Tourists’ Perceptions of Road Safety in Malta

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to understand tourists’ perceptions about road safety in the Maltese islands. Its objective is to determine the issues related to road safety that are experienced by tourists visiting the country and to suggest interventions that might improve road safety in local tourist areas. Road accidents can have far-reaching effects including death and serious injuries. Despite tourism being one of the largest contributors towards the GDP of Malta, there is a lack of research that studies the effect of road safety on tourists visiting the country.

A qualitative research design using narrative inquiry was utilized in order to understand the experiences and perceptions of three participants. A collaborative narrative was written for each participant and, following the process of thematic narrative analysis, a total of three common narrative themes together with four sub-themes were identified. These highlight three main factors which affect tourists’ perceptions of road safety in Malta: (1) excessive amount of traffic on Malta’s roads; (2) lack of discipline by Maltese road users; and (3) inadequate pedestrian zones. Conclusions drawn from this study indicate that these issues can be addressed through policy changes, such as increasing pedestrian zones and enhancing pedestrian safety within the existing urban context, more bicycle lanes in the Maltese road network, improving the frequency and reliability of the public transport service, and stricter enforcement. Finally, recommendations for further research on the topic of road safety within the local context are discussed.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; urban design; road safety; tourism

List of Abbreviations

ERSO: European Road Safety Observatory
FIA: Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
GIS: Geographic Information System
LESA: Local Enforcement System Agency
MCAST: Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
NSO: National Statistics Office
SMEs: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SRA: Social Research Association
TM: Transport Malta
Background

Road accidents are events with far-reaching effects on the health and wellbeing of those involved in them, including injuries or loss of life (Rolison et al. 2018). In the European Union, road accidents caused 25,792 fatalities during 2016 (ERSO 2018). The number of reported traffic accidents in Malta during the third quarter of 2019 was 4,187, an increase of 14.5% over Q3 2018. During the same period, there were three fatalities on Maltese roads (National Statistics Office 2019).

The issue of road safety is of a particular importance for the tourism industry because motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of injury and death for tourists visiting a host country (Wilks 1999). Considerable hidden costs are associated with traffic incidents involving tourists, and there is a clear need for national research programmes that deal with tourist road safety (Wilks et al. 1999). Furthermore, the safety and security of tourists in the host country are essential when it comes to promoting a good quality tourist experience. The promotional appeal of a destination is enhanced if it is perceived by the tourist to be safe (World Tourism Organization 1996).

A particular focus on tourism was chosen because tourism sites are affected by a number of specific issues. Firstly, tourism expenditure is an essential contribution towards the GDP of the host country (World Tourism Organization 2015). This is especially true in Malta, where the contribution of tourism towards the GDP of the country experienced a consistent rise in the years prior to the global coronavirus pandemic (Grant Thornton 2019). A statistical evaluation of a number of key studies that estimate the contribution of tourism to the Maltese economy (Cassar et al. 2017) suggest that this contribution accounts for 5.7% of total GDP, when taking into account only direct effects, and roughly 17% once indirect and induced effects are accounted for. Secondly, localities with sizeable tourism hotspots are influenced by specific challenges relating to the urban context, including tourism seasonality and conflict between various sectors, such as retail and residential. These factors often alter the environmental and social fabric of the host community, an issue which is clearly shown in the case study of the effect of mass tourism on the town of Mellieha (Black 1996). Thirdly, the urban mobility patterns of the users in tourist spots are often different than those within a typical Maltese town or village. For example, tourists are more likely to use the public bus system as the predominant form of transport during their stay in Malta (Bajada and Titheridge 2017). Furthermore, there is a rise in the use of new forms of transport which are marketed towards tourists. These include cab hire via mobile applications, shared transport such as bike-sharing and ride-sharing (Keszthelyi 2019), and electric scooters (Macdonald 2019).

Despite the above statements regarding the importance of tourism for Malta and the effects of road safety on the global tourism industry, there is a lack of research within the local context that looks at the effects of road safety on tourists visiting the Maltese islands. This became evident following the undertaking of the preliminary literature review, which is explained in detail below.

Research Justification

Tallying with the researcher’s choice of narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2013) states that there are three ways by which narrative researchers can provide a clear response to questions regarding the purpose and justification of their studies. These justifications can be applied to this research as follows:
• Personal Justification: The research will allow the author to build on his existing academic and theoretical knowledge in the areas of urban design and the built environment by applying it to the practical field of tourism which, like many individuals in the Maltese islands, is an industry in which the author has some past work experience. Thus, aside from being important for economic reasons, tourism is also important for the author on a personal level.

• Practical Justification: By identifying the problems experienced by tourists and proposing solutions to improve road safety, it would be possible to make tourist zones safer from road accidents; this can be beneficial to both tourists and residents. Tourism is an important contributor to the Maltese economy; consequently, any improvement in the quality of the touristic product offered can have a positive effect on the Maltese economy, both of a direct and indirect nature.

• Social Justification: By contributing to reduce the research gap on road safety in Malta, the paper will contribute research in an area which can be useful for policy makers and transport planners. Furthermore, the research will contribute to the ongoing discussions in academia on tourist-related road injury accidents.

Main Research Question and Objectives

In view of the above justifications, the aim of the research is to understand tourists’ perceptions about road safety in the Maltese islands. The objectives of the research are the following:

• To determine the issues related to road safety that are experienced by tourists visiting the Maltese islands; and

• To suggest interventions that might improve road safety within Maltese tourist areas.

