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) claim that **social motivation** (with the host, local community) is a very strong driver of sharing economy. According to Guttentag (2015), Ert et al (2015), Tussyadiah (2015), many travellers prefer peer-to-peer accommodations over the more traditional choice of lodging, such as hotels since they want to be a part of the community and engage in social contact.

Economic benefits (for profit) are considered by Guttentag 2015) to be as the main motivational factor that underlies the concept of sharing economy, whereby both hosts and guests can benefit - hosts are able to utilize their idling assets and guests who are not in the position to own can still share the good / service (Francica,2019). The study conducted by Botsman and Rogers (2011) showed that around 80 per cent of owned items are barely used more than once a month, thus indicating the possibility to gain extra income and increase one's financial independence (Owyang, 2013).

Other researchers (Palgan et al.,2017; Sung et al, 2018) indicated **environmental** drivers (sustainable consumption) to be significant motivations for using sharing economy.

Botsman and Rogers (2011) single out **technology** to be another key driver of the sharing economy. In their opinion, the development of social media and mobile devices has greatly contributed to the growth of sharing economy. Ganapati and Reddick (2018)

supported the theory by highlighting the fact that nowadays the internet has become so affordable and accessible.

Cons and pros of Sharing economy

One of the main benefits of the sharing economy is the increased affordability thanks to new entrants and competition with commercial providers. The lower prices allow people to travel to new destinations and take longer trips , thus contributing to the economy and creation of new jobs and services (Grybaitė and Stankevičienė,2016).

Ert et al (2016) indicated the ability of sharing platforms to create new networks within our societies on the basis of trust between participants in the community. If the customer is not satisfied with the service, the service provider will be getting a low rating which in turn can make other potential customers think twice about using that particular service provider.

Several scholars (Belk, 2014 ; Hamari, 2016) highlight the fact that the sharing economy is highly advantageous to the environment. Not only that the sharing economy involves using existing resources in a more sustainable manner and means potential energy savings (car / bike sharing), but it also provides consumers multiple opportunities to get insights about economic, societal and environmental issues while travelling, which might be impossible to get if residing in traditional types of accommodation.

When it comes to defining negatives of the sharing economy, one of the main ones is the disruption of established traditional markets like taxi service (Uber) and hotel industry because of Airbnb (Zervas and Prosperio, 2017). Some works portray criticism towards sharing economy for being rather about financial self-interest and not sharing and in some case even being predatory like in case with New York taxis (Quattrone et al., 2016).

According to Edelman and Geradin (2015), Airbnb was at first blamed for representing a danger to the safety of the local population as due to Airbnb platform the shortage of housing was created and there was a fear that long term tenants would be displaced.

Another significant issue is the lack of standardised regulation across the globe. In some countries, regulation and tax policies in accommodation-sharing sector are imposed, while in others self-regulation is welcomed. Having no regulation standards makes it difficult to protect consumers as it raises the issue of protecting consumers due to security and privacy concerns (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). There are also labour law-related issues, such as whether people working in such companies are eligible for

vacation and other benefits (Goudin, 2016). In addition, taxation and licensing issues are a major concern as potential government revenues are lost (Wright, 2018).

2.2 Authenticity

2.2.1 Background on Authenticity

The definition of authenticity has always been a research topic for many scholars. Boorstin was first, who without mentioning "authenticity" discusses it in his book "The Image," published in 1962 (Maccannell,1973). In his book Boorstin criticizes the superficial and extravagant lifestyle after analysing the tourism experiences in the USA. In his opinion, people were looking for "pseudo-events" due to high expectations of tourist experiences. These so-called pseudo-events withdraw tourists from real life and consequently, the authenticity of the tourist product.

Sociologist MacCannel (1973) shares the same thoughts on the shallow and inauthentic lifestyle of that time highlighted by Boorstin (1962), but he argues that tourists do not want to stay in their comfort zones and will always look for true and authentic experiences. Similar to Goffman's concepts of front stage and back stage, MacCannell comes up with two types of authenticity – the real and the staged. The real authenticity is the actual one, while the staged one is made up for tourists to be seen as the real one.

According to Cohen (1979), one of the prevailing topics in tourism sociology is authenticity in tourist experiences. Yet, the same phenomenon can be found in studies about architecture (Stovel,2007), geography (Rickly-Boyd, 2013), linguistics (Macdonald et al, 2006) and anthropology (Bruner,1994) as the concept of authenticity has been researched further and applied in different scientific areas. Taylor (2001) explains this abundance of definitions due to many scientists from different areas of expertise.

Taking these disagreements and too many concepts into consideration, Wang (1999) makes effort and organizes the existing concepts, develops and presents the concept of existential authenticity. The author presents three types of authenticity: objective, constructive and existential (postmodern).

Objective authenticity appears to have the genuineness of objects, artifacts and structures as a focal point and the authenticity is to be measured and certified (Barthel,1996). Some researchers like Barthel (1996) rely on an objectivist point of view while analysing heritage sites and decide on authenticity level which depends on the originality of the site, its structures, and its social context.

Constructive authenticity is supported by authors who insist on defining authenticity as something flexible and constructed by communities. Disneyland Park in the USA comes as a perfect example of emergent authenticity and is now widely perceived as original, therefore authentic fantasy theme park of Walt Disney.

Existential Authenticity refers to a state of existence and the one that considers an individual's personal feelings to analyse the whole experience. Originally brought up by Heidegger (1962) who notices that connection between people and objects influence their experience. Scholars like Steiner and Reisinger (2006) propose that this type of authenticity is experience-based. Brown (2013) thinks of the surroundings of an experience as a "catalyst" for existential authenticity.

Wang (1999) recognizes four elements of existential authenticity: **intrapersona**l (relating to body and self- realization) and **interpersonal** (family-oriented experiences and informal, temporary interactions with others).

For Wang (1999) **intrapersonal** authenticity is the one that "involves a bodily experience of personal authenticity" (p. 362). Mkono (2013) proposes that "Intrapersonal authenticity relates to the individual self and includes physical aspects (for example relaxation and invigoration), and psychological aspects, such as self-discovery and self-realization".

The physical component is related to the way the experience helps in having a totally different from everyday life bodily experience. A long-awaited hike, a sensual massage, a day spent on the beach allow the traveller to have new physical experiences that enhance his sense of well-being. The psychological aspect refers to opportunity to be free from social roles in private life and explore new elements of their true identity (N. Wang 1999).

Interpersonal authenticity is a type of authenticity when tourists look for real and deep connection with others in order to achieve a new level of authenticity (Steiner and Reisinger 2006). This is pertinent in case with Airbnb as this platform is based on social interaction. By communicating with local hosts, Airbnb customers can gain a feeling of comfort and belonging, provided there is a sense of congruity with these hosts.

The student has shown particular interest in the existential authenticity which influences guests' decision-making in choosing Airbnb as a better accommodation option for authentic experience.

2.2.2 Authenticity in Airbnb

In the context of the sharing economy, authenticity has a special significance (Guttentag, 2015; Paulauskaite et al., 2017; Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Through sharing, one experiences diverse cultures, different ways of living and maybe this is what mainly attracts users of the online home-sharing platform Airbnb (Liang et al. 2017). Lamb (2011) in his study identified some of the lodgings, i.e. hotels. Another empirical study conducted by Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) included literature on sharing economy and included a survey about reasons why people choose peer-to-peer (P2P) short term rental accommodation reasons why Airbnb customers prefer sharing accommodation when compared to traditional.

As mentioned before, authenticity is one of the main principles on Airbnb platform however this topic has ample room for further research. For instance, Poon and Huang (2017) discovered in their research Airbnb is perceived to be far more superior in providing authentic experiences by Airbnb users when compared to hotels. Airbnb is a disruptive innovation and the price is another advantage as accommodations on Airbnb are generally cheaper than traditional hotel accommodation (Hockenson, 2013). Guttentag (2015) points out that Airbnb accommodations may offer numerous benefits in the household (kitchen, yard) thus calling for a more unique and authentic experience. In another study conducted in Thailand, where Dolezal (2011) states that it is impossible to offer true authenticity due to varied factors, regardless of the host's intention to provide the best possible authentic experience.

Another researcher, Mura (2015), argues that the travellers' stay will be affected by both authentic and inauthentic components as tourists also want comforts of their home together with the authenticity in their places of stay.

There are other studies highlighting consumers' perceptions of authenticity. Paulauskaite et al. (2017) point to such attributes like interactions with hosts and with local culture, a unique accommodation interior to be contributing to guests' perception of authenticity.

Lalicic and Weismayer (2017) also shared that it was interactions with the host which made guests refer to their stay as authentic as hosts are deeply knowledgeable about local activities and main attractions. An elevated level of engagement gives that feeling of authenticity for the guest, thus social factors are vital in making the tourists feel like it was their home and not just a place they visited. (Paulauskaite et al. 2017).

Liu and Mattila (2017) discovered two factors, namely uniqueness and sense of belongingness, which were significant for creating authenticity for Airbnb guests, thus establishing a connection between a guest and Airbnb.

Due to its growth over the last few years Airbnb has been the main topic of discussions about P2P markets for tourist accommodation. While there are numerous studies pertaining to Airbnb in large cities and its effect on mainland economies, there is a limited number of works related to Airbnb and particularly on authenticity in Airbnb which are related to islands.

Some authors have covered certain aspects of the Airbnb market in the context of some islands. Eugenio-Martin, Cazorla-Artiles, & González-Martel (2019) research Airbnb's spatial distribution and factors affecting Airbnb locations in the Canary Islands while Campbell, McNair, Mackay, & Perkins (2019) study the spatial distribution of Airbnb properties in New Zealand.

Cyprus was a point of reference for Malazizi, Alipour, & Olya (2018) who attempted to analyse risk perceptions from the point of view of Airbnb hosts, and Xifilidou, Mangina, & Karanikolas (2018) investigate Airbnb's effects on the real estate market in Mikonos, Greece.

Malta was a case study for Camilleri and Neuhofer (2017) who developed a theoretical foundation of value co-creation and value co-destruction in Airbnb stays by analysing guest reviews and posted online host responses.

However, there is little research on importance of authenticity in Airbnb stays when it comes to island destinations. This research intends to cover this gap.

2.3 Airbnb customer experience

2.3.1 Guest experience in Airbnb

Due to ever growing desire for authentic experiences Airbnb is in a very favourable position as it appears to be providing such experiences. After travellers choose and book a home, they get the experience of staying there. Many guests will be sharing their experiences online and guest reviews became a very popular area of research for many scholars who will be studying the characteristics of guest experience while staying in Airbnb. Many researchers noted that the reviews mostly focused on attributes related to accommodation (such as location and comfort) and the host (such as interaction and feeling of hospitality).

Having analysed Airbnb reviews related to Portland (USA), Tussyadiah and Zach (2017) observed that reviews concentrated on the following attributes: the location (whether in convenient location and what kind of neighbourhood), the service, home-related features

(comfort, ambiance) and the welcome feeling. Other researchers looked into Airbnb reviews of accommodation lodgings in Sydney and agreed that reviews were surprisingly extremely positive and mainly evolved around convenient location and accommodation amenities, also describing how flexible and helpful the hosts were and how easy it was to communicate with them (Cheng and Jin, 2019). Worth noting that "big data" set of online reviews in both aforementioned cases brought different results. While Cheng and Jin (2019) established that Airbnb guests are likely to gauge their experience by comparing it to their previous hotel stays, Tussyadiah and Zach (2017) used their findings to highlight unmistakable nature of Airbnb where hosts' importance and a welcome feeling are paramount. The same researchers also concluded that those reviews highlighting the location and a welcome feeling usually brought higher ratings. Research conducted by Von Hoffen et al. (2018) gathered Airbnb reviews and tweets related to Airbnb and it was identified via sentiment analysis toolkit that Airbnb guests value the most home-related attributes (fully equipped kitchen, bed comfort, cleanliness, space), a non-intrusive Airbnb host and preferably a central but quiet locality.

Some scholars utilized Airbnb reviews in order to explore the Airbnb experience through the prism of value co-creation between guests and hosts. Airbnb reviews in Jamaica were analysed by Johnson and Neuhofer (2017) who found that the combination of home, surrounding community and host creates value. Guests also found value in traveling like a local, engaging in cooking and cleaning with a host, learning something new about culture. Likewise, Airbnb reviews in Malta were analysed by Camilleri and Neuhofer (2017) who observed six common attributes which pertained to value co-creation. These are being welcomed upon arrival, expressing positive/negative emotions, interaction with hosts and hosts' helpfulness, describing location and home benefits, recommending the premises to others and expressing gratitude to each other.

As there was evident general consistency in the described above studies, Brochado et al. (2017) decided to compare Airbnb reviews in different countries, i.e. India, United States and Portugal. Contrary to the researchers' expectation that diverse cultural norms would lead to different rating patterns, the scholars concluded that positive experiences were very much alike across countries.

There are also studies comparing Airbnb experiences with hotel experiences. One of them is the study of Bellamino et al. (2019) which, after comparing reviews on Airbnb and TripAdvisor platforms, discovered that Airbnb guests focused more on interacting with hosts, locality character and engagement with local businesses, while hotels guests put more emphasis on room and hotel amenities and distance to tourist destinations.

Another study introduced four new components to the experience economy framework, namely "serendipity, localness, communities and personalization" (Mody et al., 2017) and found that Airbnb guests rated each experience component higher than hotel guests. However, hotels were able to transform guest experiences into extraordinary ones, thus translating unforgettable experiences leading to recommendations and repeat purchase intentions. The same authors later on (Mody et al., 2019) added one more component of "hospitableness" to the experience economy framework and concluded that hotels could use hospitableness to compete with Airbnb and make experiences unforgettable after discovering that the dimension of hospitableness was not greater in Airbnb stays.

Birinci et al. (2018) researched the concept of perceived authenticity amongst Airbnb and hotel guests. The results showed that perceived authenticity was rated higher in Airbnb stays while there was no significant difference between respondents staying in Airbnb and hotels when it came to risks related to security, safety, time and product performance.

Zervas et al. (2021) underline the importance of conducting research on Airbnb experiences that does not rely on reviews only as the review system of Airbnb seemingly encourages positive guest rating scores (Guttentag, 2017). Another study by Bridges and Vásquez (2018) indicated after examining Airbnb reviews by both hosts and guests that reviews were extremely positive and had only 2 percent of negative reviews. The authors did, however, point out that reviewers occasionally expressed their dissatisfaction in a delicate way by sandwiching a negative comment or by just leaving a rather neutral review.

It is to be remembered that not all Airbnb guests submit reviews. In fact, Bae et al. (2017) concluded in their study that guests were more prone to leaving reviews whenever their Airbnb experience was different from expectations (either positively or negatively) and quality of the experience deviated from neutral (either positively or negatively). Some researchers purposely looked into negative Airbnb experiences. It was observed that the complaints had few issues in common and pertained mainly to technical problems (due diligence process), poor Airbnb customer service and lack of trust (expectations not met and last-minute cancellation).

"Interpersonal contaminations" have been mentioned in the study of Bucher et al. (2017) which derived from situational host – guest closeness and related to hosts' personal objects, ambient contamination or privacy intrusion. Yet, a subsequent study by Bucher et al (2018) proposed that guests were willing to accept a certain amount of

interpersonal contamination as long as the experience was perceived as authentic one. The authors suggested that some sort of closeness may be considered as markers of authenticity thus enhancing the experience altogether.

2.3.2 Motivations to use Airbnb

The term motivation is defined in many ways; in a nutshell, it indicates why someone engages in a particular behaviour (Hawkins et al., 2007). Dann's framework of push-pull motivation (1981) is mainly used in tourism literature. This framework recognizes both the specific characteristics of a certain tourism product that persuade tourists to choose it ("pull factors") and those intrinsic motivations that cause someone to travel ("push factors").

Push and pull factors are often closely related, even though these are conceptually different (Kim et al., 2007). **Push** factors fit into a more precise concept of motivation as an internal motivation to satisfy an inner need (Hawkins et al., 2007). **Pull** motivations, on the contrary, are more in line with the idea that consumers choose products for specific benefits.

Due to increasing popularity of Airbnb many scholars attempted examining the factors that drive customers to choose Airbnb for their travel needs (Guttentag,2016; Lamb,2011;Tussyadiah, 2015; Nowak et al, 2015) and the following major motivating factors have been identified:

Price has been mentioned in all the studies on Airbnb pull factors and has been regarded by many scholars as the most important motivating factor (Tussyadiah, 2015 ; Nowak et al, 2015), however not all the researchers like Lamb (2011) and Quinby and Gasdia (2014) considered the price factor as the most important.

Authenticity has long been viewed as essential in Airbnb concept "Live like a local" and highlighted in a number of studies including Lamb (2011), who considered "authenticity seeking behaviour" as a primary motivator for choosing an Airbnb lodging, and Liang (2018), according to whom the authenticity concept resonates with customers' perception of real experiences at Airbnb accommodations. Nowak et al.'s (2015) survey for the financial services company Morgan Stanley indicates that authenticity is indeed one of the powerful motives for using Airbnb. Poon and Huang (2017) also state that authentic local experiences appear to be a unique factor in Airbnb stays. Guttentag (2015) suggested that authenticity may also include interacting with locals, but Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) distinguish such interactions from the concept of authenticity and refer them to as part of social benefits that come with using Airbnb.

Household amenities and space have been recognized in various studies and seem to be a deal breaker for many Airbnb guests (Quinby and Gasdia, 2014). The functional characteristics of a home represented by "household amenities" and "large space," according to Guttentag (2016), are what give an Airbnb stay a "homely feel." Many travellers prefer to feel at home while travelling and be able to use so typical for their own home's amenities like a full kitchen or a washing machine (Guttentag, 2015). Features like a bedroom and a kitchen were mentioned in the theoretical framework of value co-creation for Airbnb (Johnson and Neuhofer, 2017) as those would provide a "home away from home "factor. Nowak et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of home benefits after conducting a survey of EU and USA Airbnb users that indicated one of the main reasons for choosing an Airbnb accommodation was having an "own kitchen".

Social interactions appear to be one of the leading motives for many vacationers when deciding between a traditional and non-traditional accommodations. Airbnb makes it a point to foster direct communication between hosts and guests and encourages them to share their personal experiences and it appears that many guests take the opportunity for personal interaction during their stay at an Airbnb property as something important. Being a collaborative consumption model, Airbnb allows to socially interact with both host and locals. In fact, Camilleri and Neuhofer (2017) mention host – guest interactions like showing guests around, providing insiders' tips on restaurant and sightseeing, introducing guests to friends and spending time together. As indicated in another study (Stors & Kagermeier, 2015), Airbnb guests are keen on meeting new people and receiving recommendations from the host.

Sustainability appears as another motivational factor for many Airbnb guest (Tussyadiah, 2015). The consumer's choice of Airbnb may also be influenced by sustainability, which reflects the idea that collaborative consumption can benefit local communities and economies while reducing the development of new goods and the usage of raw materials (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016a). Customers believe that such sustainable platforms as Airbnb can minimize the negative effects of consumption on the environment, society, and economy (Luchs et al., 2011). Guttentag et al., 2017 argue that the sharing economy concept is connected to sustainability and represents beliefs like supporting local businesses, being environmentally conscious, and Airbnb's commitment to fostering a sense of community.

Location has been mentioned by Nowak et al (2015) as the second most important motive for choosing an Airbnb accommodation. While hotels frequently aim to be close to

touristy locales (near downtown areas, city attractions, and close to airports), Airbnb also builds a strong presence in city centres and gives guests the option to stay in a variety of residential districts. Secondly, staying at Airbnb accommodations gives you the chance to meet locals and discover their culture.

Novelty - the degree to which a customer wants to learn about or use new products is typically referred to as novelty (Manning et al., 1995). Personal innovativeness, or the propensity to adopt innovations, is congruent with the idea of novelty seeking (Guttentag, 2016). Novelty's concept is somewhat similar to what Mao and Lyu (2017) refer to as the "unique experience," which they describe as the subjective emotions upon receiving tailormade services or goods. Considering that Airbnb might offer a more unique travel experience than a traditional form of lodging, Guttentag (2016) claims that novelty seekers may be attracted to Airbnb for that reason.

Many researchers have empirically addressed this motivational question, and their research has repeatedly emphasized the particular importance of the practical benefits of Airbnb (price, household amenities, location) and sometimes acknowledged experiential benefits (authenticity, social interactions and novelty). Guttentag et al. (2018) surveyed more than eight hundred Airbnb users, mainly in Canada and the United States, and it appeared that even though mainly practical benefits were in demand (price, location, household amenities, etc.), but for some guests experiential benefits were of great significance. In another study of interviewing Airbnb users worldwide it transpired that price and location were the two primary motivational factors for choosing Airbnb (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018a). Paulauskaite et al. (2017) surveyed Airbnb guests and found that cost savings were their main motivator. However, the study was specifically focused on authenticity and main attributes such as accommodation décor, interactions with hosts and local culture contributed to guests' perception of authenticity.

Interestingly, a survey of German and Chinese millennials (Amaro et al., 2018) showed that economic benefits were far less important compared to other studies results and main factors for using Airbnb were the variety and uniqueness of Airbnb listings and positive attitude for online purchasing.

2.3.3 How Airbnb guests choose an accommodation

Many destinations allow Airbnb guests to choose from a variety of Airbnb listings, and there have been numerous studies examining how those choices are made. When selecting accommodations, location, cost, and amenities were the three factors that

Cape Town Airbnb visitors valued most, according to a survey by Visser et al. (2017). The listing characteristics that affected demand for Airbnb accommodations in Vienna were examined by Gunter and Önder (2018), who discovered that size of premises, number of photos, and host response rate boosted demand while price and remoteness variables together with host response time decreased it. When Airbnb customers were interviewed in 2016, Varma et al. discovered that location, cost, ratings, service quality, and prior experience were the factors that most affected their choice. Interestingly, same attributes were of immense importance to hotel users who participated in the same research.

Abrate and Viglia (2017) looked at Airbnb accommodations within Europe and their study suggested that verified identity and "Superhost" status increased host revenue while professional photos and a high volume of reviews seemed to be less important. Mauri et al. (2018) looked at Airbnb listings in the UK and Italy and concluded that personal reputation was of paramount importance and contributed heavily (almost 40%) towards popularity where combination of review scores, number of reviews and number of times the listing was saved to "wish list" are applied.

