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The attitudes of tourists towards a bus service: implications for policy from a Maltese case study

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Abstract

When tourists visit a country, they often use the available public transport service. Their knowledge of this service, may be limited when compared with that of the citizens of the host country. This paper uses Malta as a case study, an island state that serves as a spatial laboratory, to understand the attitudes of tourists towards the main mode of public transport in Malta – the bus service. The research was carried out following a series of major changes to the bus system over a relatively short time-frame of three years, including a reform of the bus service. This reform involved change, amongst other factors, to the operator, network, fleet, and infrastructure. Seventeen semi-structured in-depth interviews with tourists were recorded and then analysed using thematic analysis. This paper provides insight for the need to understand better the influence of tourists' attitudes towards a bus service in the host country. Results show that bus service quality characteristics requiring improvement may have negative repercussions on other factors that influence tourists' attitudes (for instance, crowding on buses contributes to increased waiting times). Moreover, suggestions for policy makers and transport planners could improve bus service operations that are attractive to both the citizens, and tourists, particularly in locations that are economically dependent on the tourism industry.

Keywords: Tourists; Attitudes; Bus Service; Reform; Malta; Policy

1. Introduction

Most tourists depend on the public transport system that is available in the host country [1][2]. This effects the locations they visit. Tourist destinations that have effective and accessible public transport networks tend to attract

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more tourists [3]. If a bus service has limited network coverage or operates during limited times of day, then tourists who are dependent on the bus service may be unable to reach a desired destination. These restrictions are likely to force tourists to search for other destinations [4].

Tourists' needs are different from commuter needs [2][5]. Tourists require the basic service criteria but also an additional array of service characteristics, such as more and different information than that required by those with good local knowledge and a familiarity with the service [2].

Transport contributes to local economies [6]. This is especially important for an island state dependent on tourism, like Malta, particularly if the public transport service is shared between local commuters and tourists. Traditional bus companies tend to focus on increasing patronage and revenues [7], and show less enthusiasm for building the tourism market [8]. This lack of interest from the bus operators results from inconsistencies that the tourism market brings with it, such as seasonality and weather volatility [8]. This might not be the case; however, for countries such as Malta where, although there are peak tourist seasons, tourists also visit during shoulder months. Malta benefits from a Mediterranean climate that has mild winters and warm summers, which are attractive all year round for tourists coming from cold countries [9].

The aim of this paper is to understand tourists' attitudes towards the bus service in Malta and how these attitudes may have been affected by a recent reform that was implemented overnight. The objectives are to analyse the tourists' evaluation of the bus service, and hence to identify implications for future planning and policy. Researchers use islands as small-scale spatial laboratories that can be used for more complex systems in larger countries [10][11], and this is how the Maltese case study is used. The research methodology involves in-depth interviews conducted with tourists between July and October 2014. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis.

1.1. Structure

We continue this paper by presenting an overview of existing literature on leisure travel. We proceed by exploring factors that form part of bus service quality criteria that affect tourists' use of buses in host countries, and the role of tourists as stakeholders. In section three, we describe the research context – the Maltese case study. This is followed by the research methodology used to conduct this study. Section 5 presents our findings on the tourists' attitudes towards the bus service when they visit Malta. This section also includes a discussion of the findings. Section 6 concludes with suggestions for bus services operating in similar touristic environments to encourage tourists to use the bus.

2. Literature Review

The World Tourism Organisation defines tourism as a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, business or professional purposes. These people are tourists that carry out activities that include also tourism expenditure [12]. Hence, they are an essential contribution to a host country's GDP, especially if it relies on tourism, such as Malta.

In countries dependent on tourism, it is essential to attract tourists, and keep the momentum going for the financial benefit of the country. One of the factors that affects tourists' intentions to revisit a country is the level of local transport services [13]. Consequently, it is necessary that the transport modes that they use influence the tourists' attitudes positively.

It seems that no research has particularly focused on non-domestic tourists and their attitudes after the implementation of a bus reform aimed to encourage modal shift from car use to bus use, by improving bus service quality. This research uses the case of Malta's bus service to explore these attitudes, under such a circumstance. This literature review focuses on the bus as a public transport mode that caters for mixed population segments, including tourists.

2.1. Leisure Travel

Tourism is largely a leisure activity [14]. People travel during their leisure time to other countries [15], and they travel within the countries they visit [16]. A characteristic of leisure travel is freedom of choice regarding whether to

travel or not, the location of the destination, the time taken to reach the destination, and the mode of transport used to reach the destination [8]. The journey has intrinsic and instrumental value [17], as the trip generates psychological benefits while travelling and on reaching the destination. Such benefits include the escape from routine, and the associated stress [18]. Leisure is "a pleasant expectation and recollection" [15]. To make sure that tourists experience these positive feelings, and develop good attitudes towards a transport service, it is necessary to provide a service that satisfies the expectations of tourists [19][1].