The study is important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the gap in research on road safety in Malta. Secondly, the improvement of road safety within local tourist areas may lead to an enhancement in the quality and attractiveness of Malta as a tourist destination. Thirdly, the paper will contribute research in an area which can be useful for policymakers and transport planners. Finally, the research will contribute to the ongoing discussions in academia on tourist-related road injury accidents.

Research Puzzle

Clandinin (2013) suggests the framing of a research puzzle, rather than a research question with a precise definition and the expectation of a specific answer. This is an important step in the design process of a narrative inquiry, as it carries with it a sense of “continual reformation”, where the researcher is studying his own experiences in relation to those of the participant (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). For this study, the following central research puzzle has been developed:

• What are the perceptions of tourists regarding road safety in tourist hotspots in the Maltese islands?

This research puzzle will be further developed into a series of sub-questions that will allow open-ended responses by the participants during the interviewing phase of the research. These include the following:

• What are the road safety related problems faced by tourists in tourist hotspots?

• What are the possible interventions in urban spaces that can enhance road safety?
Research Stakeholders

The study concerns the following stakeholders:

- Tourists: As the main users of the space, their experiences are the primary focus of the study.
- The Maltese tourism and hospitality industry: Due to their direct contact with tourists, employers and employees in the industry are the main beneficiaries of the effects of tourism on the local economy.
- Tourism-related organizations: Entities such as the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association, the Malta Chamber of SMEs, and the Association of Catering Establishments have been set up to protect and promote the interests of companies operating in the Maltese tourism industry and to provide guidance and support to their respective members.
- Malta Road Safety Council: A collaborative effort that brings together major stakeholders involved in road safety, including the Malta Police Force, the Civil Protection Department, Transport Malta, and LESA. The council aims to increase awareness through educational campaigns and to push forward proposals to improve road safety (Malta Independent 2017).
- The Government of Malta: Through the Planning Authority and Transport Malta, the government is responsible for enacting policies and infrastructural projects that address road safety within the Maltese built environment.

Literature Review

The following figure shows the main themes that have emerged from the preliminary literature review. The themes are further explained below.

Figure 1: Preliminary literature map (author’s own work)
Transport Policy in Malta and the European Union

Road safety is discussed in a number of policy documents both at a local and European level. The Road Safety Strategy (Ministry for Transport and Infrastructure 2014) highlights the need to improve our knowledge on designing safer roads and suggests that more research in this field is necessary. A number of challenges that require addressing are identified in the report. These include better investigation of collisions and casualties, improved road and vehicle design that enhances safety and reduces speed, and more focus on vulnerable road users, including pedestrians. This research aims to address these challenges. Other policy documents also state that more research in the field of road accidents is necessary. A solution towards the issue of a lack of data and a more proactive approach towards road safety are two long-term objectives highlighted by Transport Malta (2016a). Furthermore, the 2025 Master Plan (Transport Malta 2016b) sets a goal to reduce injuries in traffic accidents. This can be achieved by more statistical research, road safety analyses, and a safer land transport system.

At a European level, road accidents are considered to be a problem that exerts large social pressures. Research has established that 69% of road accidents occur in cities and urban areas (European Commission 2011), which is also where most tourist activity takes place. With this in mind, the European Commission has developed a comprehensive strategy with the aim of halving road casualties by 2020 and to move close to zero fatalities by 2050 (European Commission 2011). This “zero-vision” objective regarding road safety was further reinforced through the Valletta Declaration on Road Safety (The Council of Europe 2017).

Road Accidents in Tourist Areas

A report by the FIA Foundation for the Automobile and Safety (2010) found that road crashes were the most likely fatality risks faced by tourists in the host destination. Tourists face significantly higher road safety risks than local residents, especially in developing countries. There is a lack of research that analyses the issue of road safety and tourism in Malta with a multi-disciplined approach that goes beyond one specific form of transport. Research that focused on tourists’ perceptions of the Maltese bus system (Bajada and Titheridge 2017) determined that they are more likely to use public buses as the predominant form of transport during their stay in Malta; however, they face numerous issues such as limited knowledge of the service, long waiting times, and overcrowded buses. The attractiveness of the bus service affects the attractiveness of Malta as a holiday destination - tourists who are unsatisfied with the service could change their next holiday destination or write a negative review. While no local research has been done that specifically focuses on the experiences of tourists, a number of studies have looked at road safety in a general manner. A spatial analysis of pedestrian injuries and fatalities in Malta between 2004 and 2018 (Bajada and Attard 2021) suggests that summer party-goers are a particular group of pedestrians that should be researched further and looked after in future planning and policymaking. An urban form analysis of Msida Creek by Montebello (2021) demonstrates that less public space has been allocated to pedestrians over time in favour of more vehicle-dominated spaces like roads and car parks. Mobility issues in the space need to be tackled using a complete rethinking of streets as liveable spaces where the priority is on the movement of people rather than cars. Similar views were expressed in an urban design and mobility strategy of the village of Lija by Architecture Project (2016) which devised a strategy structured around three main points: limiting vehicular traffic in both quantity and speed; prioritising the pedestrian by creating safer and better public infrastructure; and enhancing public spaces by designating new pedestrian priority areas such as small piazzas and recreation areas around the village.
Similarities exist between the transport problems faced by Malta and other countries around the world (Attard 2005). Research conducted in foreign contexts shows that tourists are at a greater risk of injury from road accidents than local residents, and vehicle accidents are the most common cause of injury and death for tourists worldwide (Wilks 1999). Furthermore, a study of road accidents involving tourists in the Balearic islands argues that the presence of tourism is often neglected when analysing road safety in the host country, and determines that tourism may be associated with a significant amount of traffic accidents that take place in the area (Rossello and Saenz-de-Miera 2011).