There are scholars who studied the same topic in the context of non-European cities. Liang et al. (2017) surveyed Airbnb listings in Hong Kong and found that listings had a higher probability of having reviews and higher guest rating scores if managed by Superhosts, guests were more likely to pay a premium to stay with Superhosts. Xie and Mao (2017) also emphasized the appeal of Superhosts after surveying approximately 6,000 listings in Austin, Texas. The findings indicated that such variables as Superhost status together with response rate, number of listings along with listing's rating, price, capacity and number of reviews determined demand.

In fact, reviews are an important feature of Airbnb because they help build the necessary trust between guests and hosts, and some researchers have specifically looked at how reviews influence decisions on Airbnb listings. An experiment with nearly 9,000 Airbnb users was conducted by Abrahao et al. (2017), in which the authors found positive reviews to be successfully counteracting biased distrust caused by social distancing after manipulating imaginary hosts' demographics (age, marital status, place of residence and gender) and reputation (number of reviews and guest rating score). The scholars confirmed their primary findings after evaluating this concept by looking at 1 million of real Airbnb interactions. Bae et al. (2017) investigated Airbnb users in South Korea and the research demonstrated that decreased social distancing increased the credibility of reviews and subsequently purchase intent.

Moreover, the profile photo of a host can affect the choices made by customers. Prices for Airbnb accommodations in Stockholm were analysed by Ert et al. (2016) who concluded that the more trustworthy hosts were perceived based on their photos, the more likely they were to have higher price of the listing and the likelihood to be chosen. It was also found that hosts' reputation based on their online reviews scores had no effect on listing price or chances of booking. A similar experiment of manipulating hosts' facial expressions by Fagerstrøm et al. (2017) showed that neutral and positive facial expressions increased tendency to book, while negative expressions coupled with lack of hosts' photos decreased likelihood of booking regardless of low prices and positive guest scores.

Bae and Koo (2018) brought up the issue of trust in their netnographic research which suggested that Airbnb users form South Korea showed little trust in reviews' content and were more likely led by number of reviews and images. Taking a more general look at the concept of trust, Mittendorf (2018) observed millennials and discovered that both perceived trust in the host and trust in the Airbnb platform were the driving force for intentions to inquire about an Airbnb listing or request a booking.

In addition, an automated classification technique based on characteristics of 33,000 worldwide and 18,000,000 reviews collected from Booking.com was developed by Martin-Fuentes et al. (2018). This method, concentrated on the number of reviews, guest rating scores, price and users' wish lists rather than the usual criteria, was overall successful in classifying hotels into the appropriate star-rating category. The authors demonstrated how this method may be applied to give Airbnb listings a hotel-like star rating (budget, mid-low and mid-high scale, and superior), which could be more helpful than the company's current star ratings because of their possible bias.

Some scholars (Chang and Wang, 2018) investigated generational differences by asking respondents of Generations X (ages 35-49), Y (ages 21-34), and Z (under 20) to rate Airbnb listings and discovered that Generation X was more focused on cleanliness while Generations Y and Z were more cost-conscious. It is worth mentioning that all generations were influenced by reviews.

Upon evaluating their options, Airbnb guests will definitely be looking at the price factor, however few scholars attempted to explore broader concepts of value instead. Chen and Chang (2018) after examining non-users and Airbnb users found that star ratings positively impacted perceived value, which in turn positively impacted purchase

intention. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2018) observed Airbnb users and concluded that they were more likely to pay a premium based on perceived functional and social value.

Recognizing potential diversity among Airbnb guests, Lutz and Newlands (2018) investigated the more popular option of renting an entire home compared to a shared space. The authors discovered by observing Airbnb users that entire home renters had higher incomes and education, travelled with a partner/spouse more frequently, and were less comfortable with social interaction. There was a higher probability that Airbnb guests staying in shared accommodations, on the other hand, were sociable male on a solo or group trip and had a lower pay.

2.4 Impact of Covid-19 on short-term accommodation in Europe

Looking at the tourism industry in the European Union, it is evident that travel has been hugely impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak. Travelling and lodging limitations made taking a holiday overseas more difficult, and prospective travellers were hesitant to go in order to reduce their exposure to health concerns.

From 2018 onward, Eurostat is able to compare guest nights spent in short-term accommodations provided by online platforms due an agreement signed in March 2020 between four major online accommodation platforms (Airbnb, TridpAdvisor, Expedia and Booking) and the European Commission. Indeed, the very term "platform tourism" was coined to define short-term rentals (e.g., apartments) arranged through these four platforms, as opposed to other types of traditional lodging such as hotels or campsites.

Figure 4 . Annual guest nights in the EU, 2018 – 2021 (Source : Eurostat)
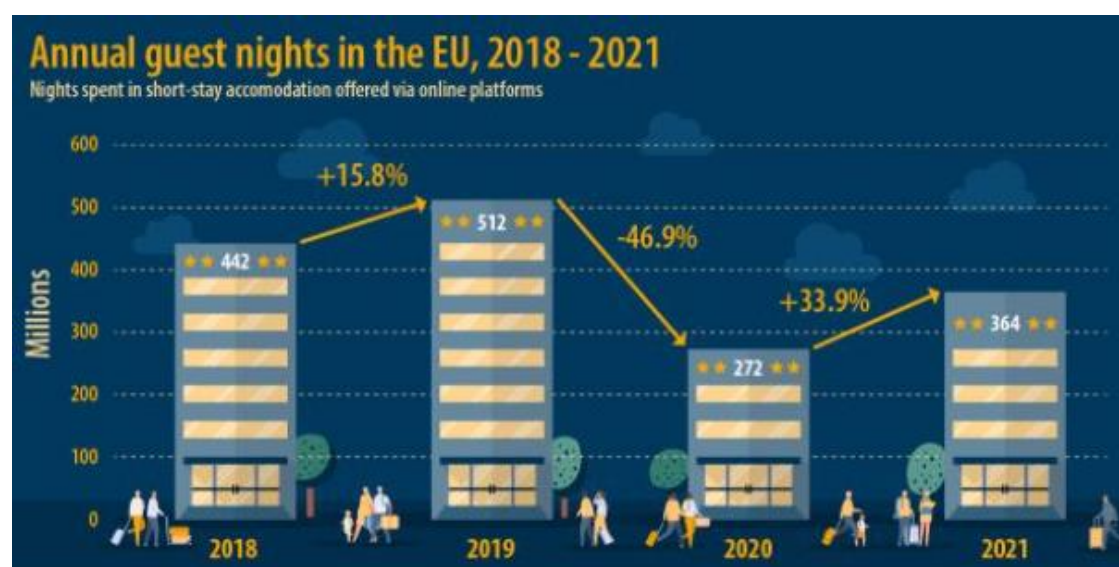
Compared to 272 million in 2020 and 512 million in 2019, 364 million visitor nights were spent in accommodations booked through one of the four platforms in 2021. This means that platform tourism has not yet fully recovered from the sharp decline of 47% from 2019 to 2020, despite a robust recovery of 34% in 2021. (see Figure 4). The decline occurred at the same time that the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in March 2020, which resulted in severe travel and lodging restrictions in the majority of the countries as well as a general aversion to traveling in order to reduce exposure to health concerns.

Figure 5 below demonstrates that despite a slight increase in visitor numbers in January and February 2020 compared to 2019, platform bookings were almost non-existent in April and May 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe in March 2020. The number of nights spent stabilized in the summer of 2020 and continued on a little lower trajectory than that of 2019. However, platform tourism suffered in the winter of 2020 and the first half of 2021 as a result of the pandemic's second wave's arrival in late 2020.

Figure 5. Monthly guest nights booked via online platforms in the EU, 2019 – 2021 (Source: Eurostat)
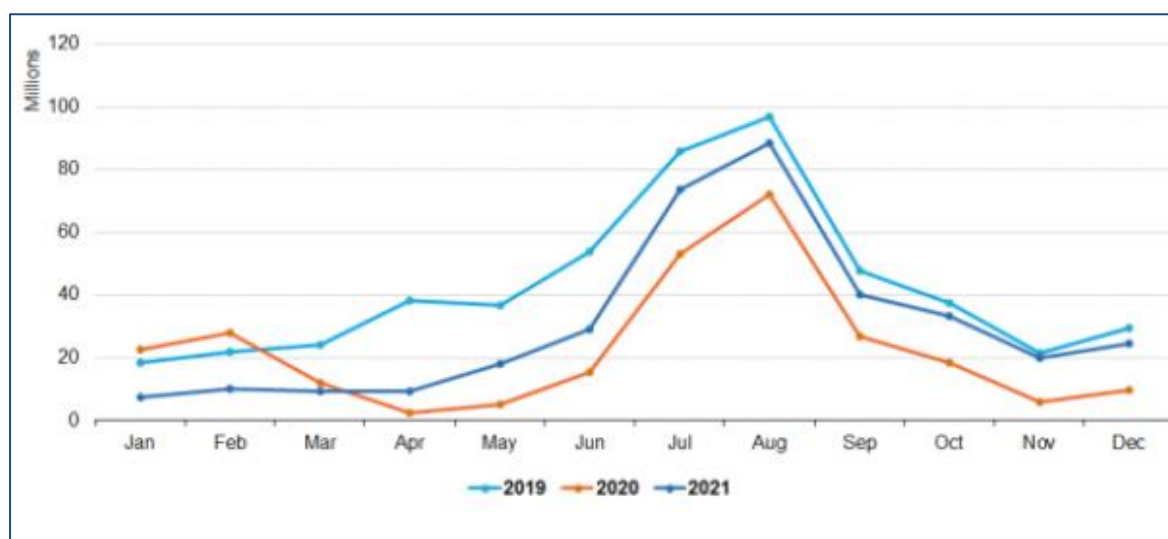
Travel restrictions were once again loosened or even abolished in most destinations during the summer of 2021. After then, usage of short-term accommodation significantly improved and was almost back to pre-pandemic levels. The two busiest months, July and August, witnessed 73.7 and 88.4 million nights spent in short-term lodging, and that is 85.9% and 91.2% of the unprecedented numbers for these months if one compares to 2019. Bookings remained strong and were nearly at pre-pandemic levels through the end of the year, despite the fact that a second wave of Covid-19 struck in late 2021. This is because only few countries imposed the same kind of restrictive measures as they had in 2020.

Figure 6 demonstrates how unevenly platform tourism was affected in 2020 across Europe, with Spain (-58.1%) and Italy (-60.2%) suffering more than France (-25.0%) or Germany (-20.6%). Iceland saw the highest drop in nights (-74.9% from 2.7 million nights in 2019 to 549.000 in 2020), followed by Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Slovenia and Czechia.

Figure 6. Decrease in guest nights in accommodations booked via online platforms per country in 2021 compared to 2019 (Source: Eurostat)
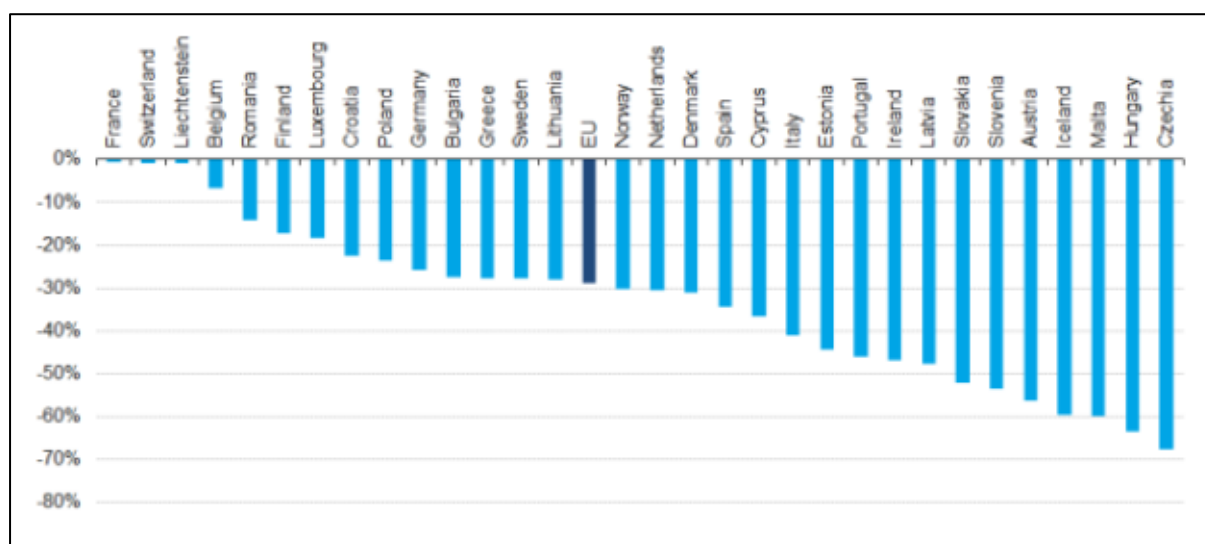

The rebound in 2021 was also unequal with a few countries coming close to matching their record highs of 2019. Whilst France registered the most guest nights for the second year in a row with only 0.6% below 2019 (Fig.7), i.e. surpassing Spain, the EU in general was still 28.9% below 2019 in terms of guest nights (Fig. 6).

The situation is also unbalanced when looking at the typical summer holiday destinations in the Mediterranean region, which in 2020 were hit particularly hard. Recovery rates that are comparable to the EU average are displayed in Figure 4 whereby Greece and Spain are away about 30% from their 2019 values, while Croatia recovered even more quickly (22.6%). Portugal (46%) and Italy (41%) still had difficulties in 2021, though.

In spite of the fact that all thirty one countries under study saw a decline in the number of guest nights, France, Switzerland, Sweden and Germany were the least affected, having losses under 30%. It is evident that traditional summer vacation spots around the Mediterranean Sea were significantly more negatively impacted when looking at the nine countries with more than ten million guest nights in 2019 (Figure 7). The low recovery rates can also be attributed to a fact that so many visitors from countries like Germany and France preferred to stay home for their vacations in 2020.

Figure 7. Guest nights by country booked via online platforms, countries with ≥ 10 million nigths in 2019 (Source: Eurostat)
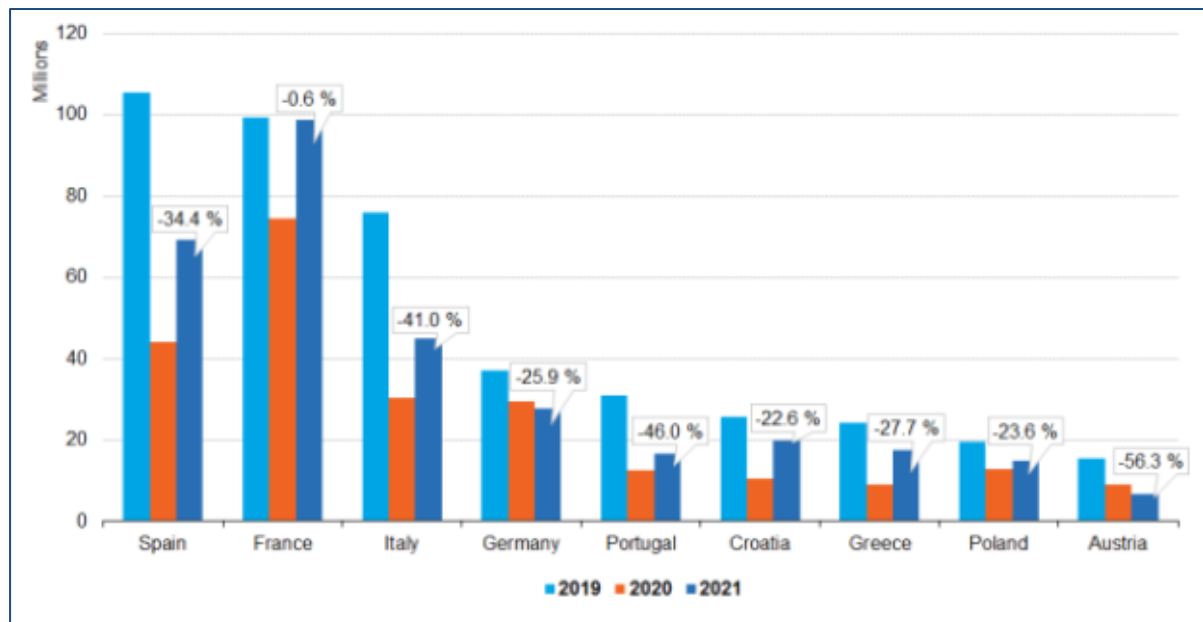
The data by Eurostat estimates that in 2021 the top city destinations in Europe were still very much behind when compared to 2019 values.

Figure 8. Guest nights spent in accommodation offered via online platforms by city, 2019 -2021 (Source: Eurostat)
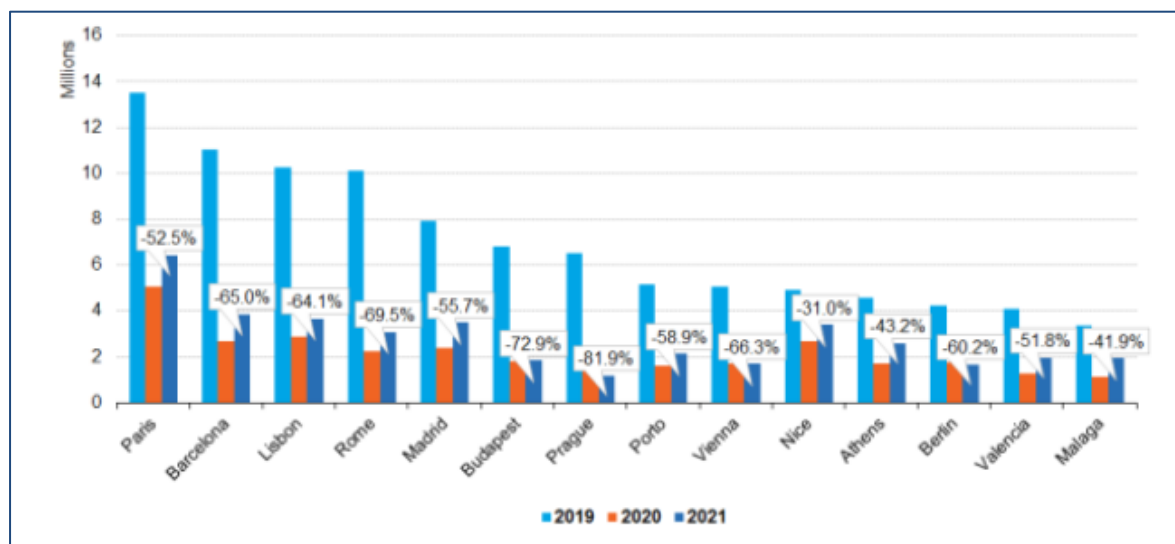
The pandemic had a particularly negative impact on city destinations, which have yet to recover. The number of guest nights for the ten most popular cities in 2019, 2020, and 2021 are shown in Figure 5. Prague (18.1%), Budapest (27.1%), and Rome (30.5%) were in the most difficult positions, while Nice (69.0%), Athens (56.8%), and Malaga (58.1%) enjoying more than 50% of their guest nights in 2021 if compared to 2019.

Due to Covid-19 domestic tourism has shot up from 33.2% in 2019 to 58.3% in 2020 and 55.9% in 2021. About one-third of all nights stayed in 2019 were due to domestic (internal) tourism, which is defined as nights spent by visitors in their own country. Around 37% of guest nights were spent by visitors from EU countries other than the host country, 15% by visitors from other parts of Europe and 14% by visitors from outside of Europe. The percentage of domestic tourists rose to about 60% in 2020 as limitations on international travel got more stringent. While travel from outside the EU substantially reduced (9% from outside of Europe; 5% from the rest of the world), travel within the EU still had a sizable share (about 28%).

Figure 9. Guest nights spent in accommodations via online platforms by origin, 2019 – 2021 (Source: Eurostat)
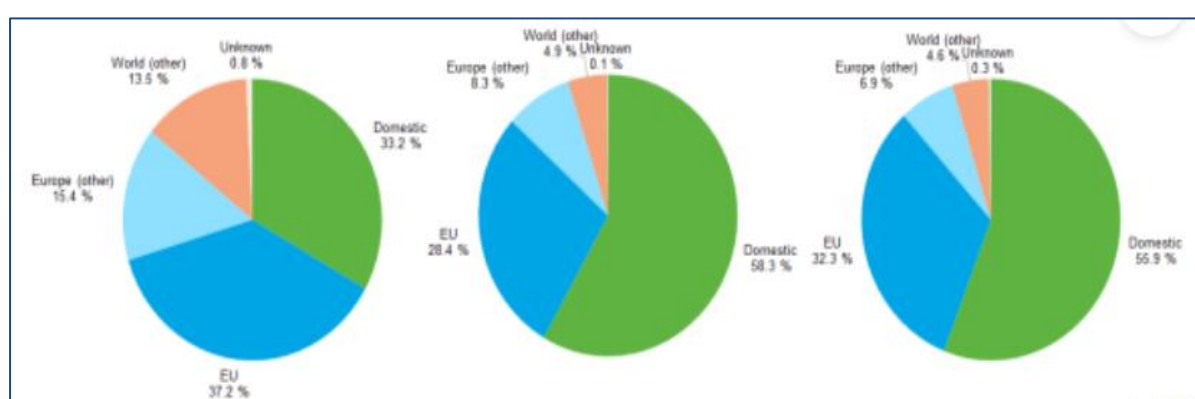
While the number of nights stayed increased dramatically in 2021, the number of visitors from outside of Europe remains at a low level (17 million guest nights, while the total number of nights in 2019 was registered at 73 million). As a result, the proportion of domestic tourists had a contribution of nearly 60% , while the share of tourists from other parts of the world remained low in comparison to the pre-pandemic scenario.

The Covid-19 pandemic's diverse impacts on platform tourism in the observed countries are largely explained by this massive decline in international travel. The percentage of domestic travel clearly had a significant impact on the reported decline in platform tourism in 2020 when looking at the breakdown of guest nights by country of origin for the guests for the six most popular countries in 2019. Travel from other regions plummeted drastically across the board, whereas internal tourism only slightly declined in all six countries (in France and Germany, it actually increased). Due to the fact that countries like Italy, Spain or Croatia had a substantially higher proportion of foreign visitors in 2019, this caused significant overall drops in number of nights (Fig.10).