We define leisure travel as travel between fixed points that involves activities and destination choices, which affect a person's existing and future psychological welfare. This definition draws from two works by Lanzendorf [20] and Mokhtarian et al. [21]. The former defines leisure travel as travel between fixed points that includes habitual activities, which are linked to lifestyle, and destination choices. For this paper, we consider leisure travel as involving fixed points within which there are activity and destination choices. We neglect the part of the definition that deals with activities that are habitual, because leisure in this case involves going to another country for a short period of time (typically between three and six days) [22]. The activities in this case are generally pre-planned [23] and not habitual. The latter define leisure travel as journeys that are done without the intention of enhancing a person's future welfare or for sustaining a normal life, but are essential to a person's psychological welfare. In this case, we agree that leisure is essential to current psychological welfare, but also to a person's future welfare, where future welfare is not only about economic welfare.

Leisure travel, however, can also turn out to be stressful. When tourists travel within the host countries they either use the same modes of transport that the locals use, or they use specifically designed transport modes, such as open-top buses [19]. Tourists may be at a disadvantage that as travelers they are unfamiliar with the destination, with the transport infrastructure in the visited area, and with how the transport system operates [6].

2.2. Tourists as valuable stakeholders

Tourists vary by type; they can be domestic (includes visitors resident within the country of where the activity takes place), or international (people taking part in activities outside their country of residence) [12]. The purpose for visiting a destination could vary, including holiday, business, and education. The reason why tourists visit a location influences the length of stay, and economic elements affect the type of accommodation selected, the transport used to travel to the destination, as well as transport used while the tourist is visiting [24].

A stakeholder is any group that affects or is affected by gains of an entity's objectives [25] including end-users, an example of which are tourists [26]. Tourists are, hence, valuable stakeholders; they use the bus service, and from their experiences, they form an opinion about it. Attitudes can be influenced directly from experiences [7]. Often experiences, particularly negative ones leave a bad impact on the tourist [27], who is more likely to recall it and lose trust in the service.

When tourists return to their country, they serve as ambassadors who relate their experiences to their family and friends [28]. They also post blogs and reviews of their travels on social media and other sites, which can influence outside their immediate social circles [29]. Hence, hearsay can have an indirect role in influencing customers' attitudes. The information that tourists obtain from their friends who might have visited the country before them might influence their attitudes towards the bus service [15][30]. Consequently, the tourist needs to be catered for and served well in order to share positive experiences. Providing a public transport service that is appealing to all stakeholders is, however, a difficult task [31].

2.3. Attitudes and Expectations

A positive experience leads to two outcomes that are favourable for the host country; these include good recommendations and repeat tourism. The quality of experience in the case of leisure travel is crucial for destination loyalty management, which influences whether tourists re-visit a country.

Previously, research on tourism and transport has focused primarily on how tourists reach destinations where leisure activities will take place, and the satisfaction of the mode of travel used to reach those destinations [7]. These destinations can be either within the same country, in the case of domestic tourism, or in another country. Research on this topic has focused on the mode of transport used, and its environmental impact [8] [9] [10].

Modal shift and attitudes towards modes of transport selected by tourists to reach their destinations for a day trip have been investigated [11] [12]. The findings of Lumsdon et al. [11], for example, suggest that multi-modal leisure tickets may motivate tourists to use public transport. Whilst, Anable [12] reveals that people have different attitudes towards mode choice, leading to varying travel behaviours. Consequently, segmentation is crucial to target achievable strategies.

It is highly probable that a successful bus service that increases in patronage meets all of its stakeholders' expectations [32]. Customers' expectations are defined as what customers feel the bus operator should offer [33]; they serve as the tourist's reference point.

By setting individual standards, the customer then evaluates the bus service. Expectations are subjective because they rely on personal setting of standards, which influence the outcomes that could be either positive or negative attitudes towards the bus service. Stakeholders would have negative attitudes towards a bus service if expectations are high, and the service delivery fails to meet the expectations [34].

A recent study on urban bus transport in Sardinia (Italy) [35] evaluated the difference in the impact of participants' attitudes and expectations. They concluded that bus users' attitudes are influenced by how they perceive the bus service, which is more important than their expectations per se.

2.4. Bus Service Quality

Attitudes are defined as positive or negative evaluations that may influence behaviour [36], in this case whether tourists use the bus. These evaluations are based on service quality [37]. Consequently, service quality affects bus use [38]. Research done by Eboli and Mazzulla [39][40] shows that improving service quality characteristics increase the chances of increasing bus patronage.