**Perceptions of Tourists on Road Safety in the Host Country**

A number of international studies have been published that specifically analyse tourists’ perceptions about the safety of the road network in the respective host country. Research among tourists in central Florida found that their perception on safety varies according to the geographic area, with roads and hotel parking areas noted as areas where tourists do not feel safe (Milman et al. 1999). Pedestrian safety is a significant problem – a study that surveyed users of Manila’s walking environment found that safety, rather than mobility, is the most important criteria in the hierarchy of pedestrians’ needs (Mateo-Babiano 2016). Furthermore, research that focused on female travellers’ perception of safety and security in Kuala Lumpur found that road traffic was a main concern among respondents, with crossing the road cited as a significantly unsafe activity (Amir et al. 2015). Another issue is the lack of road safety awareness; a study of tourists visiting Thailand found that tourists driving in unfamiliar surroundings often face issues in the comprehension of road signs and interpretation of local traffic laws (Choocharukul and Srirongvikrai 2017).

**Architectural Theories on Road Safety**

The rapid increase in private vehicle use during the mid-20th century brought about a radical shift in the design of the urban environment. During this period, the ideas of modernism started influencing urban planning. Modernist architects such as Le Corbusier envisioned cities with uniform blocks, transportation hubs, pedestrian paths which are segregated from the wide roadways, and the zoning of land according to function. It became clear, however, that this modernist approach was too concerned with the order of the city and did not take into consideration the real needs of citizens (Onniboni 2015). Public spaces were predominantly designed for the car, and became unsafe for the pedestrian (Jacobs 1961). An example of a city planned in the modernist style is Brasilia, designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa. The city is notorious for its sense of emptiness and a street layout that discourages pedestrian movement (Holston 1989). A number of architectural theories were published as a reaction to the failings of modernism, with a particular focus on road and pedestrian safety. Jane Jacobs (1961) believed that the streets inside a city served many more purposes than vehicular movement, and that sidewalks were a vital element for “the proper working of cities”. Therefore, the sidewalk should both provide safety to the residents of the street and welcome strangers (such as tourists) into the city.

Every place should be designed by the pattern of human activity and movement within it (Alexander 1979). This idea, known as the Pattern Language theory, stems from observing that “most of the wonderful places of the world were not made by architects, but by the people” (Alexander et al. 1977). These ideas helped influence the development of the New Urbanism movement during the 1980s. The movement attempts to address the issues created by urban sprawl and car dependence by redesigning neighbourhoods so that they are less oriented towards car use and more conductive towards walking and cycling (Cervero and Radisch 1996). This can be achieved using basic principles such as Transit-Oriented Development, “walkable” neighbourhoods, mixed-use areas, more public spaces, and safer streets (Congress for the New Urbanism 2001).
Finally, another pragmatic reaction to the failures of modernism was Kevin Lynch’s work on the human perception of the urban form and how it influences city design. This is a process known as mental mapping. There are five main qualities that directly contribute to the user’s individual perception of the city as a whole: Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes, and Landmarks. For a city to be legible, all five elements must work together (Lynch 1960). Mental maps can be used as an effective tool in spatial planning and research, particularly as a way of determining users’ perception and experience of the urban space. One such study was performed by Matei et al. (2001), who used GIS software to process 215 mental maps of Los Angeles in order to study the effect of media on the perception of urban space.

The above architectural theories highlight the problem of car dependence in urban areas and its effect on the safety of the users, and propose solutions to address these issues. The study will apply these principles to the local context, where there is a lack of research that directly utilizes these theories to analyse the safety of the Maltese road network.

**Methodology**

**Research Paradigm**

The study consists of qualitative research carried out through a mono-method narrative inquiry. A qualitative approach was chosen because it seeks to understand the individual’s stories and their experience of a particular social or human problem (Clandinin 2013). This focus on the “why” and the “how” of the individual’s story (Riessman 2008), via techniques such as observation and open-ended questioning, is what makes narrative inquiry suitable for research in the fields of architecture and humanities (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The researcher’s approach towards the study is shaped by the realist worldview, which is of a transformative nature. The transformative approach is change-oriented and addresses important social issues through political reform (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

**Positioning of the Research**

When undertaking a narrative inquiry, it is important to position the research within the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place. These three commonplaces are central to the conceptual framework of the narrative inquiry (Clandinin 2013):