Figure 10. Guest nights in accommodation via online platforms by origin of the guest, 2019 – 2021 (Source: Eurostat)
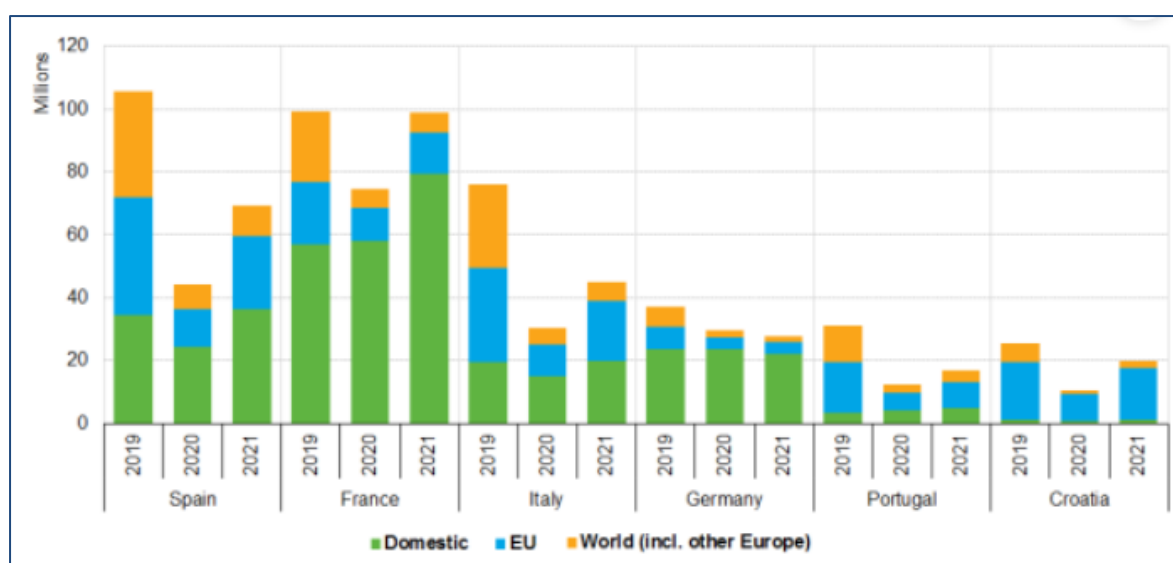
The increase in domestic tourism is mostly responsible for these countries' recovery in 2021. (especially in Spain, France and Italy).

When we look at the share of internal tourism during the pandemic in the context of Malta, it is evident that there was a drastic increase in number of nights, expenditure and number of locals travelling to and from Gozo / Malta. Given its size and extensive interindustry ties, the Maltese tourism sector was the most severely affected by the Covid -19. Table 1 demonstrates that the number of locals increased from 237,237 in 2019 to 36,460 in 2020; number of nights grew up from 618,211 in 2019 to 1,064. 318 in 2020. Total expenditure has also witnessed a growth from 39,333 in 2019 to 59,423 in 2020.

Due to a widespread lack of confidence in international travel as well as the mitigating measures proposed by local and international authorities, the rise in domestic tourism coincided with an 85% decline in outbound tourist departures, demonstrating that throughout 2020, Maltese vacationers have largely decided to travel within their home islands rather than going abroad.

Table 1.Main indicators for domestic tourists by period of departure in Malta (Source: NSO)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total domestic tourists	203,584	236,403	260,763	245,477	237,237	360,460
Total nights	562,690	622,738	708,483	650,037	618,211	1,064,318
Total expenditure (€ 000)	29,641	39,224	43,473	40,951	39,333	59,423

Interestingly, the same source provides more insights pertaining to the shift in travelling habits during 2019 and 2020. While the number of Malta residents going to Gozo / Comino region kept on steadily growing as indicated in Table 2 (188,600 in 2015;

218,272 in 2016; 236,838 in 2017; 227,121 in 2018; followed by a small drop in 2019 at 215,272 and finally in 2020 shooting up to 348,489), the number of residents of Gozo / Comino going to Malta, on the other hand, had a nearly 50% decrease in 2020 when compared with 2019, from 21,965 to 11,971.

Worth mentioning that trips of 1 – 3 nights were the most popular choice amongst locals as 199,355 residents decided for short stays in 2019 and 290,374 in 2020. Longer stays of 4 – 6 nights were the second popular option and amounted to 31,113 in 2019 and 51,878 in 2020. The stays of 7 nights and longer were the least preferred option which nearly tripled from 6,769 in 2019 to 18,208 in 2020.

Table 2. Profile of domestic tourists in Malta (Source: NSO)

Profile of domestic tourists						
Characteristics	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Regional overview						
Malta residents to Gozo/Comino region	188,600	218,272	236,838	227,121	215,272	348,489
Gozo/Comino residents to Malta region	14,984	18,131	23,924	18,356	21,965	11,971
Sex						
Males	98,932	129,113	131,891	122,148	128,266	190,313
Females	104,652	107,290	128,872	123,329	108,971	170,147
Age group						
15-24	38,304	50,778	40,786	39,686	42,691	63,499
25-44	88,608	95,103	111,235	110,700	102,584	182,557
45-64	49,167	60,981	81,145	67,317	62,228	87,347
65 or more	27,505	29,540	27,596	27,772	29,734	27,056
Purpose of visit						
Holiday	178,558	216,855	227,827	218,648	203,670	287,495
Visiting relatives and friends	17,046	12,940	17,398	16,306	19,254	54,590
Other (including business, educational, religious and health tourism)	7,980	6,608	15,538	10,523	14,314	18,375
Duration of visit						
1-3 nights	171,310	203,355	217,938	202,760	199,355	290,374
4-6 nights	22,196	24,892	32,666	33,655	31,113	51,878
7 nights or more	10,078ᵘ	8,156ᵘ	10,159ᵘ	9,061ᵘ	6,769ᵘ	18,208
Average length of stay (nights)	2.8	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.6	3.0
Total tourists	203,584	236,403	260,763	245,477	237,237	360,460

Looking at the purpose of travel, one cannot help but notice that while the number of locals going for staycations has naturally increased (increased from 203,670 in 2019 to 287,495 in 2020), the amount of those going to visit friends /family has nearly tripled during the pandemic (increased from 19,254 in 2019 to 54,590 in 2020).

Covid-19 has changed forever the way travellers book their accommodation. Some might prefer remote locations and be away from crowds for a unique experience, while others might prefer benefitting from slashed down prices and flexible cancellation policies in hotels. Surely, the pandemic has caused significant disruptions to the world economy since international travel was mostly suspended in the second quarter of 2020 in an effort to stop the virus's spread.

CHAPTER 3. Methodology

3.1.Introduction to methodology

Research methodology has been defined by Leedy & Ormrod (2001) as "the general approach the researcher takes in carrying out the research project" . Both authors claim that many a time a research is mistakenly perceived as a process of simply compiling information and documenting facts, when it is actually a process of data accumulation and analysis first, and only then interpretation of data in order "to understand a phenomenon" (Leedy & Ormrod,2001).

The whole research process (definition of objective, management of data and communication of results) takes place within an established framework and according to existing guidelines. Blumberg et al. (2014) describe research design as "the blueprint for fulfilling objectives and answering questions" of the research. Frameworks and guidelines tell researchers what to include in their research, how to conduct their research, and what conclusions they are likely to reach based on the data they collect. A study begins with at least one research question which helps researchers to stay focused and choose the right perspective to research the phenomenon in question.

3.2.Background on Malta

Nowadays travellers display increasing interest towards unique and authentic local experiences (Pera,2017) which makes Airbnb very attractive as the platform appears to be a provider of such experiences. As Qin et al. (2020) found out by studying Airbnb development in China through hoteliers' perspective that authenticity and experiencing local culture are considered to be advantages that hotels lack when compared to these type of informal accommodations. Moreover, Morgan Stanley's research (Global Insight, 2015) positions authenticity as one of the strongest incentives for people choosing Airbnb.

Due to its growth Airbnb has been widely researched but the majority of studies are concentrated on Airbnb in large cities and its effect on mainland economies. There is little research on Airbnb and particularly on the concept of authenticity in Airbnb stays when it comes to island destinations and this research intends to cover this gap in the context of Malta.

Malta, officially known as the Republic of Malta, is an island country in the European Union consisting of an archipelago which lies virtually at the centre of the Mediterranean, 93 km south of Sicily and 288 km north of Africa. The archipelago consists of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino with a total population of over 516,000 inhabitants (National Statistics Office, 18 March 2022) occupying an area of 316 square kilometres (Fig.11 and Fig.12).

Malta is the largest island of the three and the centre of culture, commerce and administration. Gozo, being the second largest island, has a more rural character, marked by fishing, tourism, crafts and agriculture. Comino, the smallest of the trio, is mostly uninhabited. With favourable weather conditions all year round, lovely beaches, a vibrant nightlife and 7,000 years of fascinating history, Malta has so much to offer to its visitors.

Figure 11. Geographical position of Malta (WorldAtlas.com)   *Figure 12. Map of Malta (WorldAtlas.com)*

Figure 13 illustrates that Malta is subdivided into 68 localities in alphabetical order: Attard, Balzan, Birgu, Birkirkara, Birzebbuga, Bormla, Dingli, Fgura, Floriana, Fontana, Ghajnsielem, Gharb, Gharghur, Ghasri, Ghaxaq, Gudja, Gzira, Hamrun, Iklin, Imdina, Imgarr, Imqabba, Imsida, Imtarfa, Isla, Kalkara, Kercem, Kirkop, Lija, Luqa, Marsa, Marsaskala, Marsaxlokk, Mellieha, Mosta, Munxar, Nadur, Naxxar, Paola, Pembroke, Pieta, Qala, Qormi, Qrendi, Rabat, Rabat (Ghawdex), Safi, San Giljan/Saint Julian, San Gwann/Saint John, San Lawrenz/Saint Lawrence, Sannat, San Pawl il-Bahar/Saint Paul's Bay, Santa Lucija/Saint Lucia, Santa Venera/Saint Venera, Siggiewi, Sliema, Swieqi, Tarxien, Ta' Xbiex, Valletta, Xaghra, Xewkija, Xghajra, Zabbar, Zebbug, Zebbug (Ghawdex), Zejtun and Zurrieq (Visitmalta.com).
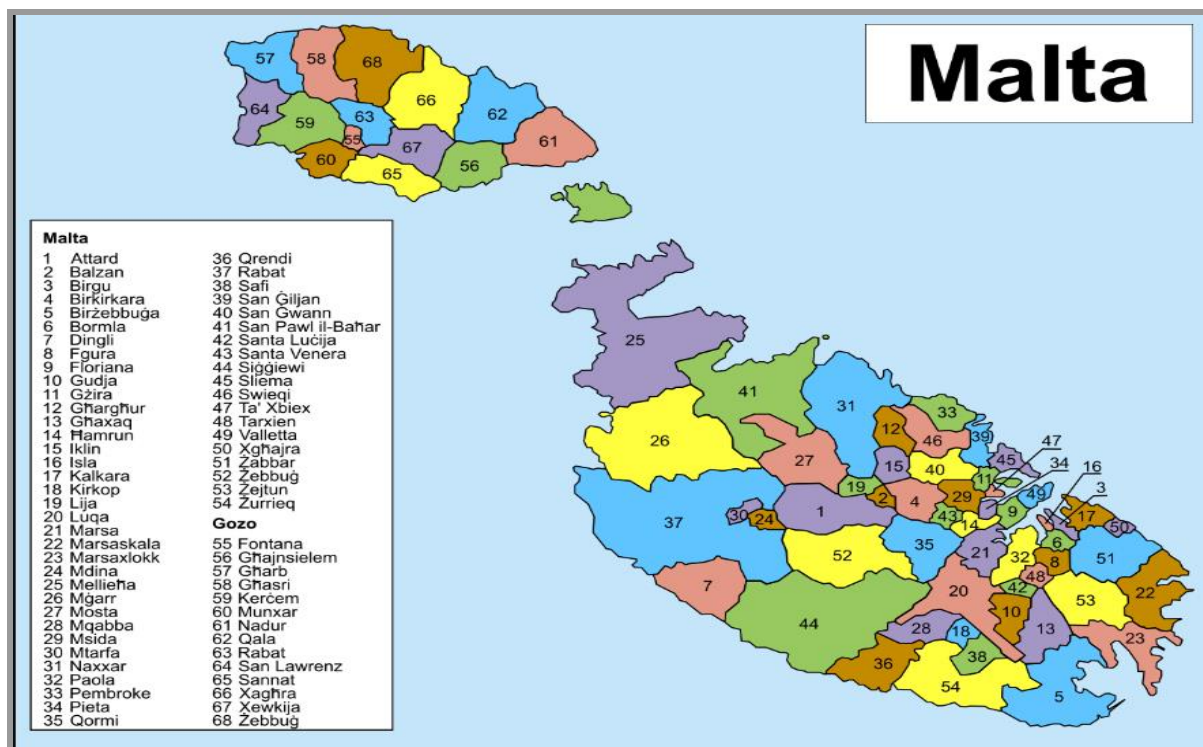
Malta is considered to be the 10th smallest country in the world, having an area of 316 sq. km, and the 4th most densely populated country in the world with 516,000 population (WolrdAtlas.com) which is heavily relies on tourism. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2018), travel and tourism direct contribution accounted for 14.2% of Malta's GDP in 2017 and 31,000 jobs directly associated with travel and tourism were created in Malta in 2017 (15.7% of total employment).

When compared to other tourist destinations in the area, Malta's contribution of the travel and tourism sector to employment has been comparatively high. As per data provided by World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2018), it was 28.3% in 2016, which was higher above the average (usually between 10% - 12%) for the Mediterranean, the European Union, and the rest of the world (WTTC, 2018). With a total share of 24.8%, Greece came in second among the other nations in the region, followed by Cyprus. The significance of tourism in both the economic and social aspects of Malta is highlighted by its remarkable contribution to employment.

According to data from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2018), the travel and tourism sector contributed a total of 27.1% to Malta's GDP in 2017. Figure 14 demonstrates that at 22.3% of GDP, Cyprus had the second-highest percentage, followed by Greece and Lebanon.
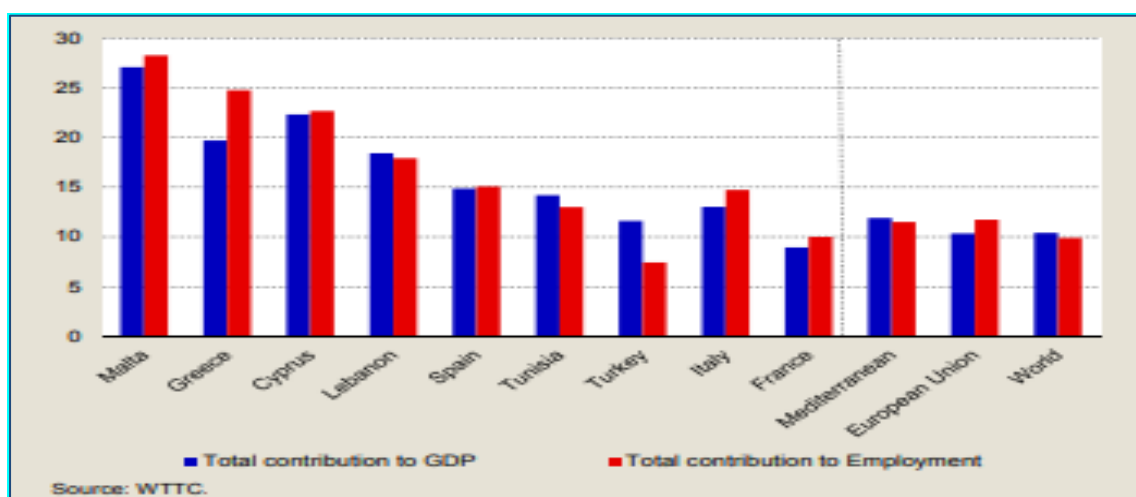
As per estimates of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2018), travel and tourism direct contribution accounted for 14.2% of Malta's GDP in 2017. The economic activity is mainly represented by sectors like accommodation, travel agencies, airlines, and other passenger transportation services (aside from commuter services), however does include leisure and catering activities which are usually taken care of directly by tourists.

In accordance with projections from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2018), 31,000 jobs directly associated with travel and tourism were created in Malta in 2017 (15.7% of total employment). In addition to jobs in the restaurant and leisure sectors , this also includes employment by hotels, travel agencies, airlines, and other passenger transport companies. In 2017, 55,000 jobs, or 28.3% of all employment, were estimated to be generated by these sectors in total, including indirect and induced effects.

Since Malta is an island country, there are only two ways to enter IT: by air or by sea. In 2019, 98,1% of tourists—defined as foreign nationals who made use of an accommodation for at least one night in Malta—arrived at Malta International Airport, which is the only airport. The remaining 1.9% share of travellers arrived at Malta by sea (NSO, Inbound Tourism). Malta's subtropical climate has played a vital role in helping the Islands establish themselves as a major Mediterranean "sun-and-sea" vacation destination, together with a high average number of sunny days.

Croes and Semrad (2013) have recognized "the discovery of culture" as a beneficial route to new market niches that enables small island locations to capitalize on their capacity to give a "distinct experience." Thus, Malta's unique history serves as a valuable asset in luring "culture tourists" (Markwick, 1999). Malta's tourist industry has evolved

over time, and the nation today specializes in corporate travel, conferences, health and wellness, English language courses, scuba diving, and other sports (Attard, 2018).

3.3 Introduction to research methods

As described by Gay (Gay et al., 2006), there are two fundamental kinds of research: qualitative and quantitative. Cresswell (2009) argues that both qualitative and quantitative approaches may be applied in the same study, thus creating another, third, type of research design which is called a mixed method approach. He states that "quantitave and qualitative research should not be thought of as polar opposites or dichotomies; instead, they represent different ends on a continuum" (Cresswell, 2009).

Qualitative method is used to collect data to investigate participants' experiences with open-ended questions. The responses are non-numerical and allow a researcher to understand the complexity of a phenomenon. This approach is ideal to take away multiple views of experiences as participants will have their own opinions and beliefs.

Quantitative method has been defined by Creswell (1994) as a type of research that is "explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics)". By using quantitative method, researchers aim at establishing, confirming or validating relationships between variables used in the study and "to develop generalizations that contribute to theory" (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001).

Researchers usually choose quantitative approaches to answer research questions that require numerical data, and qualitative approaches to research questions that require textural data. If both numerical and textural data are required, a mixed methods approach will be employed.

The fundamental principle of mixed methods research is that multiple kinds of data should be collected with different strategies and methods in ways that reflect complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses, allowing a mixed methods study to provide insights not possible when only qualitative or quantitative data are collected (Johnson and Turner, 2003).

3.4 Data collection

In this study, the quantitative research method was adopted to collect data from individuals over 18 years of age or older who have used Airbnb in Malta at least once during last 12 months or prior to Covid outbreak. Quantitative survey was chosen as a

research instrument for this study as the most suitable for trying to identify the importance of various factors for Airbnb's choice in Malta.

Since Airbnb is a fairly new concept of sharing economy and only a limited part of the population made use of it, the respondents were considered as "hard-to-reach" (Marpsat & Razafindratsima, 2010). Therefore, online surveys were shared on social media platforms like Facebook in travel-related groups via links. The researcher had also considered posting on Airbnb website (blog), but according to other studies, the response rate was expected to be disappointedly low, therefore this sampling method was declined. In order to diversify the sample, other methods of collecting responses were used. These practices included posting a referral link at the end of the survey, contacting other Airbnb hosts in Malta and inviting their recent guests to participate by forwarding the survey link.

3.5 Survey design

The self-administered survey was developed using Google Docs and the questions were written in English which meant the survey participants were required to understand the language.

Before conducting the research, a pilot study was carried out with several Airbnb guests who were members of researcher's social circle. The pretest involved completing the survey, providing feedback on the survey layout and content and also checking for possible concerns over confusion and fatigue. Following this, an additional section, whereby respondents are given more detailed information about the research and are required to give consent to participate in the survey, was added and the survey link was shared for the main data collection.

The survey consists of 39 questions which are based on various options for answering: multiple choice, Likert scale and short open-ended questions. The survey itself is divided into 3 sections and is focused on respondent's Airbnb stay in Malta, including demographics and investigating potential motivation factors for choosing such a non-traditional accommodation provider like Airbnb. The first ten questions were mainly pertaining to the respondent's Airbnb stay in Malta and provided information about the location, the purpose of coming to Malta, type of accommodation chosen (entire premises, spare bedroom or shared space) and satisfaction levels related to accommodation standards, host communication and overall stay in Malta. The responses in this section were measured using multiple choice and open-ended questions, and also a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree and 1=very unsatisfied to 6=very satisfied).

The subsequent 22 questions of the second section examined respondent's agreement with various potential motivations for choosing Airbnb instead of traditional accommodation on a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree). These questions were mainly based on the prior discussed major motivational factors – price, authenticity, social interaction, household amenities and space, sustainability, location and novelty.

The last 3rd section consisted of 7 questions and provided information on demographics, including age, gender, level of education, income, respondent's country of residence and any accompanying parties. Due to the reason that respondents would be from different countries with household income measured in different currencies, therefore it was deemed necessary to use a Likert scale by employing 5 categories ranging from 1= "well below average" to 5="well above average".

Survey data were collected by using quantitative research methods and collection of data began in the middle of July 2022 and concluded in late August 2022. Acquired data were analysed by using Excel in the time between 24th August and 8th September 2022 and percentages were used for calculation.