- Temporality is explored through the tourists’ “experience through time” (Crites 1971) of the local road network during their stay in Malta.
- Sociality refers to the conditions in which the participant’s experiences are unfolding, and the bigger picture that is affecting the narrative; these are the external factors that provide context to the issue of road safety in tourist zones, and may include cultural, social, institutional and political factors (Clandinin 2013).
- Place is the specific physical, concrete, and topological boundary where the events of the inquiry occur (Connelly and Clandinin 2006). A local tourist zone was identified and served as the focal point for this research. Tourist zones are areas which are subject to a very high degree of visiting tourists, and include coastal resorts with seaside promenades (for example Sliema, St. Julian’s, and St. Paul’s Bay) as well as historic settlements such as Mdina, Vittoriosa, and Valletta (Malta Tourism Authority 2015). Concentrating on one specific tourist site allowed for a more effective participant selection, a more direct focus on problematic areas, and urban interventions that are specifically tailored towards the needs of the respective site. For the purposes of this research, the Sliema - St. Julian’s area was identified as a particular area of concern.
Sample Selection

Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis, through informed consent. The aim of selecting the ideal sampling strategy in a qualitative study is to attain data which is rich and in-depth (Patton 2002). In view of this, the researcher opted for a purposive sampling strategy. The focus on tourists who have travelled through the site and stakeholders directly linked with the tourism industry is more likely to yield data which is relevant and topical; this is another aspect of qualitative research that makes it ideal for this kind of study (Marshall and Rossman 2006).

Data Collection

Narrative analysis consists of a multi-layered process including interviews, discussions, field texts, and reflexive journals. Interviews are seen as a narrative occasion where the participants can connect their responses into a sustained account or "story" (Riessman 2003). In order to collect data, in-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out with three research participants. These included two tourists who were visiting Malta and one stakeholder in the local tourism industry, in this case a manager in a leading Maltese hotel. Through individual semi-structured formal interviews, the participants were queried on their perception of road safety in the site. This method of interviewing allows access to data along the pre-selected theme of road safety but is also flexible enough to allow deviations and a discussion on the participant’s personal experiences and subjective opinions (Biddle et al. 2001). Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow the participants to discuss any data they consider relevant with the interviewer, and allow the interviewer to deviate from the planned interview schedule in order to ask for clarifications or elaborations (Welman et al. 2000). In a narrative inquiry, the data collection process follows a longitudinal approach; this is because more than one interview is done with the same participant. For the purposes of transcribing and subsequent reflections and analysis, the interviews were digitally recorded; this was done with the written consent of the participants. Furthermore, due to the open-ended nature of the interviews, an interview guide was prepared by the researcher beforehand, in order to help the participants bring out their relevant stories.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In a narrative inquiry, data gathering and analysis is a harmonious process, where analysis of the participants’ stories occurs all throughout the research process, rather than being a separate activity which is carried out after the data collection (Gehart et al. 2007). Furthermore, accounts are preserved and treated analytically as units, without the participants’ stories being fragmented, distilled, coded and edited into generic statements. Thus, narrative inquiry is a case-centred approach where the researcher attempts to keep the participant’s “story” intact (Riessman 2008).

Reflexivity

Reflective positioning by the researcher is necessary at all stages of the research, as the researcher’s own reflexive process is also a crucial aspect of a narrative inquiry (McLeod 2001). Throughout the study, the researcher filled in a reflexive journal where the thoughts and feelings after each interview were noted, together with any concerns, observations, or notes. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that reflexivity requires discussing two important points: the past experiences of the researcher and how these experiences shape the researcher’s interpretations. Through the reflexive journal, the researcher personally analyses and processes the interview; this helps to further enhance the contents of the interview and creates a feedback loop between the researcher and the research participant.
Qualitative Validity and Reliability in Research

Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate, while qualitative reliability indicates a consistent approach by the researcher (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Shenton (2004) suggests the adoption of a strategy based on Guba's four criteria of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) in order to address the validity and reliability of qualitative research. This involves the incorporation of numerous measures which were adopted in this study:

1. Credibility: Adoption of appropriate and well-known research methods, familiarity with the culture under study, good use of reflexivity, description of the researcher’s background and experience, thorough description of the issue being studied, and member checks to determine the accuracy of the collected data (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Shenton 2004);
2. Transferability: Establishing the context of the study by providing background data and detailed descriptions of the problem being studied (Shenton 2004);
3. Dependability: In-depth description of the adopted methodology so that the study can be repeated (Shenton 2004);
4. Confirmability: Clarifying the researcher’s position and bias, recognition of the study’s shortcomings, and in-depth description of the methodology that will allow the integrity of the research to be scrutinised (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Shenton 2004).

Ethical Issues

In the process of carrying out this research, special consideration was given to ethical issues. During the course of the study, the precautions listed below were taken in accordance with the guidelines set by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (2016). These precautions are intended to address the following four main ethical issues: issues regarding confidential personal data; possibility of physical harm; possibility of moral harm; and possibility of business harm.

Issues Regarding Confidential Personal Data

Because of narrative inquiry’s focus on individual experiences and in-depth personal study (Creswell and Creswell 2018), the biggest ethical issue that was envisaged during this research was the issue of data protection and confidentiality. In the European Union, the processing and movement of personal data is governed by the General Data Protection Regulations (European Parliament 2016). In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, all collected data was processed for the purposes of the research only, and was not shared with or forwarded to third parties. The collected data was only stored for as long as necessary and was deleted when it was no longer required for the research (European Parliament 2016). This includes the interview transcripts and the digital recordings of the interviews. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and identifiers and personal details were removed. Furthermore, all participants were sent a covering letter prior to the interview that disclosed the purpose of the research and provided some background information on the researcher. Participants were also reminded before the start of the interview that due to the qualitative nature of the study, it will be necessary to digitally record the interviews (MCAST 2016). Finally, precautions were taken to limit the risk of data theft linked to the use of computers (Social Research Association 2003). These include the storage of the collected data on a secure storage device, making use of a desktop computer which is only used by the researcher, and avoiding the use of cloud services for data backups.
Possibility of Physical Harm

Since the study took place during the global Covid-19 pandemic, the latest guidelines issued by the Ministry for Health at the time of the data collection phase were followed in order to protect the researcher and the participants. A number of measures were taken in order to reduce the risk of transmission, including mandatory use of face masks that cover the nose, mouth and chin (Ministry for Health 2020a), physical distancing and avoiding crowded places (Ministry for Health 2020b), and regular hand washing and/or use of alcohol-based disinfectant (Ministry for Health 2020b).

Possibility of Moral Harm

Informed consent was obtained for all participants before the start of the research (MCAST 2016). Therefore, participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview. During the interview, the participants were reminded that participation is voluntary and they are free to pause, rearrange, or terminate the interview. Furthermore, care was taken to minimise the emotional distress, embarrassment, or anxiety of the participants during the interview; this was done by avoiding sensitive topics and questions that may cause offence (SRA 2021). Finally, the effect of any perceived power imbalances was countered by encouraging an equal standing between the researcher and the participant (SRA 2021).

Possibility of Business Harm

Within the local context, there are often blurred lines between information in the private domain and the public domain (Falzon 2017). In order to avoid ethical dilemmas regarding information in the private domain, no commercially sensitive information was discussed during the interviews or stored as data. Furthermore, the issues regarding confidentiality of personal data which were discussed above also apply to confidential business data. No names of business organizations were stored during the study, and all data was kept anonymous and rendered difficult to attach to organisations (Social Research Association 2003).

Process of Analysis

In this study, thematic narrative analysis was used to analyse the participants’ narratives. In a thematic narrative analysis, common thematic elements are identified and examined across the narratives (Riessman 2008). The process involved the following steps:

1. Semi-structured formal interviews were conducted separately with each participant in the English language. The interviews were recorded with the prior agreement of the participants and field notes were taken by the researcher during the interview.
2. Transcripts of each interview were created and inputted into the MAXQDA software for further analysis.
3. The researcher read the transcripts and field notes several times and listened to the audio recordings in order to identify and understand the tacit voice and meaning emerging from each narrative.
4. A collaborative narrative, including the researcher’s reflexivity, was written for each participant. All participants were asked to verify and endorse the content of the narratives, and to suggest any additions or changes (if necessary). All participants endorsed their narratives.
5. Through the process of thematic narrative analysis, emergent themes in each narrative were identified. The narratives were then compared in order to identify any divergences and resonances across the three narratives. This was done through the MAXQDA software. The findings were then discussed, as supported by existing literature.
6. The conclusion presents the strengths and limitations of the study, implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and final remarks.

**Thematic Narrative Analysis**

A summary of the collaborative narratives of each of the three participants in the study is presented below. In a thematic narrative analysis, the narratives are not broken down into small segments but are considered as a whole, so as to keep the participants’ stories intact (Riessman 2008). The sources of data for the collaborative narratives include the transcripts of the interviews, the researcher’s field notes, and the researcher’s reflexive journal.

**Main Themes Emerging from the Collaborative Narrative with Gareth**

Gareth (a pseudonym) is the general manager of a local 5-star hotel, a role he has occupied since 2007. He has worked in the hotel industry for over 40 years. What he likes about working in hotels is that, unlike in an office job, he gets to meet people and share experiences with them. Gareth makes it a point to be in contact regularly with the guests: “The most important person in the organization is the hotel guest”, he says. Doing so allows him to assess the service that the hotel is providing and the guests’ satisfaction. He deals with complaints directly, and even meets the unsatisfied guests himself. He thinks this approach works, and he proudly explains that some of the hotel’s most loyal repeat customers were guests that initially met with him to complain.

Gareth feels that the country has made big steps in the area of road safety since he first started working in the tourist industry. The infrastructure has improved immensely, especially the arterial road network and the pedestrian areas in Valletta. He is very pleased with the Triton fountain regeneration project: “It’s an immense improvement, and it’s the way forward.” However, there is still a lot of work to be done. Gareth believes that two main issues are affecting tourists’ experience in Malta. Firstly, they are spending more time in traffic than they would have foreseen and secondly they do not feel safe driving in Malta. In the case of the latter, the attitude of Maltese drivers is a problem, but he feels that it can be improved with more enforcement. The issue of traffic, however, requires more thought. The authorities need to encourage people to use alternative forms of transport. This requires improvements in a number of areas such as the public transport service, pedestrian zones, and the infrastructure used by cyclists.

**Main Themes Emerging from the Collaborative Narrative with Erik**

Erik (a pseudonym) is a young adult from Sweden who is spending a month in Malta. He is staying alone in San Ġwann. Erik is visiting St. Julian’s and Sliema regularly during his stay in Malta, “at least 5 times a week”. He is especially fond of Paceville and St. Julian’s because of all the bars and restaurants, and because it contains the nearest swimming spots to his place of residence. It is his first time visiting the country so he cannot evaluate how the state of Malta’s roads has changed throughout the years; however, he can certainly compare them to his native Sweden:

“I think the roads are in worse condition...in this aspect I definitely think that Malta has some improvements to be made.”