CHAPTER 4. Findings

Malta has been very successful at marketing itself as a popular tourist destination in the Mediterranean. Ever since new 11 hotels opened between 1959 and 1964 (Lockhart, 1997) - thus almost doubling existing bed supply in Malta, the tourism industry boomed from then onward. Arrivals shot up from under 400,000 tourists in 1975 to nearly 1,800,000 in 2015 and almost 2,600,000 in 2018. As indicated by Micallef and Attard (2015), the hike in tourist arrivals was mostly due to private investment in the **collective establishments** (as per NSO (National Statistics Office) definition, these include hotels, guesthouses, tourist villages, holiday complexes, bed and breakfasts, holiday complexes, campsites and hostels). Since then, the tourism industry has been strongly contributing to the economic growth of Malta and also creating job opportunities. Malta experienced an astonishing increase from about 11,000,000 guest nights in 2009 to just under 20,000,000 nights while managing to accommodate total of 2,753,239 tourists (excluding overnight cruise passengers amounting to 18,649) in 2019 as per National Statistics Office (Tourism in Malta. Facts and Figures 2019, Malta Tourism Authority).

A report by Eurostat displays number of nights booked via collaborative economy platforms (Airbnb, Booking.com, Expedia and TripAdvisor) in 2019 and we can see that 3,090,000 international guest nights were produced via these 4 platforms.

Figure 15. Number of nights booked via collaborative economy platforms in 2019 (Source: Eurostat)

	Number of guest nights			Number of stays		
	Total	Domestic	International	Total	Domestic	International
EU	511 939 000	169 736 000	342 202 000	46 958 000	18 523 000	28 435 000
Belgium	6 987 000	1 624 000	5 363 000	821 000	166 000	655 000
Bulgaria	3 047 000	830 000	2 217 000	278 000	107 000	171 000
Czechia	9 401 000	1 607 000	7 794 000	1 046 000	234 000	812 000
Denmark	4 681 000	1 004 000	3 677 000	471 000	126 000	345 000
Germany	37 236 000	23 513 000	13 723 000	4 029 000	2 551 000	1 478 000
Estonia	1 523 000	311 000	1 212 000	235 000	67 000	168 000
Ireland	6 912 000	1 498 000	5 414 000	816 000	189 000	627 000
Greece	24 302 000	3 394 000	20 908 000	2 085 000	453 000	1 633 000
Spain	105 602 000	34 349 000	71 253 000	7 823 000	3 147 000	4 676 000
France	99 453 000	57 033 000	42 421 000	9 177 000	5 817 000	3 361 000
Croatia	25 630 000	1 180 000	24 450 000	1 964 000	175 000	1 789 000
Italy	76 044 000	19 696 000	56 348 000	7 030 000	2 186 000	4 844 000
Cyprus	4 241 000	317 000	3 924 000	220 000	36 000	184 000
Latvia	1 338 000	168 000	1 170 000	177 000	37 000	140 000
Lithuania	1 578 000	460 000	1 118 000	252 000	89 000	163 000
Luxembourg	281 000	19 000	262 000	41 000	2 000	39 000
Hungary	9 173 000	1 140 000	8 033 000	1 019 000	178 000	841 000
Malta	3 212 000	122 000	3 090 000	192 000	9 000	183 000
Netherlands	9 396 000	1 705 000	7 691 000	1 017 000	238 000	779 000
Austria	15 572 000	1 242 000	14 330 000	1 286 000	144 000	1 142 000
Poland	19 685 000	10 208 000	9 478 000	2 623 000	1 539 000	1 084 000
Portugal	31 064 000	3 500 000	27 564 000	2 409 000	304 000	2 105 000
Romania	4 192 000	2 019 000	2 173 000	608 000	331 000	278 000
Slovenia	2 584 000	187 000	2 396 000	306 000	27 000	279 000
Slovakia	2 238 000	567 000	1 672 000	282 000	88 000	194 000
Finland	2 916 000	1 071 000	1 845 000	401 000	180 000	221 000
Sweden	3 650 000	972 000	2 678 000	349 000	105 000	243 000
Iceland	2 186 000	58 000	2 128 000	328 000	9 000	319 000
Liechtenstein	17 000	<1 000	17 000	2 000	<1 000	2 000
Norway	3 970 000	1 136 000	2 834 000	509 000	132 000	378 000
Switzerland	6 383 000	1 596 000	4 787 000	682 000	168 000	514 000

It is worth noting that according to the latest report of Malta Tourism Authority of 2019, the tourism sector has strongly contributed to the GDP of Malta, which was estimated in 2019 at 13,208.5 million by injecting 2,2 billion of Total tourist expenditure.

The research of Attard (2018) indicates that since the 2000s, there was a shift amongst visitors from booking collective accommodation towards choosing to stay in **private accommodations** (these include rented accommodation, own private residence, staying with friends and other private accommodation, as per NSO). This phenomenon is a global trend and not exclusive to Malta, thanks to emergence of low-cost airlines and advance of technologies, i.e. online booking systems and instant confirmation. The advantages of booking private accommodation via online platforms are evident - lower rates, choice of localities to choose from, even in non-touristy areas, user feedback and host ratings. In the same study Attard (2018) investigates the causes leading to this shift in the travel industry of Malta and suggests that probably visitors were motivated by the value for money concept and looked for local authentic experiences.

It appears that authenticity has become a significant factor affecting tourist's preference to choose private lodgings since the turn of 21st century. Therefore, the topic of authenticity was of a particular interest to the researcher, especially how it evolved during last few years and whether it is still relevant to visitors when booking on Airbnb platform as one of the private accommodation options.

A total of 72 surveys were received and none showed any signs of incompleteness or inappropriate answers. To begin with, all respondents gave their informed consent prior to participating in the survey and secondly, all respondents confirmed that they were users of Airbnb and that they had their recent stay at an Airbnb in Malta by answering "yes" to "Have you stayed in an Airbnb in Malta for the past 12 months or pre-Covid?".

In order to assess the general representativeness of the sample , sample characteristics were compared with those data reports on tourism figures 2019, mainly produced by National Statistics Office and where applicable, on private accommodation by Ellul (2019) as Airbnb does not disclose any of its operational data to the public, thus creating difficulties in quantifying the usage of this accommodation provider in Malta. It is worth mentioning that the European Commission reached a landmark agreement to share data with four collaborative economy platforms (Airbnb, Booking.com, Expedia and TripAdvisor) in 2020 and the data for 2019 have already been published by Eurostat. While the takeaways related to Malta are quite impressive, the information does not provide data linked to Airbnb only. Hence, a comparison will be made with the figures provided by National Statistics Office.

Sample profile

This section is related to demographics and as it can be seen from Fig. 16, the sample is relatively young with the majority of respondents (45.8%) between 31 – 40 years old, followed by 27.8% of respondents who were aged between 21 – 30 years old, 16.7% are in the bracket of 41 – 50 years. Age brackets "51 – 60" and "61 years and older" are equally represented at 4.2% each and very small percentage (1.3%) appeared to be in the category "20 or under".

Figure 16. Your age
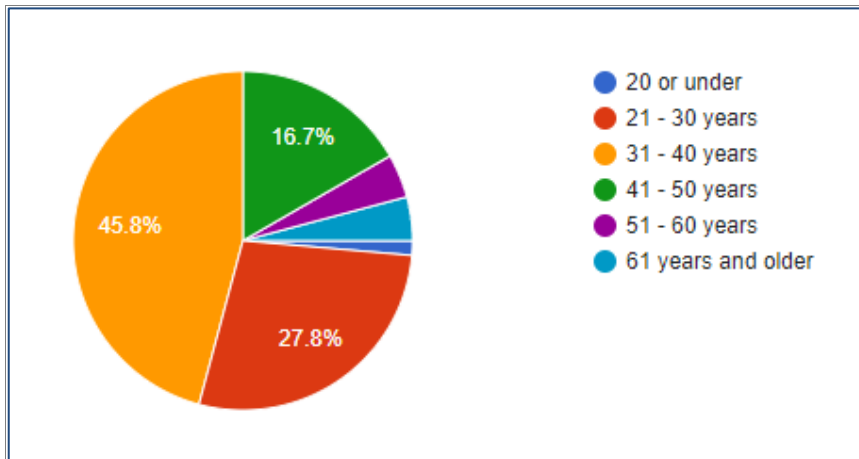
When compared to the data provided by National Statistics Office in the Malta Tourism report (Facts and Figures, 2019) it transpired that the both current study and MTA report are in agreement that majority of visitors are in their late 20s to early 40s age group (current study shows the 45.8% share of 31 - 40 years while MTA report indicates 1.101,842, i.e. 40% of 25 - 44 years (Fig. 16 and 17). The second largest share of travellers is represented by different age segment. While in the present study the second largest share (27.80%) consists of 21 - 30 years participants, NSO data display the second largest percentage of tourists (826,816, i.e. 30%) which is represented by the 45 - 64 years age group. The age group of under 20s to early 20s makes a substantial share of visitors in MTA report (544,597, i.e. 19.8%) while respondents in their 20s represent only 1.3% of the study's sample. The tourist market of over 60s is underrepresented in study's sample (only 4.2%) while MTA report demonstrates comparatively a larger portion of 10.2% amounting to 279,984 travellers.

Figure 17. Incoming tourists (Source: NSO)

INCOMING TOURISTS
Demographic Profile

	2017	2018	2019	Change 2019/2018
GENDER				
Males	1,168,929	1,300,684	1,368,550	5.2%
Females	1,104,908	1,298,006	1,384,689	6.7%
AGE GROUP				
0-24	430,150	475,417	544,597	14.6%
25-44	860,200	1,005,901	1,101,842	9.5%
45-64	728,071	826,732	826,816	0.0%
65+	255,417	290,639	279,984	-3.7%
ORGANISATION OF STAY				
Package	802,386	886,606	818,014	-7.7%
Non-package	1,471,452	1,712,084	1,935,226	13.0%
FREQUENCY				
First time tourists	1,660,017	1,912,486	2,056,139	7.5%
Repeat tourists	613,820	686,203	697,100	1.6%

The majority of respondents were female at 66.7% as opposed to males at 33.3% (Fig. 18). The gender profile of incoming tourists featured in MTA report is somewhat similar to the current study as females make up the majority of the sample (66.7% of females and 33.3% by males). However, the difference between male and female travellers in MTA demographic sample is not so drastic like of the study's findings as males are represented by 49.7% and females indicate 50.3% share of the total sample (Fig. 17 and 18).

Figure 18. Your gender.
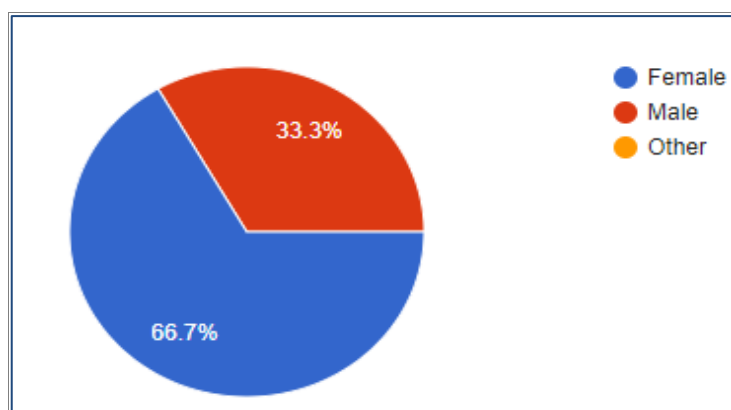
The overall sample was also well-educated, with 54.2% having a graduate/professional degree, 40.3% of the respondents had a university / college degree and only 5.5% have attended *High or less school* (Fig. 19).

Figure 19. Please indicate your highest level of education.
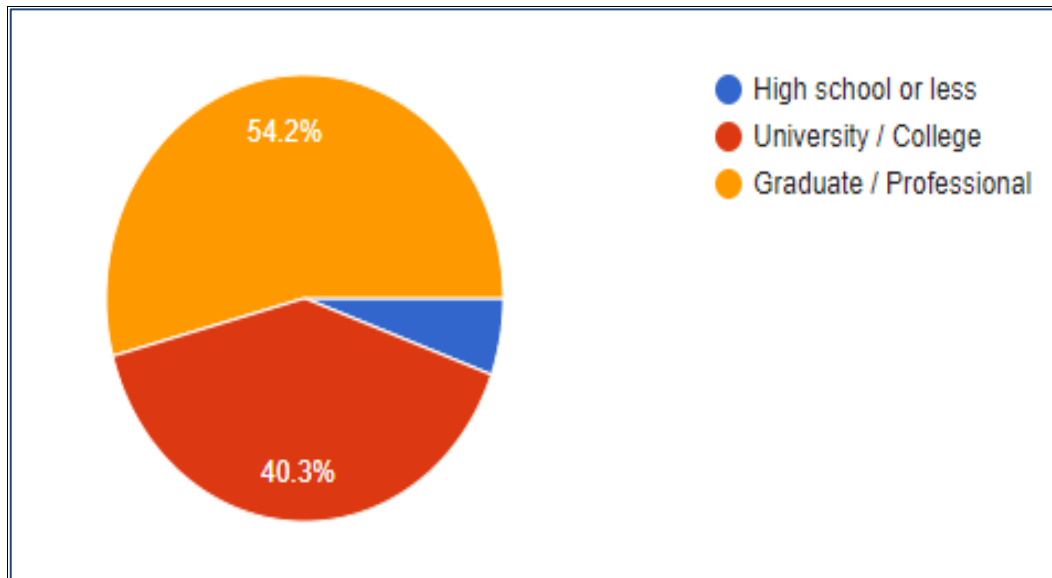
When it comes to household income, 50% of the sample perceived their household financial status as "average" in their home country, with 38.9% of participants as "well above average" and 9.7% as "well above average". A small percentage of 1.4% considered their income as "below average" (Fig. 20).

Figure 20. Please indicate your gross household income (relative to your home country).
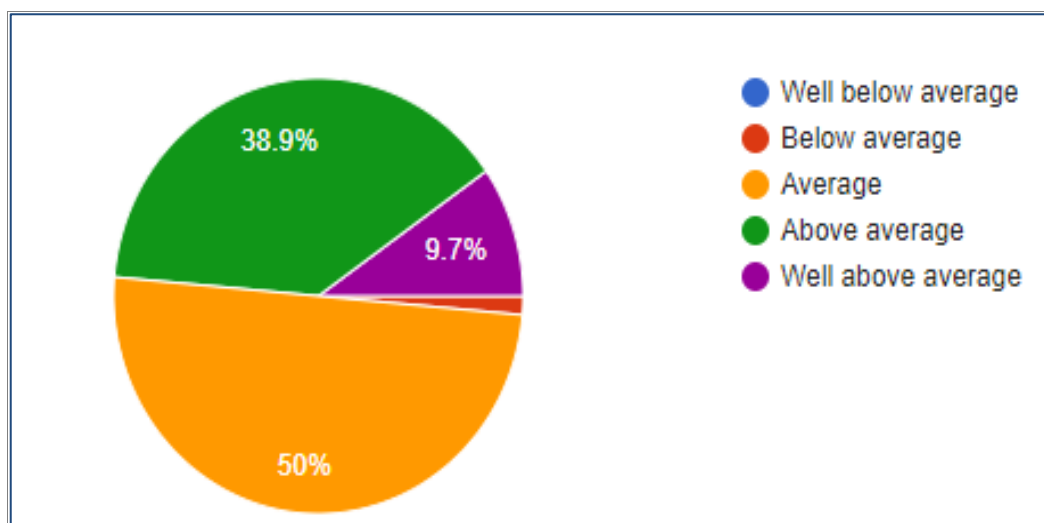
The sample appeared to be quite international with United Kingdom residents taking the lead at 20.83%, followed by Italy at 15.28% and France at 13.89%. 11.11% of respondents were from Germany, 9.72% from Spain and Poland, Belgium, Russia, Finland and Sweden at 2.78% each. The rest of sample was represented by participants from Greece, Slovenia, Portugal, Hungary, Scotland, Norway, Iceland, Ireland, Austria, Australia and Netherlands at 1.39% each (Fig. 21). These findings are consistent with NSO report (Inbound Tourism, 2019) which demonstrates the same top three destinations - United Kingdom (23.6%), Italy (14.3%) and France (8.7%). The reasons explaining why the British market is in the lead might be one of the factors mentioned in MTA's Market Profile Survey (2019) - "English widely spoken" which stands at 29% and "Good flight connections" at 42.6% which applies to most European cities. Worth noting that Heathrow Airport in London was the busiest airport in the European Union in 2019 (Statista, 2022). Moreover, as stated by Sant (2020), route connectivity from Malta greatly improved from 85 direct air connections in 2005 to 125, meaning that in 2019 Malta had direct flight to 40 countries as compared with 27 countries in 2005. Increased air connectivity to/from Malta made a huge difference resulting in record numbers of inbound tourists. The emergence of low-cost carriers like Ryanair and easyJet also contributed to increased share of travellers. In fact, in 2016 Ryanair became the largest carrier operating to/from Malta with its market share at 34.1% while the national airline's share dropped to 31.5% (Attard, 2020).

Figure 21. Your country of residence.
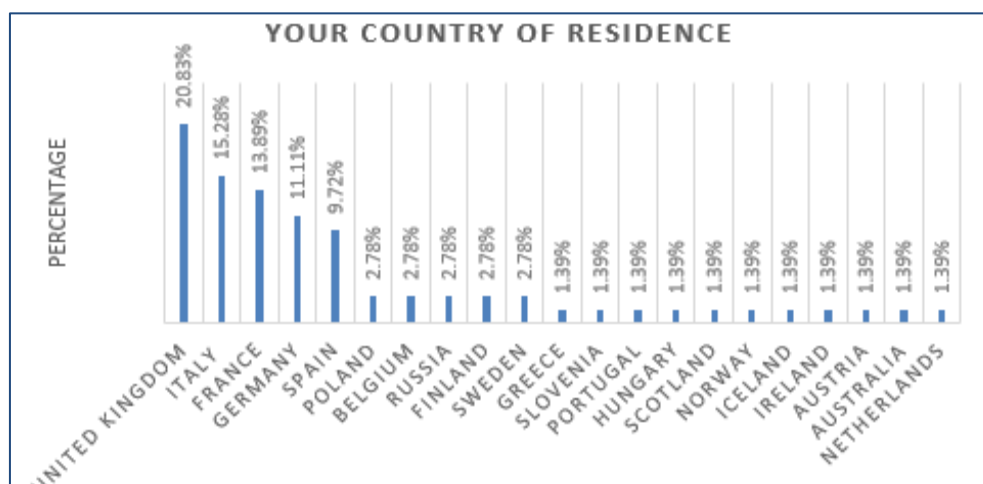
Upon their stay at Airbnb in Malta, the overall sample was always accompanied by one and more persons. The majority of the respondents (45.8%) were accompanied by one person, 27.8% were joined by two persons, 20.8% by 3 and 5.6% stayed with 4 more persons (Fig. 22).
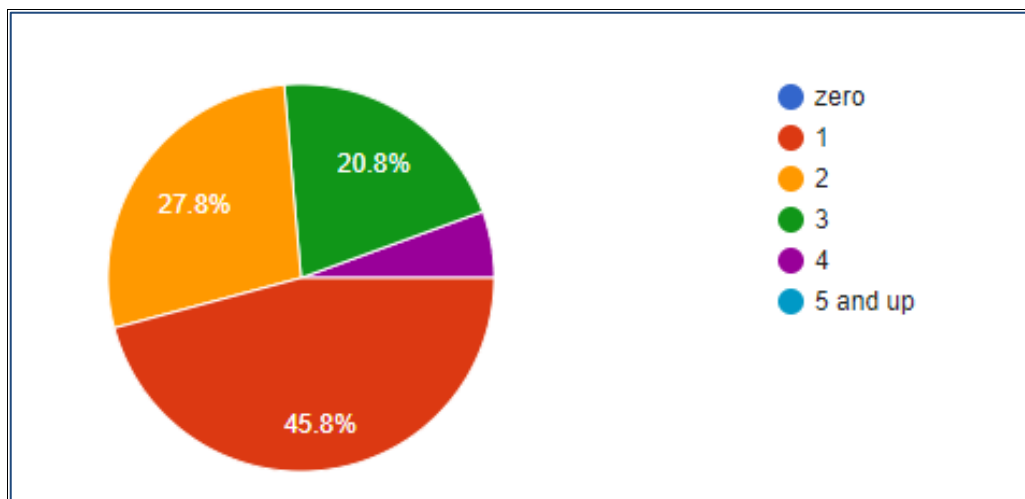
Having a look at who were those accompanying persons, we can see that most of the participants (38.9%) decided to visit Malta with friends, 29.2% with spouse / partner. 13.9% were accompanied by relatives, 11.1% were joined in by children, followed by 6.9% of respondents who were accompanied by their colleagues (Fig. 23).

Figure 23. Who were those accompanying guests?
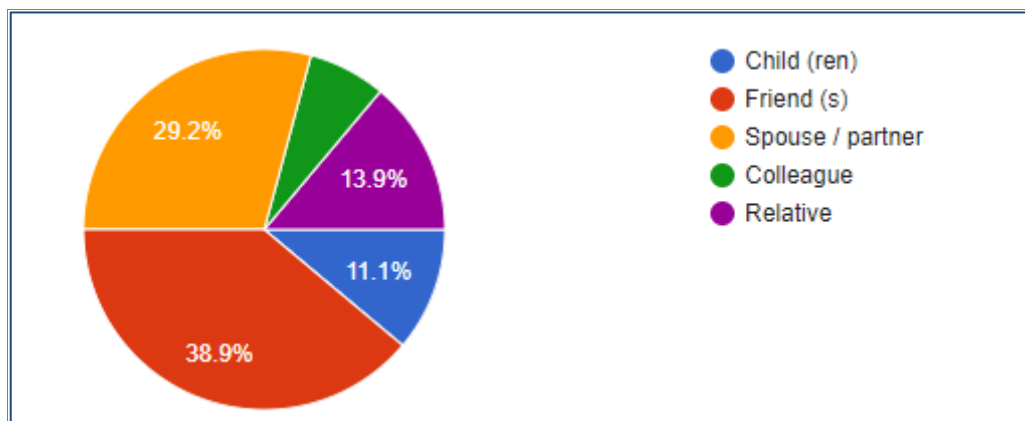
Motivations to use Airbnb in Malta

Following section will give more insights about respondents' recent stay in Malta. The responses as to why the participants chose Malta for their Airbnb stay were reorganized in 10 groups and amongst the most popular like "Sun, sea and weather" (29.1%), "Visiting friends and family" (23.6%), "History/culture/ sightseeing" (13.8%), "Event" (11.1%), "Studying English" (5.6%), "Diving" (5.6%), there were other, less popular in this overall sample, like "Business set-up" (1.4%). Malta was chosen as "New destination" by 2.8% and was claimed to be "Favourite destination in the Med" by 1.4% of respondents (Figure 26).

4 persons (5.6%) from this study's sample came to Malta to study English and are from Italy, France, Germany and Russia respectively. This result is in agreement with NSO report (2019) which indicates the top six countries producing students for studying English language (Fig 24).

Figure 24. Share of the top six English Learning students by citizenship, 2019 (Source: NSO)
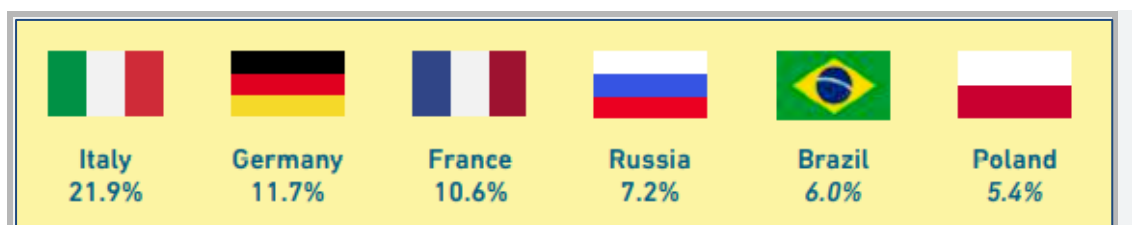
According to MTA's Market Profile Survey (2019) and NSO (Inbound Tourism, 2019), the most popular motivation (49.3%) for choosing Malta appeared to be joint "Sun and culture" in comparison with 29.1% of "Sun, sea and weather" of the present sample. "Culture" at 10.8% was considered the second strongest motivation to visit Malta in comparison with 13.8% of the sample. "Visiting friends and family" at 7.6% which is lower when compared with 23.6% of the present research. Other motivations like "English language" at 3% (against 5.6% of the present study), "Scuba diving" at 4.8 % (as opposed to 5.6%) and "Special occasion" at 8.5% (11.1% of the sample) are pretty much on a par with the present survey results. Remarkably, "Wellness" (at 4.9%) and "Other Sports" at 2.8% of the national survey were not mentioned in the researcher's survey (Fig.25).

Figure 25. Main motivations for choosing Malta,2019. Source: MTA's Market Profile Survey 2019 and NSO (Inbound Tourism,2019)
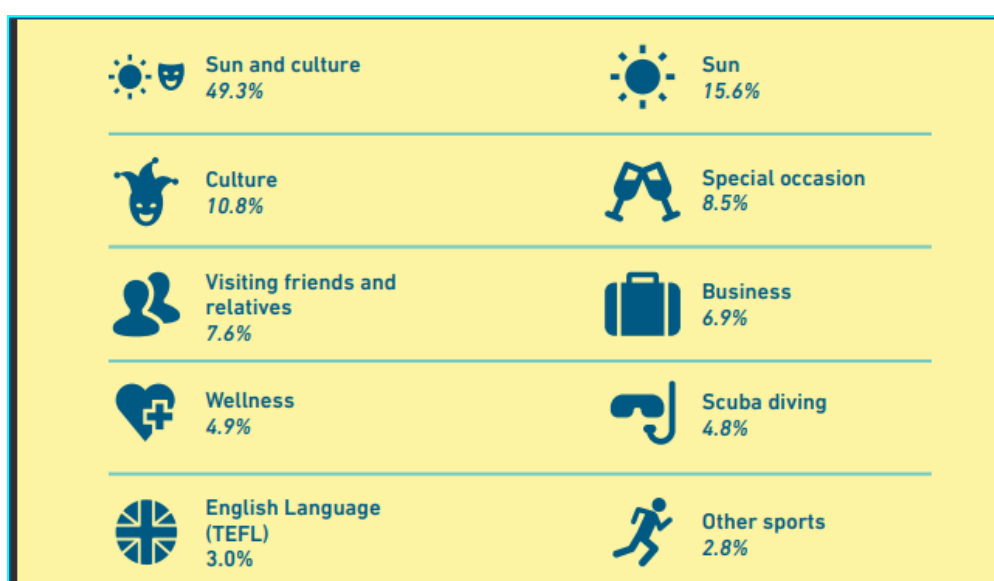
Figure 26. Why did you choose Malta as a destination?
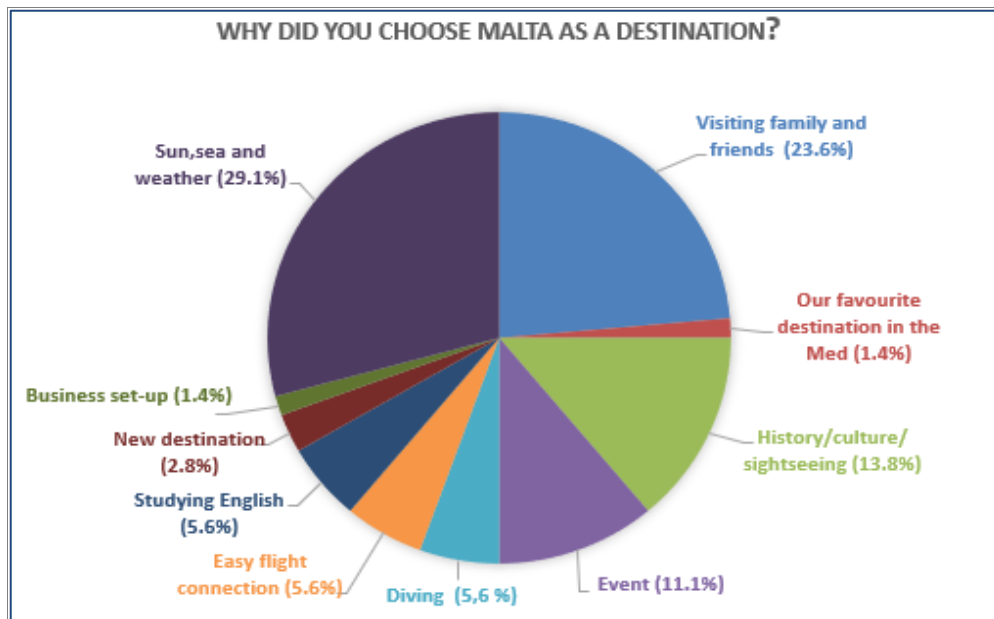
The most popular destinations within this sample are unsurprisingly Sliema (15.28%), Mellieha (13.89%), Valletta (9.72%), St. Julian's (8.34%) and Qawra (8.33%). Sliema, a popular seaside destination for visitors and locals alike, which is famous for its promenade and numerous shopping opportunities and abundant bars and restaurants, scored the highest percentage of 15.28%. This finding is consistent with the research of Ellul (2019) whereby Sliema was also the top locality with Airbnb listings at 12%. As per

Ellul's report of May 2019 the top 5 localities in Malta are Sliema (12%), St.Paul's Bay (11.3%), St. Julian's (8.9%), Mellieha (5.1%) and Valletta (5%).

Apart from localities adjacent to the most popular destinations like Gzira (5.56%), Msida (4.16%), Floriana (1.39%), St.Paul's Bay (2.78%), Buggibba (2.78%), Xemxija (1.39%), San Gwann (1.39%), it is worth noting that rural areas are also in the demand, e.g. Manikata (1.39%), Mgarr (1.39%) in Malta and Nadur (1.39%) and Gharb (1.39%) in Gozo. Marsascala (5.56%), Birzebbugia (1.39%) and Marsaxlokk (1.39%) are established resort towns offering plenty in terms of authenticity. Another remarkable insight is the availability of Airbnb premises and the choice of participants to stay in a Airbnb in historical cities (Mdina, 2.78%) and Cottonera area (Birgu, 2.78%) and other residential areas of Malta like Tarxien (1.39%), Zebbug (1.39%), Madliena (1.39%), Gudja (1.39%) which usually less tend to accommodate tourists.

Figure 27. In which location of Malta was your most recent Airbnb stay?
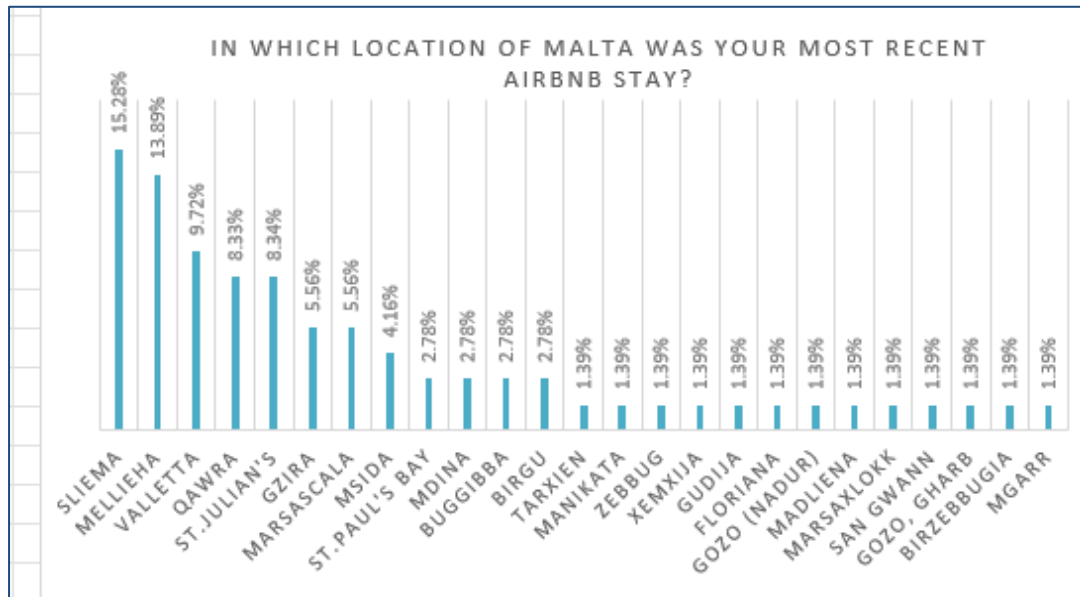
Figure 28 displays that more than half of the sample travelled to Malta for leisure (55.6%), followed by 25% of respondents travelling to visit their family and friends (e.g. a UK participant staying in an Airbnb in Marsaxlokk describes "My mother is Maltese so we come to visit every year"), 9.7% replied "other", 6,9% came for an event and 2.8% had a business-related visit.

Figure 28. What was the purpose of your trip?
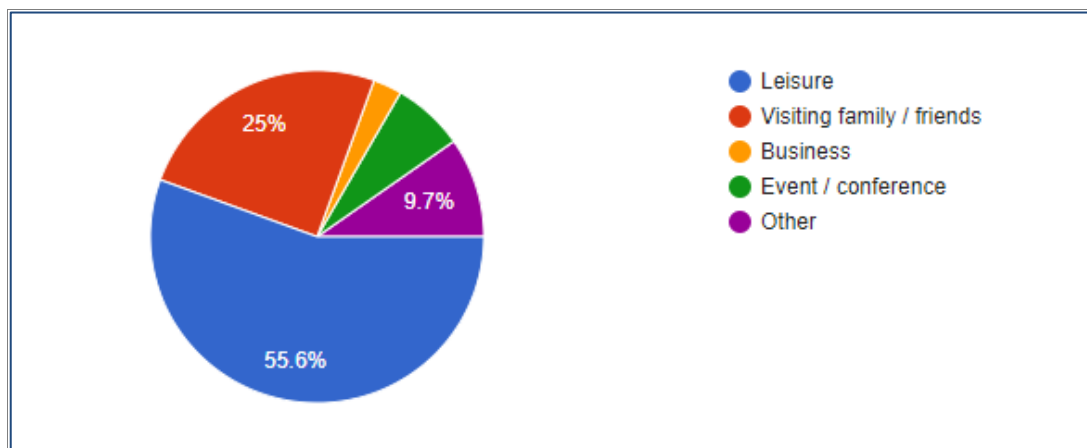
NSO report (Inbound Tourism, 2019) shows that out of 4 purposes to visit Malta such as "Holiday" (81,36%), "Business and Professional" (6.87%), "Visiting Family / Friends" (7,56%) and "Other" (4.21%), the purpose for leisure was dominant in both NSO and researcher's reports. However, other purposes indicate lower numbers, e.g. "Visiting family/ friends" is only 7.56% in NSO report while sample shows a high of 25%.

When it comes to the most used type of Airbnb accommodation, Figure 29 below indicates a strong inclination towards renting the entire place (77.8%), followed by 20.8% choosing to stay in a private bedroom and only one respondent (1.4%) indicated

renting a shared space. This finding is in line with Ellul's research who estimates due to web scraped Airbnb data as of May 2019 that 5,532 dwellings (63.1%) out of 8,761 Airbnb listings in Malta are entire premises. 2,905 listings (33,2%) are represented by private rooms, while there is a small percentage of 3,7% (324) as shared room listings.

Figure 29. What type of accommodation was it?
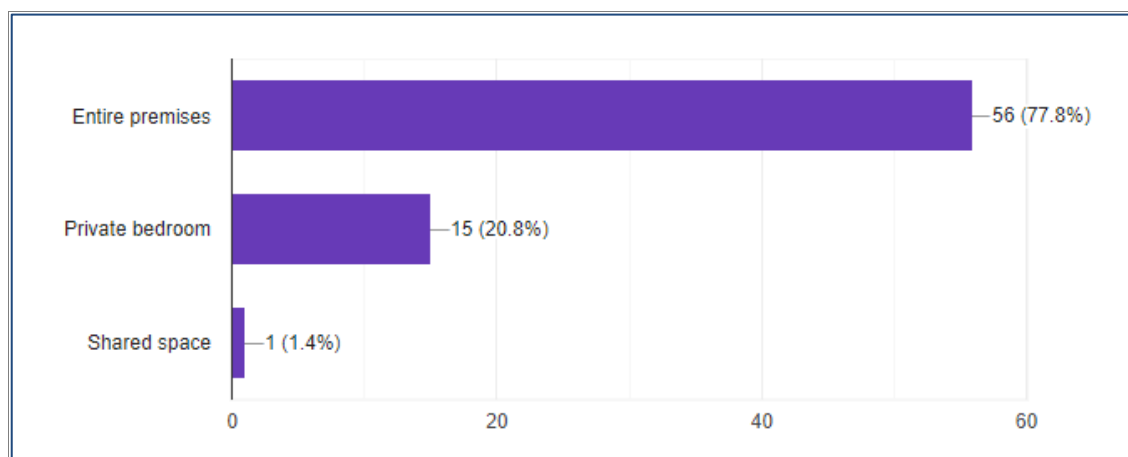
It appears that according to participants the majority of Airbnb premises were precisely described. By using the Likert scale from 1 to 6 (with 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Somewhat disagree, 4= Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly agree), 73.6% indicated "Strongly agree", followed by 19.4% as "Agree" and 6.9% respondents rated this question as "Somewhat agree" (Fig. 30).

Figure 30. Was the premises as advertised on the website? Please answer on a scale from 1-6, with 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Somewhat disagree, 4= Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly agree.
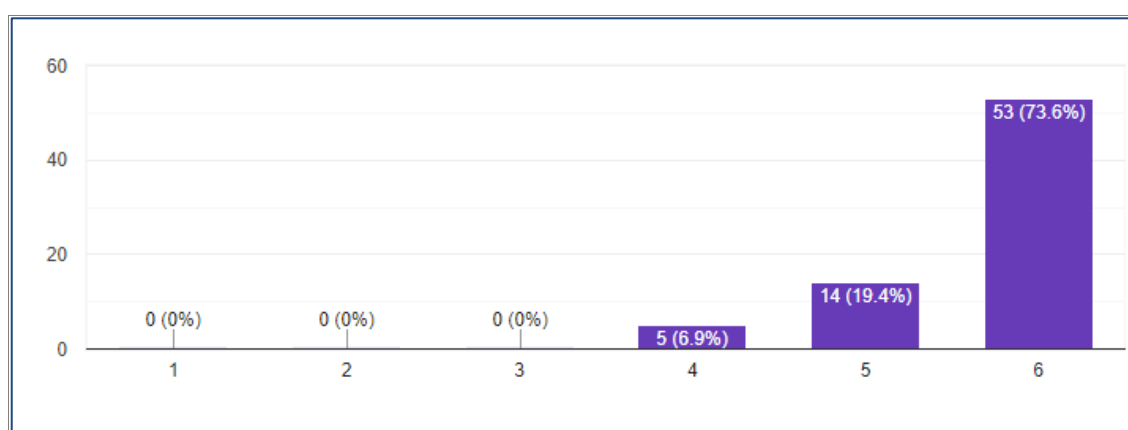

Survey shows that guests were quite happy with their hosts in terms of host-client relationship and ease of communication which can be observed in Fig.6 and Fig.7

respectively. 73.6% were "very satisfied" with their Airbnb host, 22.2% were "satisfied" and only 4.2% were "somewhat satisfied" (Fig. 31).
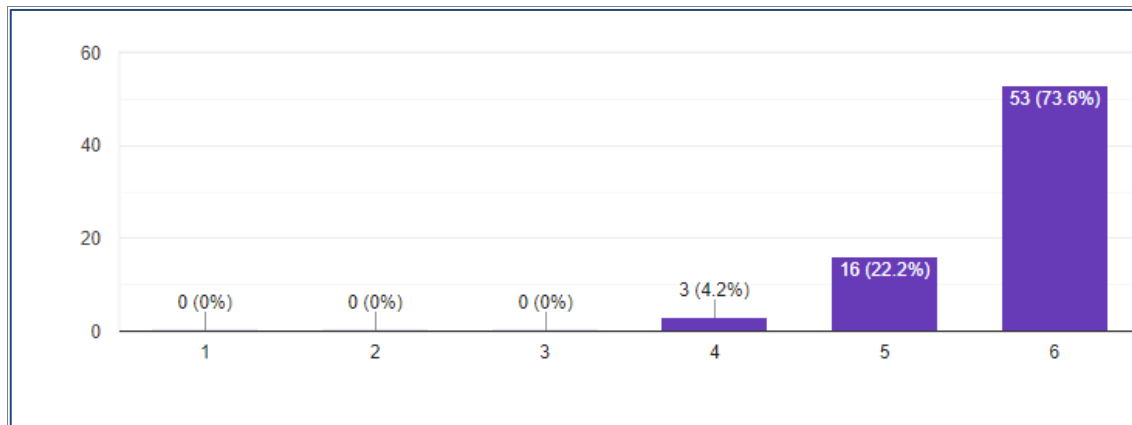
Figure 32 shows that 69.4% "strongly agreed" with the statement about easy communication with an Airbnb host, 19.4% "agreed", 9.7% "somewhat agree" and 1.4% "somewhat disagree".
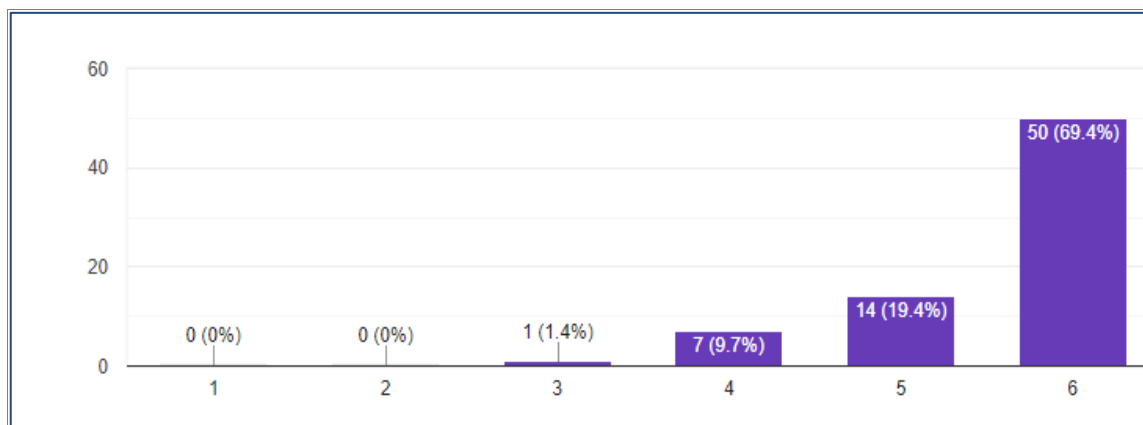
Based on the chart below (Fig. 33) we can see that most of respondents (72.2%) were "very satisfied" with their Airbnb stay in Malta, followed by 23.6% as "satisfied" and 4.2% as "somewhat satisfied".
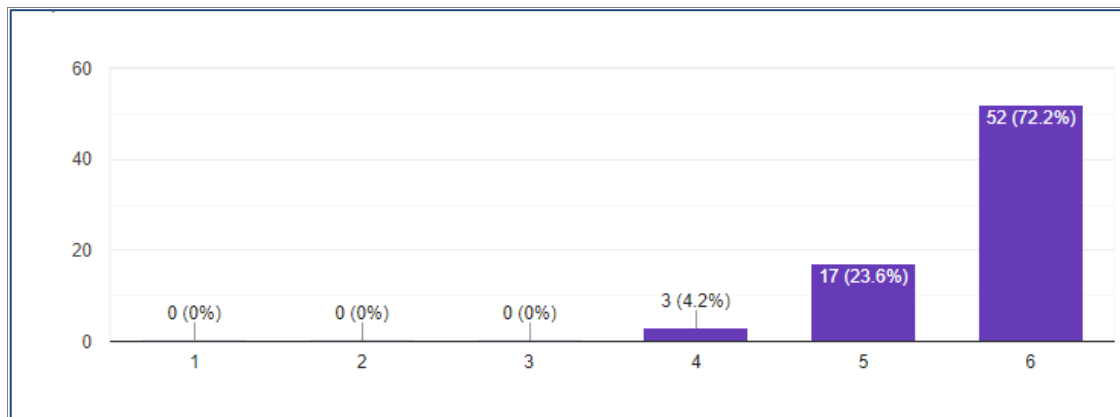
In fact, the overall satisfaction with participants' choice of Airbnb stay is also represented in Fig. 34, whereby most respondents (66.7%) would have returned to the same locality if they were to rent an Airbnb, 29.2% replied "maybe" and 4.1% answered "no". When looked at the locations of those participants who replied "no", one could possibly guess the reason as the locations mentioned are Gudja, Birzebuggia and St.Julian's; most likely the negative answers were possibly caused by long commute to city centre, lack of entertainment and catering establishments in Gudja and Birzebuggia and hectic surroundings and noise pollution of St.Julian's.