During his stay in Malta, Erik is using the public bus service and e-scooters to travel around. His use of the e-scooter gives him a unique perspective for this study, as he can share his experiences on the Maltese roads as an e-scooter user.
Overall, Erik thinks that Malta has some improvements to be made when it comes to road safety, especially when compared to Sweden. However, he does not think that this issue affects his experience of Malta and his quality of life on the island too much. If he was to consider moving to Malta permanently, he does not feel that road safety is an issue that would stop him from doing so.

Main Themes Emerging from the Collaborative Narrative with Christina

Christina (a pseudonym) is a student from Lithuania. She has just completed her degree in the field of psychology and has visited Malta several times in order to participate in youth exchanges and to meet with friends which she has made while on the island. Her first visit was four years ago when she attended a youth training course in Dingli, and she is currently in Malta for the sixth time. She is staying in Naxxar during this visit. Christina has also entered into a relationship with a Maltese man and is planning to move to the island permanently in the near future once she has finished her studies in Lithuania.

Christina believes that a lot of work has to be done to make Malta feel safe from the point of view of the pedestrian. Most of the issues stem from the fact that many pavements in Malta are too narrow. Malta’s roads are too focused on the needs of the car user, and more should be done to satisfy other users such as pedestrians and cyclists. Furthermore, Christina thinks that the public transport service in Malta should be improved by tackling the issues of punctuality and frequency of the buses so that more people are encouraged to use it instead of buying so many cars per household. Having said this, she does not feel that this issue is serious enough to stop her from moving to Malta, or that it could potentially deter other tourists from visiting the island.

Discussion

Following the process of thematic narrative analysis, the three narratives were compared in order to identify any divergences and resonances amongst the emergent themes. A total of three common themes and four sub-themes were identified. These represent seven issues which affect how tourists perceive road safety in Malta. All seven issues were resonating themes within the narratives of the three participants. The main divergence that emerged from the thematic narrative analysis is a disagreement on how to address the issues relating to the Maltese public transport service, in particular whether a bus system is sufficient or an underground metro is necessary. These themes are further discussed below.

![Figure 2: Theoretical Model showing the emergent themes in the study (author’s own work)](image-url)
**Theme 1: Excessive Amount of Traffic on Malta’s Roads**

Traffic congestion is viewed as a significant problem by the participants of this study. All participants believe that there are an excessive number of private cars on Malta’s roads: “It’s a lot of cars for such a small island” (Erik). Data from the National Statistics Office confirms this—in the third quarter of 2021, there were 411,056 licensed motor vehicles in Malta. The number of cars on Maltese roads has continued to rise—there was an increase of 2,851 over the previous quarter, which is an average of 31 motor vehicles per day (NSO 2021a). The three participants believe that in Malta it is common for each household to own multiple cars, and this is a problem that needs to be addressed:

> They are not really encouraging Maltese people to use public transport because it is so inconvenient, so every person in the household has their own car. So if there are three people, this means there are three cars. – Christina

Gareth points out that due to the congestion on Malta’s roads, there are instances where guests staying at his hotel spend more time in traffic than they would have anticipated when planning their holiday. One example is when tourists visit Gozo on busy days such as Sundays or the Santa Maria feast; some tourists get caught in the long queues on their way back to Malta. This leads to missed appointments and is an issue that creates a lot of frustration for his guests who experience it.

**Improvement in Public Transport Service is Necessary**

In order to reduce the number of private cars on Malta’s roads, more people should be encouraged to use public transport:

> Improve everything related to public transport so that somehow people are encouraged to use it more than their cars, and they wouldn’t need everyone in the house to have their own car to go somewhere. - Christina

The findings of this research show that some improvements in the bus service are necessary. All three participants mention two main problems with the buses in Malta: frequency and punctuality. Erik describes the bus service as follows:

> It’s worse than what I am used to in Sweden...the buses don’t run on time as much as I’m used to, and they don’t come as often either.

This is consistent with the research by Bajada and Titheridge (2017), where problems of punctuality and unreliability were highlighted as two of the main issues experienced by tourists using the Maltese bus service. There is a divergence in the opinions of the participants on whether a new mass transport system such as an underground metro is necessary. A feasibility study by Arup (2021) proposes a metro system consisting of three lines with 25 stations. Gareth believes that in order to have a truly efficient public transport service, an underground system connecting the harbour area is necessary: “Imagine the connectivity you would have.” However, the two tourists share a different opinion; Erik believes that improving the existing bus service is enough:

> If they increased the number of buses, the buses were more reliable, and you had more departures per hour, I think that would be sufficient.

Maltese experts also share diverging opinions on whether an underground metro is the ideal solution for the Maltese islands, with some believing that a metro is a vital infrastructural project that would improve the Maltese economy and quality of life (Xuereb 2019), while others, such as Dr. Maria Attard, believing that the proposed metro is financially unfeasible,
and other solutions such as a bus rapid transit system are more suitable for Malta (Balzan 2021).