Figure 34. if you had to revisit the destination, would you stay in Airbnb accommodation again and choose the same locality?
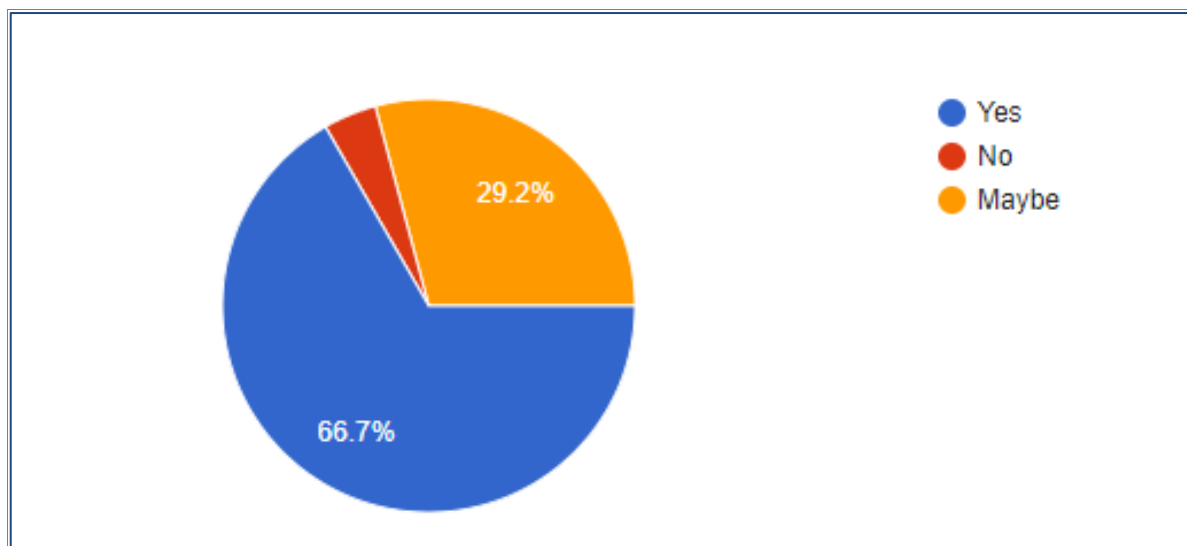
In the next part, the respondents were required to indicate their agreement with various potential motivations for choosing Airbnb instead of traditional accommodation on a

Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Somewhat disagree, 4= Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly agree).

Figure 35 and Figure 36 present the motivational factors related to price. According to the findings, the majority of respondents (63.9%) "strongly agreed" on using Airbnb because of the price benefits, 9.7% "agreed", 23.6% replied as "somewhat agree" and 2.8% "somewhat disagree" (Fig.35).

Figure 35. I chose Airbnb for my trip in Malta for its cost-effectiveness.
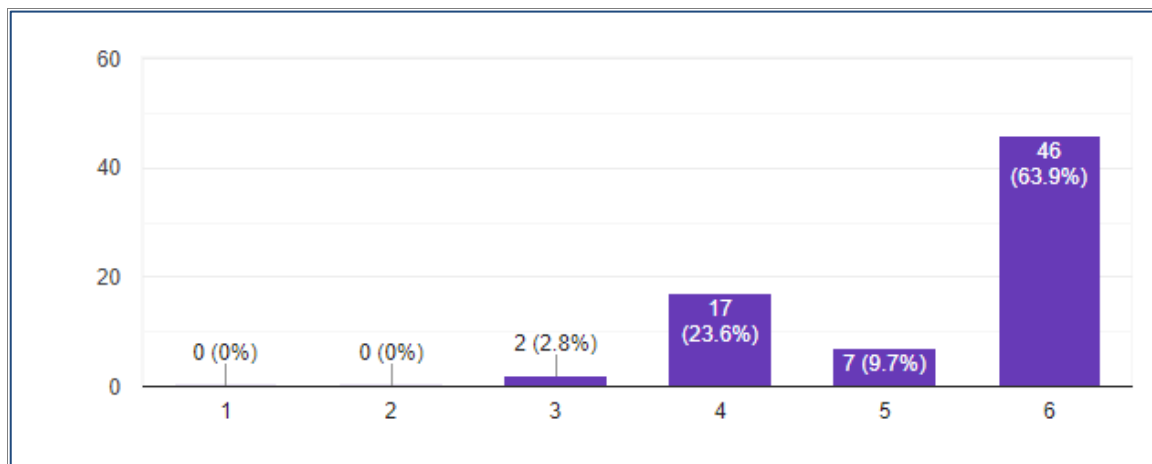
66.7% "strongly agreed" by choosing Airbnb in order to get with less money a far more superior accommodation option when compared to traditional types of lodging, followed by 19.4% who "agreed ", 12.5% "somewhat agree" and 1.4% "somewhat disagree" with this statement (Fig.36).

Figure 36. The reason of choosing Airbnb in Malta was to have a far more superior lodging compared to traditional types of accommodation (hotel, hostel, B&B) with less money.
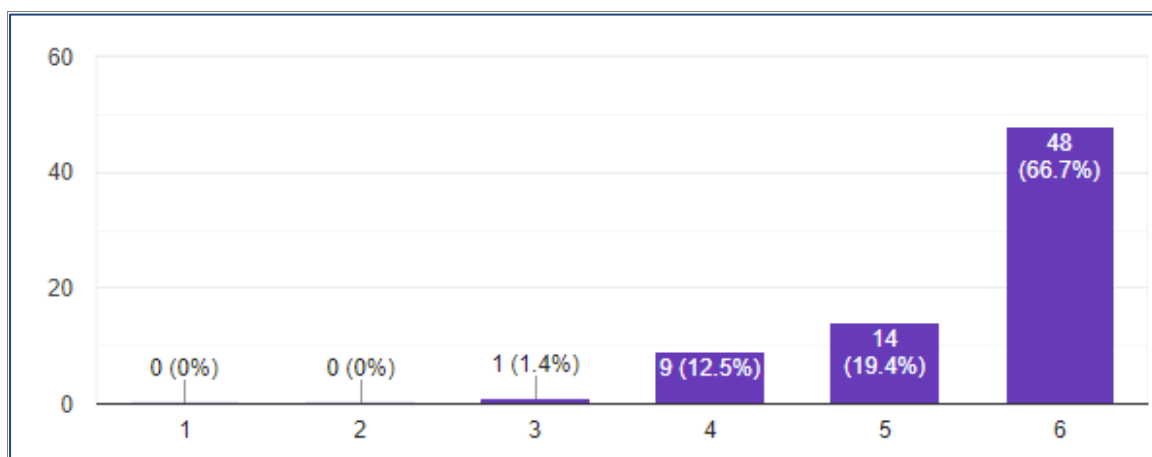
Figures 37 and Figure 38 indicate that authenticity factor was a strong motivation for choosing Airbnb for many respondents. 71.8% "strongly agreed" that staying in local Airbnb allowed them to experience the real day-to-day life of locals (Fig.37) and 66.7% felt more like a local during their Airbnb stay in Malta (Fig. 38). Worth noting that 2.8% in Fig. 13 totally "disagreed" with "I felt more like a local during my Airbnb stay in Malta" statement and resided in St. Julian's and Qawra.

Figure 37. Staying in Airbnb in Malta allowed me to experience the real day-to-day life of locals.
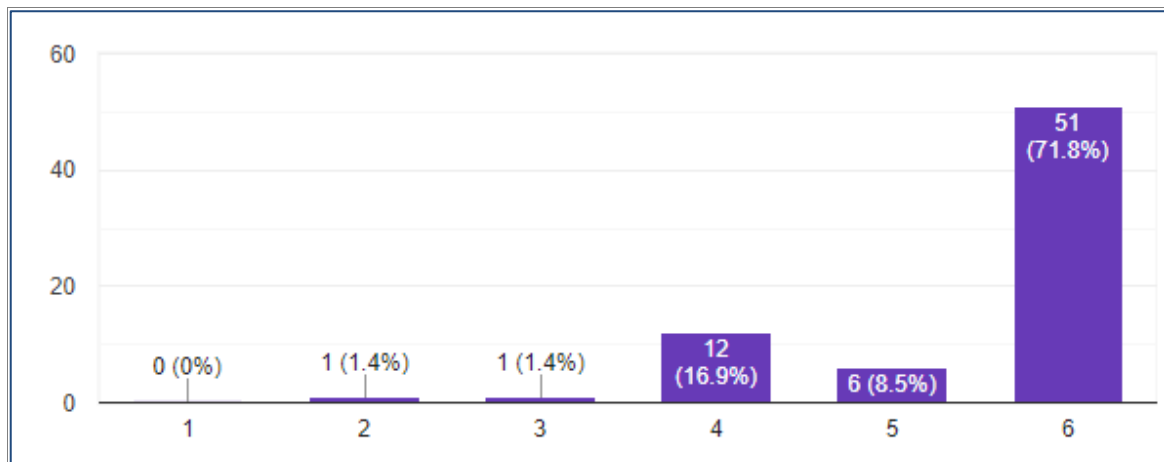
Figure 38. I felt more like a local during my Airbnb stay in Malta.
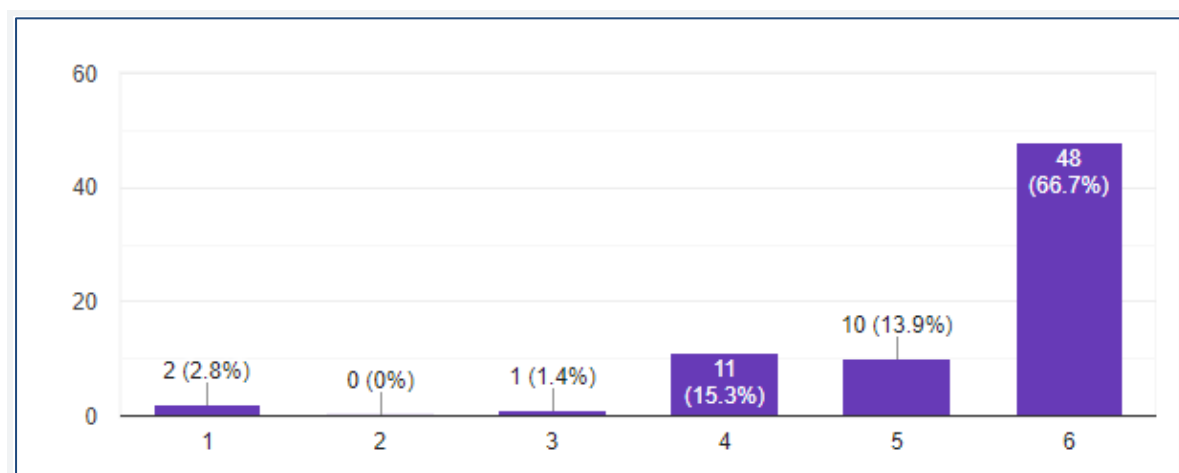
Most of respondents felt that they were exposed to authentic restaurants and cultural activities thanks to their location (Fig. 39 and Fig. 40). 69.4% replied that they could enjoy some local authentic restaurants (Fig. 39) and 70.8% "strongly agreed" that they were able to participate in local events and celebrations while staying at Airbnb (Fig. 40).
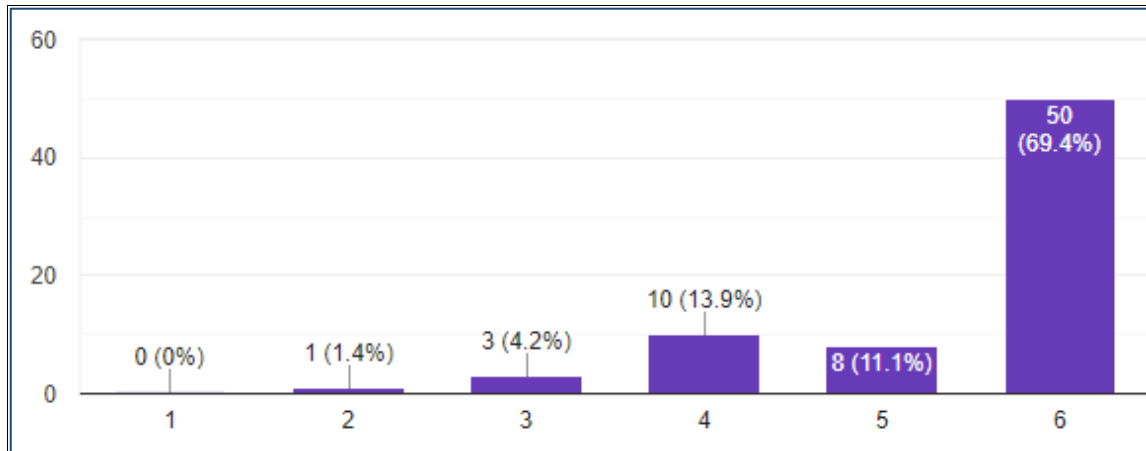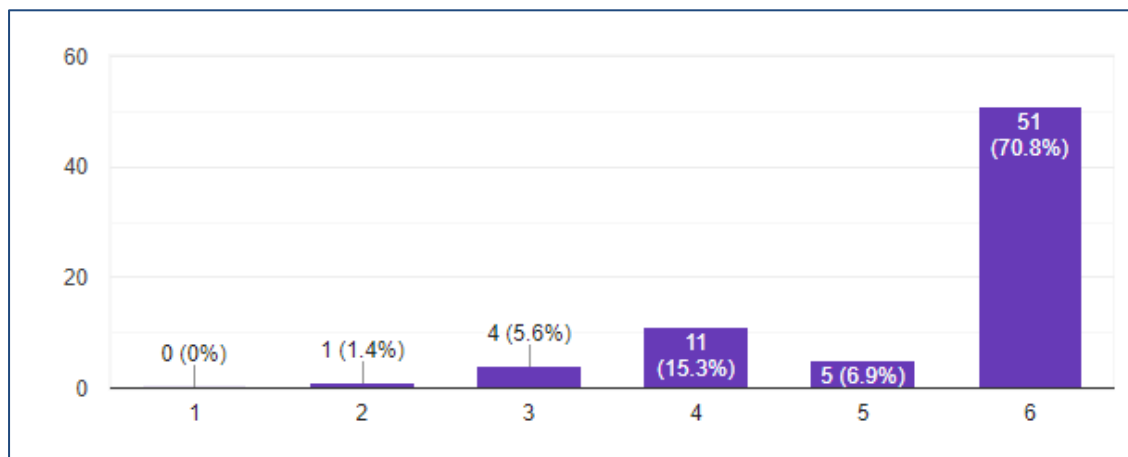
Motivational factors that examine social interactions with locals and hosts are represented in Figure 41 and Figure 42.

While 70.4% of respondents "strongly agreed", 12.7% "agreed" and 12.7% "somewhat agreed" that they felt more engaged with locals while staying at Airbnb, there were others who "strongly disagreed" (1.4%) and "disagreed" (2.8%). The ones who did not feel engaged with locals were residing in Sliema, St. Julian's and Qawra, highly touristic areas (Fig. 41).
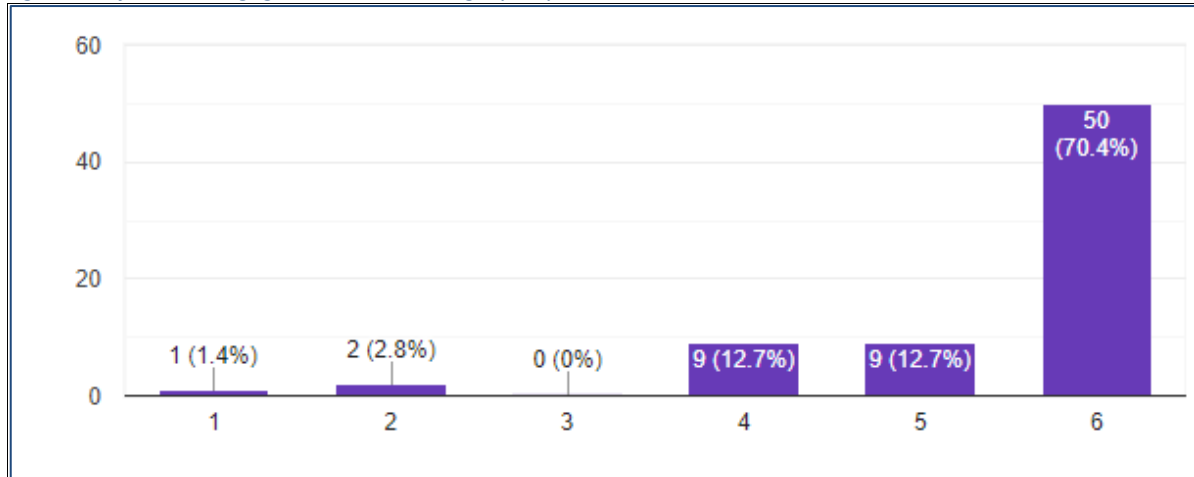
It appears that less than half of respondents (45.8%) strongly felt that they rented Airbnb in order to receive local information and tips from local host. 11.1% "agreed", followed by 36.1% "somewhat agreed" and 6.9% "somewhat disagreed" and maybe it has to do with lots of information available online and social media (Fig. 42).

Figure 42. I chose Airbnb to be able to receive local information and tips from my host in Malta.
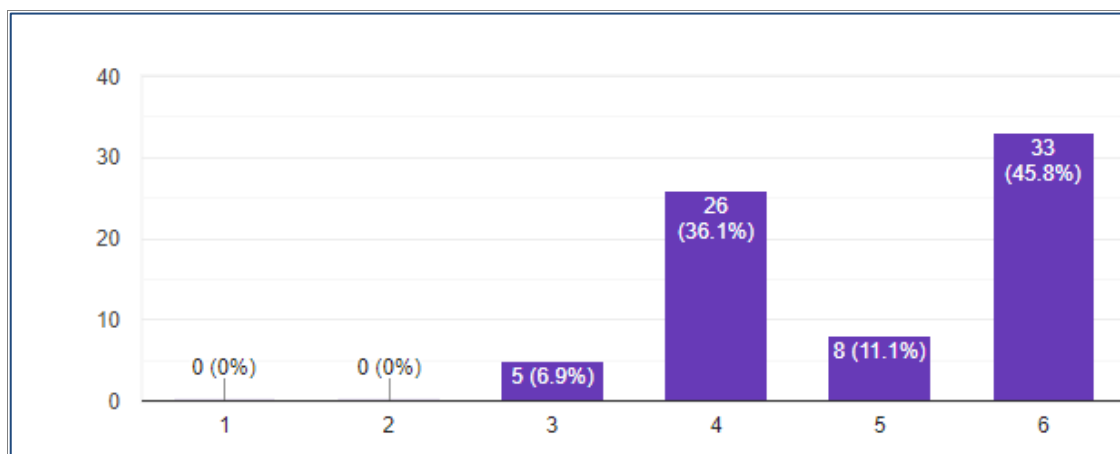

Interestingly, how many of respondents (95.8%) chose Airbnb premises due to its convenient location (Fig.43).
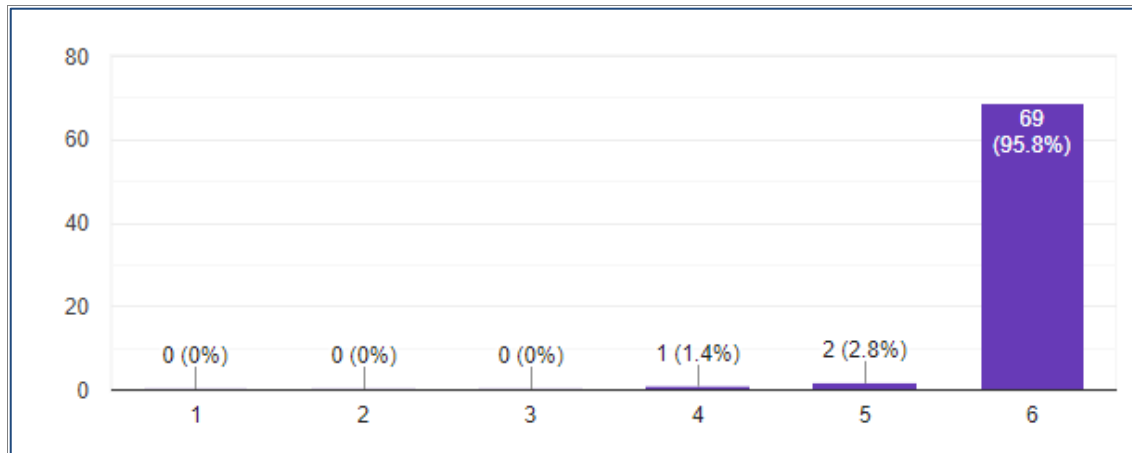
The statements about motivation factors related to household amenities and space are represented in Fig. 44-45. It is remarkable that the 100% of respondents "strongly agreed" on choosing Airbnb in order to make use of household amenities like cooker, washing machine etc. (Fig. 44).

Figure 44. Staying at Airbnb allowed me make use of household amenities (washing machine, cooker etc.).
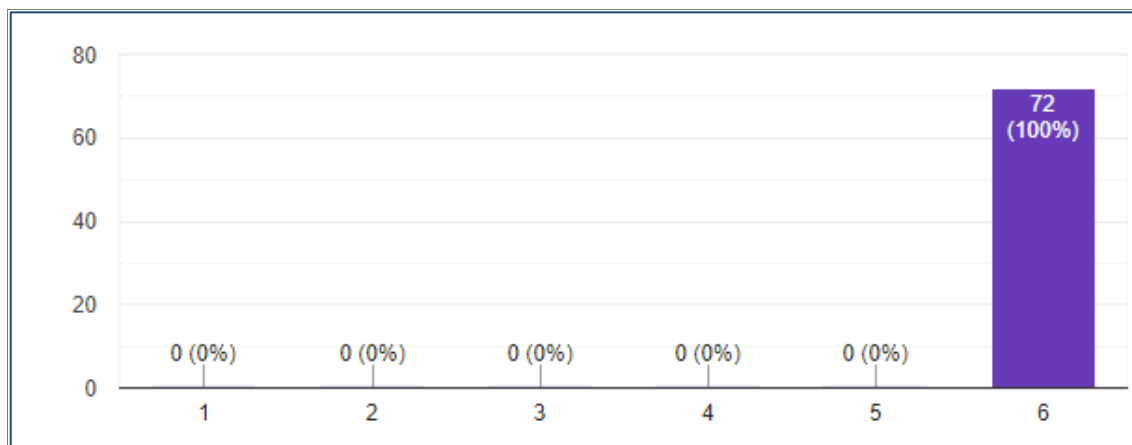
The majority of participants (77.8%) "strongly agreed" that the reason they chose Airbnb was the large amount of space/ terrace, with 6.9% "agreed", followed by 13.9 % "somewhat agree" and 1.4% "somewhat disagreed" (Fig. 45).
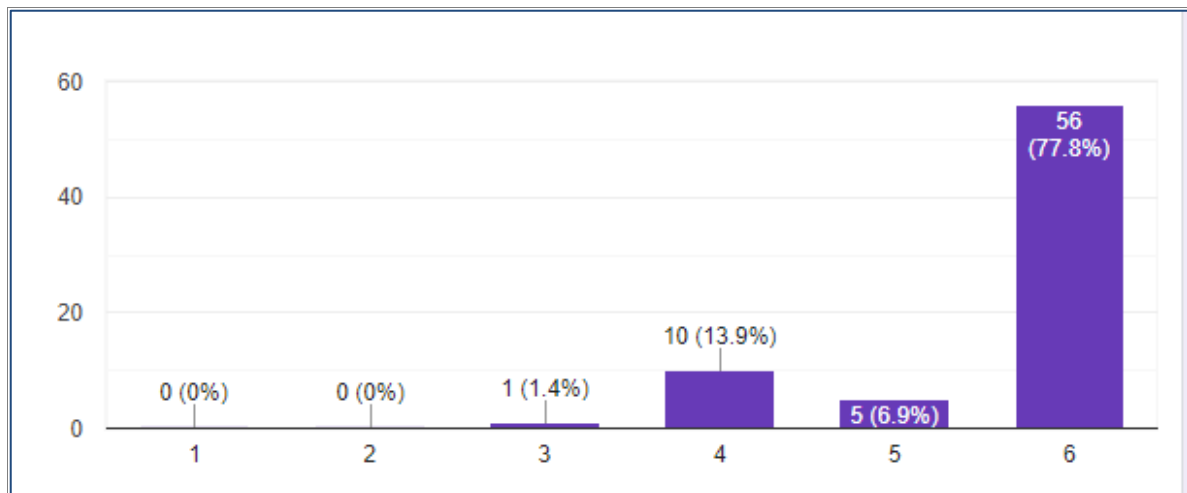
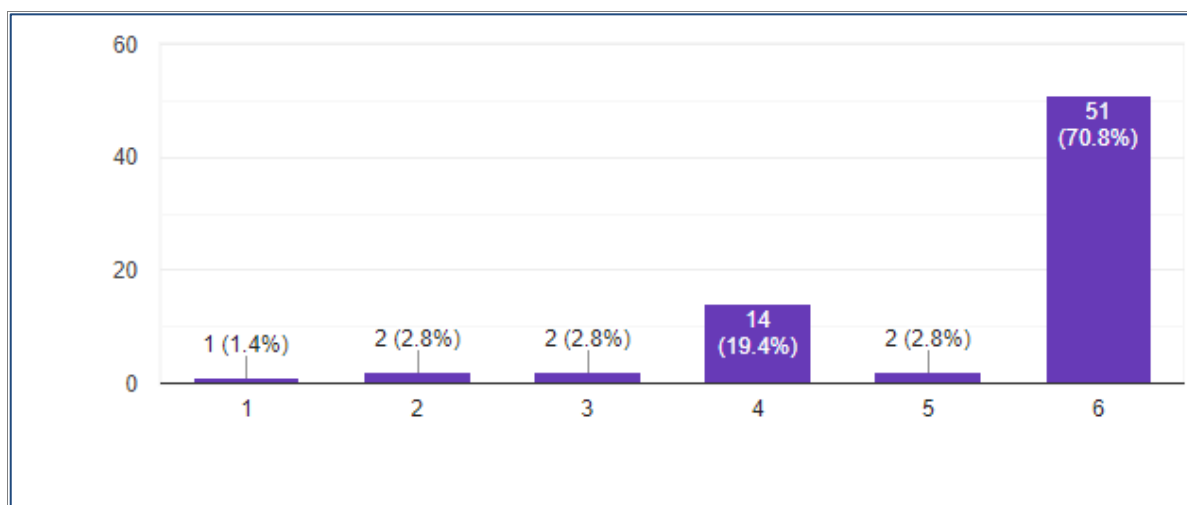Additionally, 70.8% said that they chose Airbnb for "home away from home" feeling, while 2.8% "agreed", 19.4% "somewhat agreed", 2.8% "somewhat disagreed", 2.8% "disagreed" and 1.4% "strongly disagreed" with this statement (Fig. 46).

The novelty factor and the agreement of respondents with statements related to an experience in Malta is represented in Fig. 47 – 50.

Figure 47 shows that only 44.4% of participants "strongly agreed" with the statement of choosing Airbnb in Malta in order to have an exciting and unpredictable experience, followed by 15.3% who "agreed", 31.9% "somewhat agreed", 1.4% "somewhat disagreed", 5.6% "disagreed" and 1.4% "strongly disagreed".

Figure 47. By choosing Airbnb while in Malta I wanted to have an exciting and unpredictable experience.
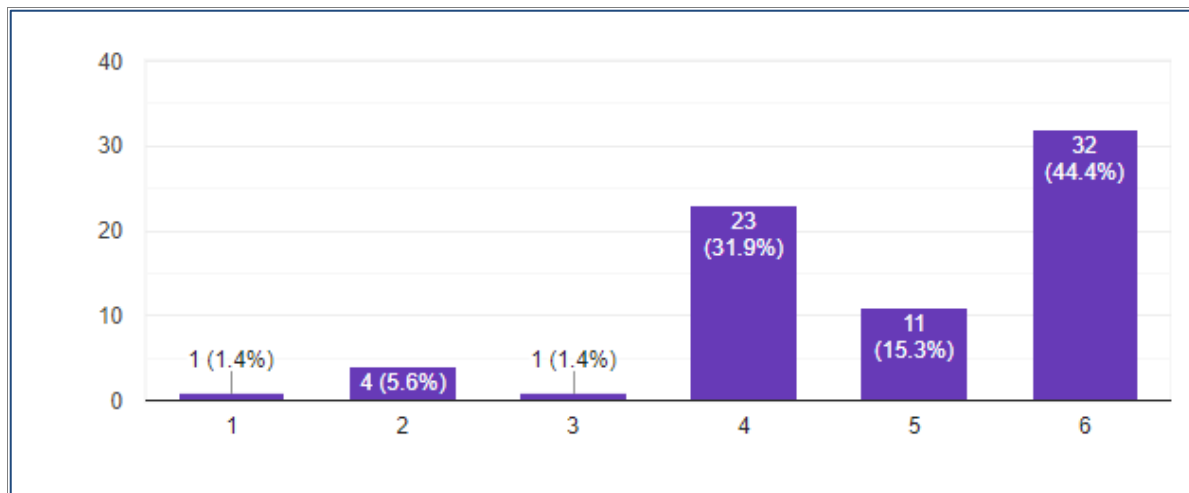
More than half of survey respondents (55.6%) "strongly agreed" that they chose Airbnb in Malta to do something different and new, 19.4% "agreed", 18.1% "somewhat agreed", followed by 1.4% who "somewhat disagree", 4.2% said that they disagreed with the statement and 1.4% "strongly disagreed" (Fig. 48).

Figure 48. I chose Airbnb in Malta to do something different and new.
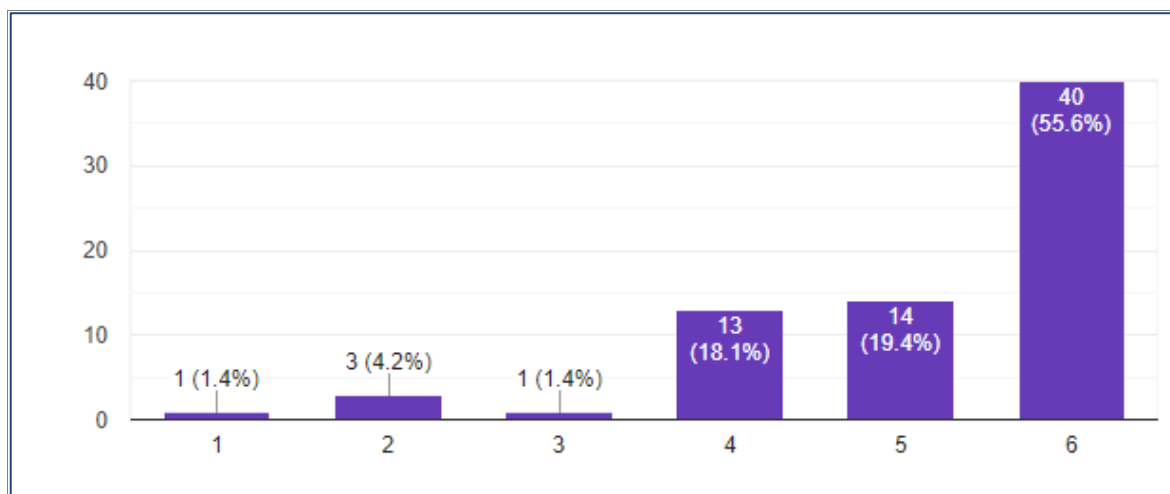
The majority of participants (58.3%) replied that they "strongly agreed" to the statement about choosing Airbnb to have a unique experience in Malta, followed by 22.2% who "agreed" and 12.5% "somewhat agreed". 2.8% and 4.2% said that they "somewhat disagreed" and "disagreed" respectively (Fig. 49).

Figure 49. I chose Airbnb to have a unique experience in Malta.
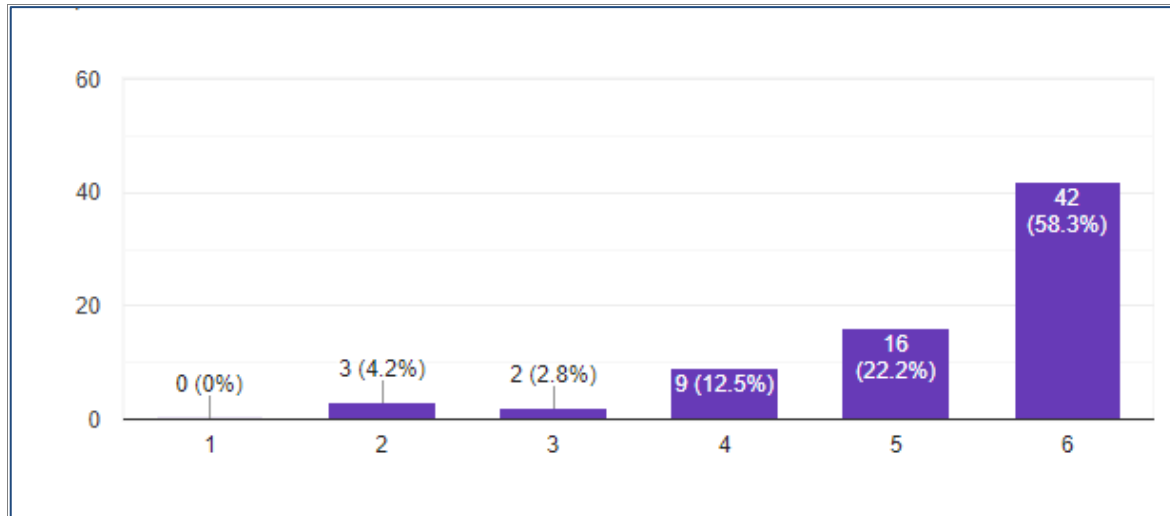
Interestingly, when asked to reply to a statement which is based on participants' desire to have an experience which they could relate to their family and friends about, a high proportion of participants (73.6%) "strongly agreed" to the statement, 15.3% "agreed", 4.2% "somewhat agreed", followed by 5.6% who "disagreed" and 1.4% "strongly disagreed" (Fig. 50).

Figure 50. Staying at an Airbnb in Malta provided me with experiences which I could relate to my family and friends about.
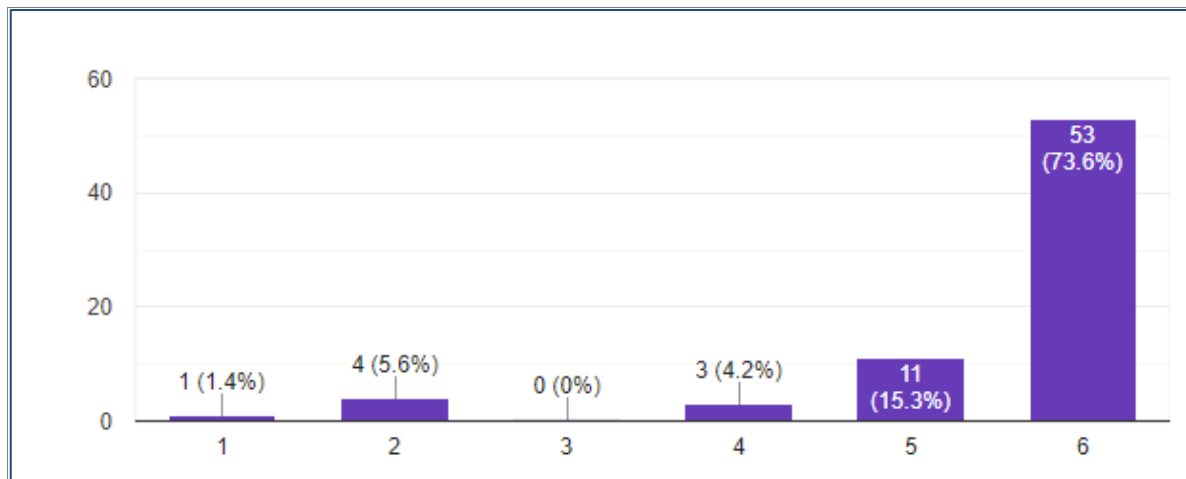
The survey has also statements pertaining to the sustainability as one of the potential motivations for choosing Airbnb in Malta (Fig. 51 – Fig. 54).

Figure 51 illustrates that 41.7 % were very much in agreement with the statement that they have chosen Airbnb so they could contribute to reducing consumption of energy and

other resources. 23.6% also "agreed" with the statement, followed by 26.4% who "somewhat agreed" and 8.3% replied that they "somewhat disagreed".

Figure 51. By choosing Airbnb I contributed to reducing consumption of energy and other resources.
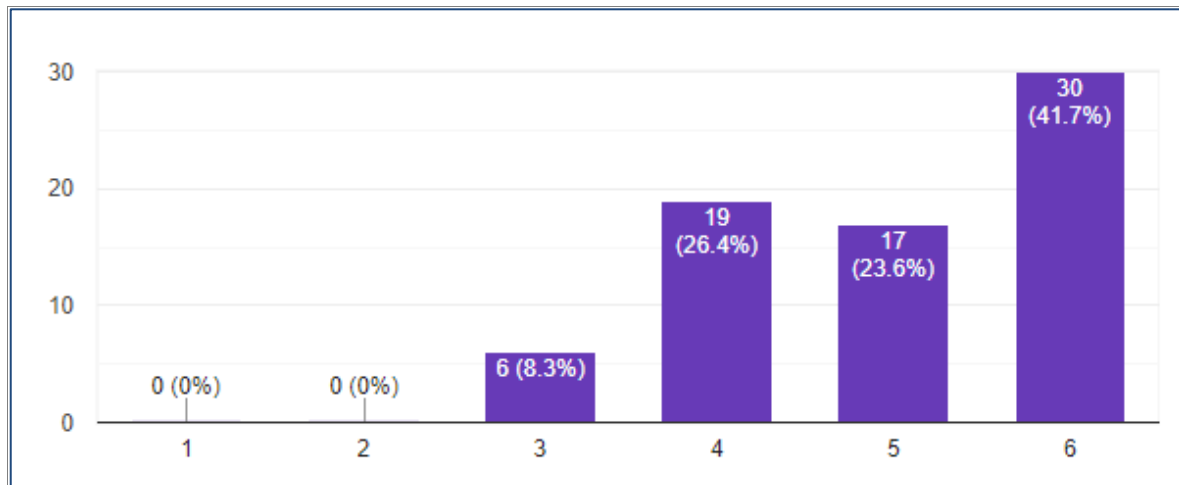
Less than half of respondents (44.4%) were concerned about money spent going to locals when choosing Airbnb in Malta. 26.4% "agreed" with the statement, followed by 23.6% "somewhat agreed" and 5.6% who chose "somewhat disagreed" (Fig. 52).

Figure 52. Having chosen Airbnb in Malta, I wanted the money spent to go to locals.
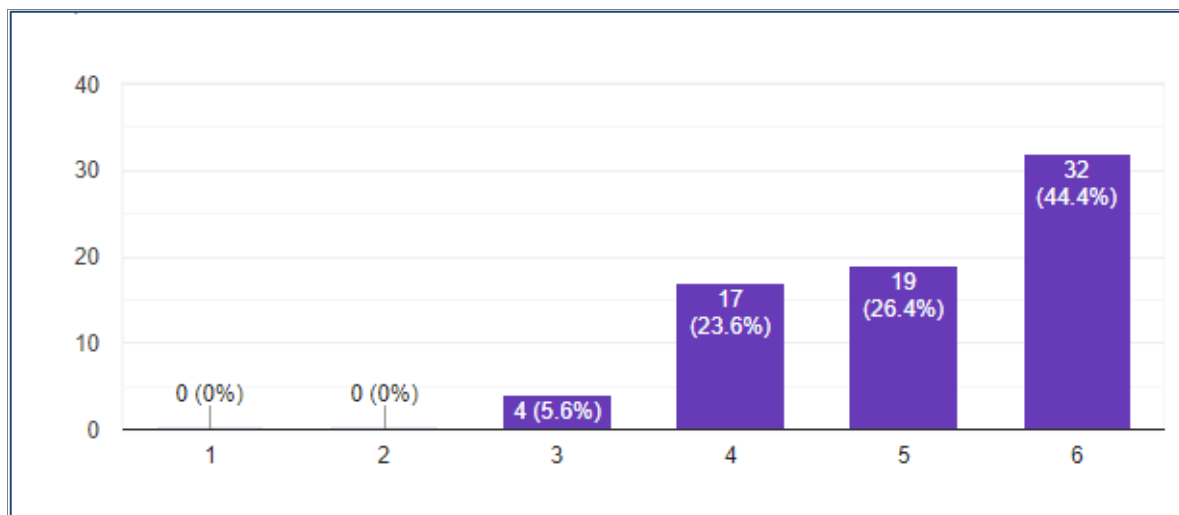
About one third of respondents (34.7% - strongly agreed) gave importance to being a socially responsible traveller when choosing Airbnb in Malta, while other 34.7% "agreed" to the statement. 22.2% of participants "somewhat agreed" and 8.3% "somewhat disagreed". (Fig. 53). Remarkably, none of the 6 respondents who "somewhat

disagreed" had their highest level of education as Graduate / Professional and were either *University/ College* or *High school or less*.

Figure 53. I chose Airbnb because I want to be more socially responsible traveller (staying in locally owned lodging, eating in locally owned restaurants, and using local guides and tour operators etc).
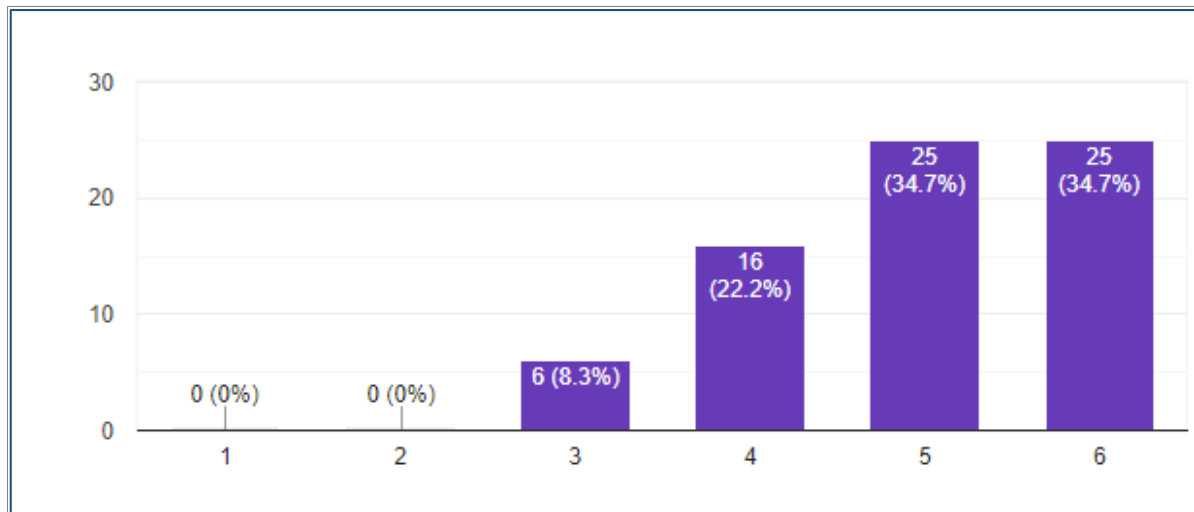
Respondents were also asked whether outbreak of Covid-19 has affected their travel experience, to which 43.1% "strongly agreed" and 37.5% "agreed". There were participants who were not affected by Covid-19 outbreak at all (6.9% - "strongly disagreed") and 12.5% replied that they "somewhat agreed" when answering the question (Fig. 54).