*Cycling in Malta is Unsafe*

Another possible solution to reduce vehicular traffic on the roads is to encourage more people to cycle to their destination. This emerges from the narratives of all three participants, and their views are corroborated by research which shows that cycling is an effective method of reducing congestion in urban areas and can even reduce the journey times of other road users (Granville et al. 2001). Furthermore, cycling is beneficial for environmental reasons, as it produces no direct emissions of carbon dioxide or noise (Heinen et al. 2010). The promotion of cycling for short journeys is an effective method for curbing the use of cars and reducing transport emissions, particularly in small touristic cities (Karanikola et al. 2018). The three participants in this study are aware of the aforementioned benefits of cycling, however, they believe that more needs to be done to make cycling in Malta more safe and convenient: “How safe are you riding a bicycle on a Maltese road?” (Gareth). These views are confirmed by research which shows an increase in cycling-related injuries in Malta between 2009 and 2015 (Attard et al. 2016). Improving the safety of cycling infrastructure is an effective way of encouraging more people to cycle. A study by Noland (1995) found that a perceived improvement of 10% in safety results in a 10% increase in the share of people commuting by bicycle.

*Theme 2: Lack of Discipline by Maltese Road Users*

This study raises a number of issues related to a lack of discipline by Maltese road users. These include careless driving and over-speeding, which are also highlighted as primary topics of concern in Malta by the European Road Safety Observatory (2017). All three participants have experienced incidents involving reckless driving while in Malta. Gareth is very critical of the way that some Maltese drivers behave when in the presence of tourists: “If you speak to foreigners, some are shocked with our ethics when we’re driving”. He notes that some Maltese drivers purposefully drive in an abusive manner when they notice that a tourist is driving the car in front of them, for example by overtaking dangerously or over-speeding. He has experienced these incidents himself:

> I used to drive a company car that had a self-drive number plate, you notice people’s attitude towards you. It used to shock me, and this is exactly what we do not need as an industry.

Furthermore, there is a common perception that the driving standard in Malta is worse than that in the participants’ respective home countries. Erik comments that “people don’t have as much patience here”. Gareth’s comments regarding road discipline are also in a similar vein:

> When people come from places such as northern Europe, they are much more disciplined on the roads...when you go further up in Europe, they are used to discipline which we do not have unfortunately.

Maltese experts in the field of road safety also agree that indiscipline is leading to more road accidents on our roads, and the level of road discipline followed in Nordic countries is an example that should be followed in Malta (Dalli 2017). Furthermore, data published by the National Statistics Office (2021b) shows that the number of traffic-related contraventions issued in Malta in 2020 has risen when compared to the previous year. The issue of over-speeding is highlighted as a particular problem by Gareth, who also notes that the installation of speed cameras has led to improvements:
Thank God that we have speed cameras because, if we didn’t, God knows the accidents that we would have on our roads.

In 2020, a total of 43,269 speed camera contraventions were issued by the authorities (NSO 2021b). Speed cameras have been shown to be effective at reducing the number and severity of road accidents (Graham et al. 2019; Tang 2017).

More Enforcement is Necessary

Another main issue highlighted in this research is that more enforcement by the authorities is needed. Erik and Christina both believe that there is a lower level of enforcement on Maltese roads when compared to their respective home countries. Erik mentions the issue of illegal parking as an area where enforcement is lacking: “I don’t think I’ve seen a single fine on a car.” He is especially critical of cars which are double-parked or blocking corners since they affect pedestrians’ visibility of oncoming traffic when crossing the road. Similarly, Christina believes that the lack of enforcement in areas such as drink-driving and illegal parking is leading to a situation where “people in Malta are not afraid of the police”. These statements are corroborated by studies that show that the effectiveness of traffic law enforcement in Malta is below or at the EU average (ERSO 2017), and that enforcement in Malta is perceived to be less effective than in the rest of the EU in areas such as speed legislation and drink-driving (World Health Organisation 2015).

New Safety Issues Caused by E-scooters

The recent rise in the use of e-scooters in Malta has brought with it new challenges related to road safety, particularly due to the lack of discipline observed by some of the riders. Gareth is very critical of the vehicles, and describes them as a “nuisance” since he regularly observes instances of rule breaking by e-scooter users. The blocking of pavements by improperly parked scooters is also highlighted as a problem by Gareth. However, he acknowledges their potential as a way to reduce pollution and traffic congestion:

If they were properly regulated and if people abided by the regulations, then they could be a solution for our overpopulated roads...you have to find a balance between increasing accessibility and increasing safety.

As the only participant who has made use of an e-scooter while in Malta, Erik has first-hand experience of the benefits of using the vehicle: “It’s good because it reduces the number of cars on the roads and it releases some pressure on the bus service.” He also acknowledges that more enforcement is necessary in order to control inconsiderate behaviour by some e-scooter users. The potential of e-scooters to reduce traffic congestion is explored in a study by Gebhardt et al. (2021), which determined that 10-15% of all motorized individual transport trips in Germany could be made using an e-scooter. However, the rise of e-scooter use has brought with it emerging land use conflicts between scooter riders and pedestrians, which has led to increased safety risks for pedestrians (Sikka et al. 2019) and problems involving improper parking and blocking of pedestrian rights-of-way by e-scooters (James et al. 2019). Furthermore, an analysis of e-scooter crashes in the United States of America shows that more needs to be done to improve the safety of e-scooter users, especially in areas such as vulnerable e-scooter riders, the need of wearing helmets, and riding under the influence of alcohol (Yang et al. 2020). This corroborates the views of all the participants in this study, who feel that more needs to be done to make the use of e-scooters in Malta safer.
Theme 3: Inadequate Pedestrian Zones