Figure 54. Has Covid-19 affected your travel experience ?
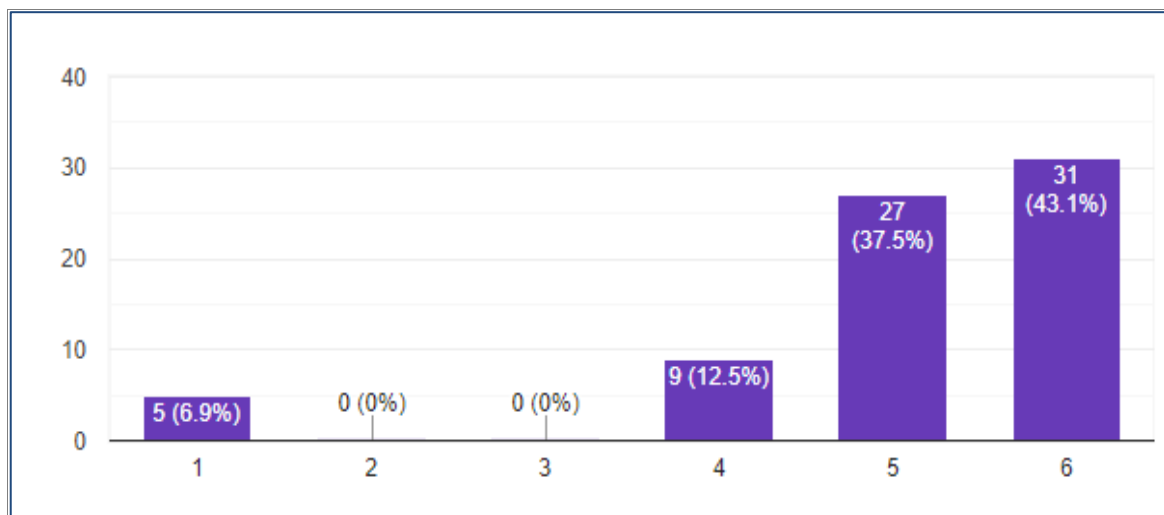
Survey respondents were required to indicate where they were most comfortable staying since Covid-19 outbreak (for safety and health reasons, pricewise) and the

overwhelming majority (94.4%) preferred to choose non-traditional accommodation like Airbnb and similar over traditional accommodation options which include hotels, hostels, B&B and similar. Only 5.6% of the overall sample felt that it was safer and cost-effective to stay in traditional lodgings (Fig. 55).

Figure 55. Where are you most comfortable staying since Covid-19 outbreak (for safety, and health reasons, pricewise)?

From the results of the survey it transpired that the age group 31 - 40 years scored the highest percentage amongst respondents (45.8%) whilst the lowest percentage (1.3%) was assigned to participants of under 20 years. The majority of the sample were females (66.7%) and males contributed to remaining 33.3%. The sample was rather highly educated having a Graduate / Professional degree (54.2%) and 98.6% of respondents had at least an average income and higher.

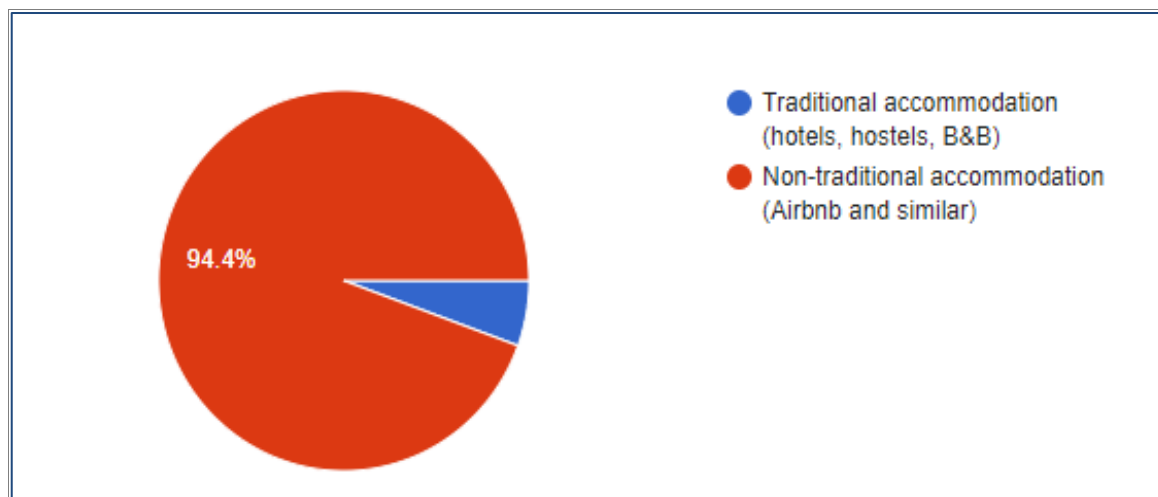Most of the survey participants were from United Kingdom (20.83%) and the majority travelled with an accompanying person (45.8%), who appeared to be a friend in most of the cases (38.9%). The less popular option amongst bookings was where a respondent was accompanied by 4 persons (5.6%) and when accompanied by a colleague (6.9%). When it comes to reasons of visiting Malta, the most popular answer was "sun, sea and weather" which contributed to 29.1%. One of the reasons such as "studying English" appeared to be one of the leading reasons to come to Malta and students from Italy produced the greatest number of English language learners (21.9%).

Sliema was the most popular locality (chosen by 15.28% of respondents) when it comes to Airbnb bookings and "leisure" was the most named reason at 55.6% of coming to Malta and the least as "business purpose" at 2.8%. When it comes to Airbnb accommodations, 77.8% of survey participants chose to rent an entire place and just 1.4% opted for a shared space. It appeared that the Airbnb premises in Malta were precisely described by 73.6% with zero negative, very negative or somewhat negative

answers in this regard. 73.6% of respondents were "very satisfied" with their Airbnb host and 69.4% confirmed that the host was "easy to communicate" with. Overall, 72.2% were "very satisfied" with their Airbnb stay in Malta and the majority (66.7%) would choose the same locality and only 4.1% responded negatively.

Price factor was a deal breaker for 63.9% of survey participants and 66.7% chose Airbnb in Malta in order to have a far superior accommodation if compared to traditional types of accommodation like hotels, hostels and B&Bs. The astonishing number of respondents (95.8%) chose Airbnb premises to have a convenient location in Malta and 77.8% made large amount of space / terrace as their priority. Having household amenities in an Airbnb (washing machine, cooker etc.) available was the most important criteria for absolutely all respondents as 100% were in agreement with this statement. Also, 70.8% were attracted to Airbnb premises for their homely feeling.

The survey participants exhibited a strong agreement with statements pertaining to authentic experiences, be it an opportunity to be socially engaged with locals (70.4%), being able to participate in local festivities and other cultural events (70.8%) or visiting authentic restaurants (69.4%) during their stay. 71.8% felt that they could experience the real day-to-day locals' life and 66.7% "strongly agreed" that they felt like a local during their stay in Malta. Lower engagement (45.8) was exhibited by visitors when they were asked whether they chose Airbnb to be able to receive any tips or information from a local host.

Airbnb was chosen by 44.4% who wanted to have an exciting and unpredictable experience and 58.3% were after a unique experience in Malta. 55.6% chose Airbnb in order to experience something new and different whilst the absolute majority (73.6%) stayed in an Airbnb to be provided with an experience they could relate to their friends and families.

The survey results demonstrated comparatively average level of agreement related to sustainability. 41.7% chose Airbnb to be able to help reduce energy consumption and 44.4% participants wanted the money spent to go to locals. 34.7% aspired to be more socially responsible travellers by using local guides and tour operators, eating in locally owned restaurants etc.

It appeared that 43.1% of participants were strongly affected by Covid-19 outbreak in terms of travelling and only 6.9% were not affected by the pandemic at all. In fact, Covid-19 outbreak made 94.4% of respondents choose non-traditional accommodation (Airbnb and other rented accommodation) due to perceived health and safety reasons.

CHAPTER 5. Discussion

This research attempted to cover the knowledge gap pertaining to visitors' motivations to choose Airbnb when they come to Malta. Airbnb has become very popular among travellers and Malta as a destination has picked up the trend, therefore it was deemed necessary to study the concept in more detail.

Main motivational factors have been identified from the various sources (Nowak et al., 2015; Tussyadiah, 2015; Guttentag, 2015; Guttentag et al., 2018) and survey questions were built around these motivations in order to find out what exactly made visitors coming to Malta choose an Airbnb premises instead of traditional accommodations like hotels, B&B etc. The motivations are based on practical benefits (price, location, household amenities and space) and also of experiential values (authenticity, social interactions, novelty and sustainability).

Survey results provided us with some insights when it comes to sample description. First of all, 66.7 % of the overall sample is represented by females. Most probably, one can suggest that females are more involved into a trip planning as argued by Mottiar and Quinn (2004). Secondly, the majority of visitors chose an Airbnb in Malta for leisure purposes which is different from when it all started – renting out a shared space during a conference. Besides, 77.8% of respondents have rented entire premises instead of sharing one which might put Airbnb service into another perspective, another kind of sharing service.

The sample showed that the reasons for visiting Malta were various and besides the standard ones like "sea and sun", "history", "visiting friends and family", one could come across "Game of Thrones was filmed in Malta", "Lost and Found Event" and "Isle of MTV" which are related to film / events industry.

Further typical characteristics of Airbnb users in Malta can be obtained from the questionnaire. Airbnb guests are usually between 31 – 40 years old with a graduate or a professional degree, having their gross household income as at least average and higher and travel with another person who in most of the cases is a friend. The fact that there are just a few seniors (60 years and older) can be explained by the lack of familiarity with the concept of Airbnb and of online activity in general. Even though Airbnb platform is very user-friendly, many seniors might find it difficult to navigate through it or trust online transactions.

The research demonstrates that despite all the studies in this field the researcher came across while working on this thesis, neither authenticity, nor price appeared to be top motivations for the overall sample of this research. Household amenities was the most "strongly agreed" with motivation (100%) and it proves to be one of the main

differences between renting an Airbnb and staying at a hotel, thus directly pinpointing at this unique value proposition of Airbnb.

The second most "strongly agreed" with motivation was location (95.8%), which can be found as well in the research by Nowak et al (2015). This can be due to the fact that visitors might be more interested to stay closer to their relatives/friends or maybe events sites, rather than choosing to stay in the areas packed with hotels only.

Having chosen an Airbnb "for the large amount of space/ terrace the premises provided" was another motivation that was "strongly agreed" with amongst the sample at 77.8%. This must be in line with another outcome of this survey which indicates that 77.8% of respondents chose to rent entire premises, not private bedroom or shared space. Usually hotels cannot offer such large spaces unless at a premium, so many visitors can afford renting an entire place on Airbnb as they would have space and the comfort of the home at the same time. Considering the fact that "household amenities" was the top motivation in the overall sample, it is expected to have this motivational factor of having space / terrace as an important one.

It is also worth mentioning, that Airbnb is in a more advantageous position when compared to hotels. Airbnb offers a vast choice of accommodation options like boats, treehouses, villas, caravans etc, whereas hotels are quite limited when it comes to accommodation and location choices. Besides, hotels might not be built in certain areas due to certain restrictions, e.g. in Malta hotels can't be built in an Urban Conservation Area (UCA) while it is possible to rent an Airbnb premises in UCA. Properties in Urban Conservation Areas are protected, preserved and carefully monitored by the Planning Authority. In a nutshell, they represent particular historical and architectural heritage and such homes have regulations in place in order to maintain their uniqueness.

It is also known that Airbnb can increase and decrease supply of accommodation according to the demand in a short time, however for hotels to increase the inventory stock will require building new rooms or restructuring the existing ones, which takes time.

Price factor was the least most "strongly agreed" with motivation amongst practical benefits of Airbnb. The total percentage of 63.9% might indicate that the visitors were not to some extent concerned with the costs as long as the accommodation they chose via Airbnb met their requirements and, in this sample, it is location and household amenities. This result is perhaps unexpected as this motivational factor has been considered as the most important pull factor by many scholars (Tussyadiah,2015; Nowak et al, 2015; Guttentag et al, 2017).

It appears that experiential motivational factors (authenticity, novelty, sustainability and social interactions) are secondary when compared to the practical motivators like price, location, household amenities and space. Looking into the experiential factors, it was found out that the authenticity was the most strongly agreed with motivation. The importance of authenticity was highlighted by various researchers (Lamb, 2011; Nowak, 2015; Guttentag,2015) and authenticity has been acknowledged as fundamental in Airbnb concept "live like a local". People enjoy participating in local events, going to authentic restaurants and engaging with locals.

Motivation on social interactions can be interpreted in two ways. While the most of respondents enjoyed being engaged with locals, the same cannot be said about interacting with their host in order to receive local information and tips (45.8%). This may be explained that the majority of Airbnb accommodation was rented as entire premises and the contact with the host was minimal or else respondents came to visit friends and family and got advice from them rather than from their host. Besides, you can not underestimate the power of social media and foreign influencers who will be advising you about the amazing places to visit some locals would not even know about.

Agreement with novelty as motivation is moderate, however it still demonstrates that people travelling in the search of authenticity do not necessarily look for new and unpredictable experiences. However, the bragging factor was quite strongly agreed with amongst 73.6% of participants,

The agreement related to sustainability is fairly neutral, which is consistent with other research on Airbnb by Kasim (2004) who argues that travellers concerned about sustainability might not be sharing the same believes during their travels.

The sample had only two respondents who stayed in an Airbnb in Gozo (Nadur and Gharb), therefore there is not enough evidence to make any kind of conclusions.

The findings clearly show that the overall sample was more after practical benefits of Airbnb rather than experiential ones which are displayed as secondary. This in turn puts a big question mark over the whole idea of sharing economy and marketing campaign of Airbnb as a provider of authentic stays and experiences.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusion and limitations

Airbnb has completely changed the way people travel nowadays by offering affordable and diverse types of accommodations. To date, there is still no clear answer as to why people choose to stay in Airbnb lodging instead of traditional types of accommodation. It is of a special interest to an island like Malta where tourism is a major contributor to the Malta's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates that 31,000 new jobs directly related to travel and tourism were created in Malta in 2017 (15.7% of total employment), with the direct contribution of 14.2% of the country's GDP.

The study has looked at the visitors' reasons to choose accommodation on Airbnb platform in the context of Malta and aimed to establish whether authenticity playing a role when deciding upon a place where to stay in Malta.

It appears that even though authenticity is a concept Airbnb is based on, this motivational factor was not the leading one for this sample. Even though it is a leading one amongst experiential factors, it is the practical attributes that were highly regarded by all the respondents of the survey. Additionally, the research indicated that location is paramount for Airbnb users when it comes to choosing an accommodation in Malta.

By utilizing the results of the study, Airbnb hosts and local businesses might have better insights on how to create memorable and unique experiences and thus contributing to local economy in a positive way.

In the post-Covid era, knowing what factors are significant to travellers and why they choose Airbnb over other forms of accommodation could be very helpful. It appears that travellers are reassessing their priorities when it comes to their accommodation options, so perhaps local businesses should do the same. Due to Covid-19, home-related amenities (such as an extra indoor or outdoor space in addition to having access to household facilities) are now highly valued by clients, as this survey has proved. The study outcomes may be used as guidelines for a strategic plan for various stakeholders.

The study has some limitations, which may stimulate future research.

This research is based in the context of Malta; thus, the outcome can only depict characteristics of the island, which might be different compared to mainland economies. Future research could also target other islands in the Mediterranean in order to identify a vast array of experiences amongst island destinations.

Overall sample is mainly represented by Europeans, which means that survey could have produced different results by having Airbnb users from other non-European countries to participate in the survey.

There is also a possibility that respondents' replies could have been influenced by their own Airbnb experiences.

Finally, future studies could concentrate on analysing the aspect of authenticity across different types of accommodation (e.g., entire home, private room and shared room).

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Appendix – online survey

Authenticity and experience in Airbnb in Malta

My name is Olesya Micallef and I am a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies, currently reading for an MBA in International Hospitality Management in affiliation with the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled: "Do authenticity and experience play a role when choosing Airbnb in Malta" and this is being supervised by Ms Nicola Caruana who is engaged with MTA, one of the main stakeholders within Malta Tourism industry. I sincerely hope in your participation and contribution to my study. The completion of this survey will take maximum 10 minutes of your time. If you require additional information or have any questions, please contact me on olesya.micallef001@its.edu.mt or my supervisor Ms Nicola Caruana on niccaruana@gmail.com.

The aim of this research is to establish whether the sharing platform Airbnb in Malta offers the travellers a way to experience a destination in a more authentic way.

Who can participate?
Anybody over 18 years old who has chosen an Airbnb for their recent (or pre-Covid) in Malta are invited to participate.
Your participation in this study will contribute to identify the main factors for people choosing Airbnb in Malta and possibly produce insights for Airbnb hosts in Malta on how to create memorable and unique experiences and thus contributing to local economy in a positive way.

Do you have to take part?
Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary, you can withdraw at any point, without any repercussions, and any data collected will be deleted. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.
If you decide to participate in this research study, please read and then indicate your consent in the "Informed Consent" section of the survey.

This research will ensure confidentiality at all times and the participant will not be identified. As a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation ((EU) 2016/679 (GDPR)) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymized form on completion of the study.

Informed consent

1. I understand that my participation is on a voluntary basis and that I may withdraw from the survey at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. If I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased anonymously;
2. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study.
3. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased;
4. I understand that the overall findings may be published in appropriate sources.

I am giving my consent for data to be used for the outlined purpose of the present study.
By clicking "Next" and proceeding with the study, you indicate that:

· You have read through and understood the information provided.
· You agree to participate in the research study.

Informed consent

☐ I agree

Your Airbnb stay in Malta

In this section you will be asked to share some details of your last stay at Airbnb in Malta.

1. Have you stayed in an Airbnb in Malta for the past 12 months or pre-Covid?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. Why did you choose Malta as a destination?

Long-answer text

3. In which location of Malta was your most recent Airbnb stay?

Short-answer text

4. What was the purpose of your trip?

◯ Leisure

◯ Visiting family / friends

◯ Business

◯ Event / conference

◯ Other

5. What type of accommodation was it?

☐ Entire premises

☐ Private bedroom

☐ Shared space

:::

6. Was the premises as advertised on the website? Please answer on a scale from 1-6, with 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Somewhat disagree, 4= Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly agree.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

7. How satisfied were you with your Airbnb host in Malta? Please answer on a scale from 1-6, with 1 = Very unsatisfied, 2 = Unsatisfied, 3= Somewhat unsatisfied, 4= Somewhat satisfied, 5 = Satisfied and 6 = Very satisfied.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very unsatisfied	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very satisfied

:::

8. Was the host easy to communicate with? Please answer on a scale from 1-6, with 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Somewhat disagree, 4= Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly agree.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

9. How satisfied were you with your Airbnb stay in Malta? Please answer on a scale from 1-6, with 1 = Very unsatisfied, 2 = Unsatisfied, 3= Somewhat unsatisfied, 4= Somewhat satisfied, 5 = Satisfied and 6 = Very satisfied.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very unsatisfied	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very satisfied

10. if you had to revisit the destination, would you stay in Airbnb accommodation again and choose the same locality?

◯ Yes

◯ No

◯ Maybe

Section 3 of 5

Potential motivations for using Airbnb

in this section, you will be asked to indicate your level of agreement with below potential motivations for choosing Airbnb in Malta. Please answer on a scale from 1-6, with 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Somewhat disagree, 4= Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree and 6 = Strongly agree.

11. I chose Airbnb for my trip in Malta for its cost-effectiveness.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Strongly agree

12. The reason of choosing Airbnb in Malta was to have a far more superior lodging compared to traditional types of accommodation (hotel, hostel, B&B) with less money.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

13. Staying in Airbnb in Malta allowed me to experience the real day-to-day life of locals.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

14. I felt more engaged with locals during my stay at Airbnb in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

15. My Maltese Airbnb was in non-touristy area so I was exposed to authentic local villages and markets.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

16. I felt more like a local during my Airbnb stay in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

17. I could participate in local festivities and other cultural events while staying at Airbnb in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

18. I chose Airbnb to be able to receive local information and tips from my host in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

19. I could visit local authentic restaurants / places to eat during my Airbnb stay in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

20. I chose my Airbnb premises due to its convenient location in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

21. I chose Airbnb for the large amount of space/ terrace the premises provided.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

22. Staying at Airbnb allowed me make use of household amenities (washing machine, cooker etc.).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

23. I chose Airbnb for "home away from home" feeling.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

24. By choosing Airbnb while in Malta I wanted to have an exciting and unpredictable experience.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

25. I chose Airbnb in Malta to do something different and new.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

26. Staying at an Airbnb in Malta provided me with experiences which I could relate to my family and friends about.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

27. I chose Airbnb to have a unique experience in Malta.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

28. By choosing Airbnb I contributed to reducing consumption of energy and other resources.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

29. Having chosen Airbnb in Malta, I wanted the money spent to go to locals.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

30. I chose Airbnb because I want to be more socially responsible traveller (staying in locally-owned lodging, eating in locally-owned restaurants, and using local guides and tour operators etc).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

31. Has Covid-19 affected your travel experience ?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

32. Where are you most comfortable staying since Covid-19 outbreak (for safety, and health reasons, pricewise)?

○ Traditional accommodation (hotels, hostels, B&B)

○ Non-traditional accommodation (Airbnb and similar)

Section 4 of 5

Demographics

In this section, you will be asked to provide some information to get characteristics of the overall sample. Please rest assured that you as participant will not be identified and that all data collected will be stored in an anonymized form on completion of the study.

33. Your age.

○ 20 or under

○ 21 - 30 years

○ 31 - 40 years

○ 41 - 50 years

○ 51 - 60 years

○ 61 years and older

○ Other...

34. Your gender.

○ Female

○ Male

○ Other

35. Please indicate your highest level of education.

○ High school or less

○ University / College

○ Graduate / Professional

36. Please indicate your gross household income (relative to your home country).

○ Well below average

○ Below average

○ Average

○ Above average

○ Well above average

37. Your country of residence.

Short-answer text

38. How many persons travelled with you? (please don't consider yourself and a host, if stayed at shared place)

○ zero

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5 and up

39. Who were those accompanying guests?

- ○ Child (ren)

- ○ Friend (s)

- ○ Spouse / partner

- ○ Colleague

- ○ Relative

After section 4   Continue to next section   ▾

Section 5 of 5

Thank you   ⌄   ⋮