The participants of this study believe that improvements in the quality and quantity of pedestrian zones in Malta are needed, particularly in village cores. The main problems emerging from this research include pavements that are too narrow and a lack of safe pedestrian crossings. Nevertheless, the participants also note three pedestrian projects in Malta that they consider to be successful: Valletta and St. George's Bay by Gareth, and the Sliema promenade by Erik and Christina. One major barrier towards the implementation of pedestrian projects is brought up by all three participants, and this is the issue of on-street parking:

I agree with pedestrianisation all the way, but there have to be parking options...How are you going to convince people to stop using their car and use public transport? You're not going to stop them, so you might as well at least create some parking options, especially underground parking options. – Gareth

A study of underground car parks in France by Godard and Tareau (1995) showed that the construction of underground public car parks allowed the renovation of main squares in several French towns which had previously been “invaded” by parked cars, such that more surface space was given back to pedestrians. The replacement of on-street parking with underground parking can also offer other environmental benefits to the urban space; a study by Yang et al. (2014) used simulation software to analyse the microclimate in a residential area, and found that underground parking can significantly reduce the concentration of CO₂ in the air when compared to surface level parking.

In summary, the process of comparison between the narratives of the three participants reveals a number of factors which influence how road safety is perceived by tourists visiting the Maltese islands. The conclusion discusses how specific policy changes can help address these issues, together with possibilities for further research on the subject.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand the perceptions of tourists visiting the Maltese islands regarding road safety. The objectives of the study were to determine the issues related to road safety that tourists experience during their stay in Malta and to suggest interventions that might improve road safety in Maltese tourist areas. These objectives were attained through the process of narrative inquiry, where the experiences of three participants were carefully studied and emergent themes that highlight the factors that affect their perceptions of road safety were listed. The conclusion shows how these issues can be addressed through changes in Maltese policy and discusses the possibilities for further research on the topic of road safety.

Research Limitations and Strengths

This study gives insight into the fields of tourism and road safety, two areas where research within the Maltese context is lacking. By highlighting the experiences of the three participants, this study sets the pace for further research within more specialized areas, such as pedestrian safety or cyclists’ safety in Malta. A limitation of this study is that, due to the aforementioned lack of research within the Maltese context, it is difficult to sufficiently compare the conclusions of this research to the existing literature. Furthermore, this study is a small-scale research endeavour, and is limited to the views of the three participants. Research involving a larger number of stakeholders may provide more conclusive results.
Main Findings and Recommendations

The emergent themes resulting from this study consist of three main factors which all three participants believe affect road safety in Malta. These include both issues of a behavioural nature (lack of discipline by Maltese road users) and issues stemming from infrastructural planning issues (excessive amount of traffic and inadequate pedestrian zones). The four sub-themes consist of more specific shortcomings. These issues can be targeted through changes in policy, which are explained below.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this study suggest the need for an infrastructural policy that prioritises the needs of the pedestrian. In order to encourage more people to walk to their destination, more pedestrian zones in urban centres are necessary. Within the Sliema-St. Julian's area, a number of projects that include full or partial pedestrianisation have been proposed in recent times; while some have remained unrealised, such as a proposal for the regeneration of Spinola Bay by the local council (Schembri Orland 2019), others such as the embellishment of Annunciation Square and the Piazzetta open space in Sliema have been approved and have been largely well-received (Calleja 2021; Malta Independent 2021).

A major obstacle towards the realisation of such pedestrian projects is the issue of parking. The replacement of on-street parking with underground parking (where possible) could free up a considerable amount of public space in Malta’s urban areas that can be used to provide more space for pedestrian areas or for bicycle lanes. Even within the existing urban context, the safety of pedestrians can be enhanced by increasing the number of zebra crossings, pelican crossings, and pedestrian priority zones.

Other issues that require addressing at policy level include the safety of cyclists using Maltese roads. This can be achieved by including more bicycle lanes in the Maltese road network, especially segregated lanes. Furthermore, steps should be taken to improve the frequency and reliability of the Maltese public transport system so that more people are encouraged to make use of it. Finally, this study shows that stricter enforcement on Maltese roads is necessary, in particular regarding offences related to reckless driving, illegal parking, and electric scooters. In the case of the latter, a possible solution that addresses the problem of the blocking of pavements by e-scooters is to implement specifically designated parking racks in areas where use of scooters is popular (Xuereb 2021).

Suggestions for Future Research

In order to fill the gap in research within the local context, it is recommended that future studies explore the experiences and perspectives of specific road users such as cyclists, electric scooter riders, and pedestrians. An additional qualitative study that focuses on the perceptions of stakeholders (such as Maltese hotel and restaurant managers) could also give a clearer picture of how road safety issues can affect the local tourism and hospitality industry. Furthermore, quantitative studies that use road accident reports or scientific surveys to assess the specific cases discussed above may reveal patterns or new information linked to road safety that will be of further assistance to Maltese policymakers.

Final Comments

This narrative study was developed on the premise that an in-depth examination of the views and experiences of tourists visiting the Maltese islands could offer a different point of view through which the issues linked to road safety in the Maltese islands could be seen. The findings and recommendations emerging from this study are consistent
with the existing literature. Their implementation could ultimately result in a number of benefits which have been discussed in this study, including safer roads, increased tourist satisfaction, and an improved urban environment.

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