The idea of considering service quality as a measurement for the strengths and weaknesses of bus systems has proved successful; for this reason, it has been included in contracts of bus operators [41][42]. The main service quality characteristics used as indicators of the service level are namely: 'availability', 'accessibility', 'fare structure', 'information', 'time', 'customer experience', 'comfort', 'security' and 'impact on the environment' [43][44][45]. The service quality characteristics, 'information' and 'time' heavily influence whether tourists use the bus or other modes of transport, such as hired cars when they are on vacation [46].

2.4.1. Information

Limited or non-existent information may discourage tourists from using the bus service [1], even more so as tourists are becoming more information driven [47]. Reliable information is essential on timetables at bus stops, however, this should be supported by, for instance, ways of ascertaining whether one has missed the bus and, if necessary, being able to obtain additional information from the bus driver [6][48].

Additionally, some destinations might not have visitor-friendly public transport services, particularly those providing the necessary information [1]. The reason for lack of information might be linked to the operator who may not be oriented towards tourist customers.

Initiatives that encourage tourists to take buses are equally important, because they have potential to provide additional information [1]. Such initiatives include location based information, for example by encouraging the downloading onto a smartphone of an application of the bus service in the area, and providing real-time bus information through that application [8]. Another initiative could include the promotion of the introduction of discount bus tickets to particular tourist destinations, as suggested in a study by Imhof et al. [49] on mobility in the Alps.

2.4.2. Time

Low frequencies lead to an unreliable service, whereas higher frequencies allow greater flexibility to the tourist. In a United Kingdom survey of tourists who travel to rural areas by bus, frequency of the bus service was one of the factors that was thought to need improvement [6].

Prideaux [4] considers time as one of the important factors that determine the mode used by tourists in the area they are visiting. He argues that a lengthy journey inhibits tourists from reaching destinations in desired timeframes, and tourists become more likely to seek alternative destinations. Thompson [1] supports this and adds that in-vehicle

time, the time taken to reach the destination, is a determiner of mode selection. Bus priority measures, such as bus lanes, are examples of interventions that reduce travel times and make the bus service more efficient [4].

2.4.3. Other bus service quality characteristics

Accessibility and cost are two additional service quality characteristics that influence whether tourists make use of a bus service [4]. In addition to the fare structure, Thompson [1] includes comfort.

Accessibility refers to the bus network coverage [1], and ease-of-use of the bus service [50]. In a study of overseas visitors to Greater Manchester, Thompson and Schofield [51] identify that overseas visitors who find the bus service easily accessible are more likely to use it .

Fare related factors include the cost of the bus service [4][1]. Examples of fare structures include discounted prices for elderly tourists, for off-peak or weakly tickets [52]. Multi-modal tickets and an easily understood fare structure also facilitate and encourage the use of the bus [48].

Comfort is another factor that affects whether tourists use the bus. A study on visitor satisfaction on public transport in Munich (Germany) found that cleanliness and space on the vehicle, with particular reference to less crowded buses, influenced whether tourists used the bus [50]. Other elements related to comfort included a pleasant ambience in waiting areas at bus stops, and more seating for passengers on the buses [50].

2.5. Customer Experience

As discussed in section 2.3, repeat tourism depends on positive experiences, and these are essential to maintain high tourist numbers, particularly in areas that are economically dependent on the hospitality industry. Tourists form their evaluations of transportation services based on their experiences [53]. They are able to form an evaluation by comparing their experiences in one host country to another [54]. Hence, if the bus service excels in one host country, and fails to reach the same service quality in another country, the tourist might form a negative evaluation of the latter.

One element that affects the tourists' experience of a bus service is the bus-driving manner. Bus drivers are responsible for the customers' safety on board the bus; however, culture influences the driving manner [55] Drivers in different countries perceive risk differently [55]. An example from Thailand shows that bus drivers' skills influence tourists' perceptions of safety, as 'buses speed along highways' [27].

Another element that influences bus customers' experience is crowding and related sense of overheating on board the bus. Pearce and Caltabiano [56] for instance, mention a negative experience of a British tourist's bus tour in Singapore. This bus tour was described as crowded and overheated. The experience was described as two hours of utter frustration. In this case, this was an organised bus tour, but similar mishaps could happen on board public transport services, and could lead to negative attitudes towards the bus service.

2.6. Summary

Tourists are important stakeholders that influence attitudes towards a bus service in the host country. Their expectations and the attitudes that they form on the bus service quality could affect whether they visit the host country again, and how they portray the host country to other potential tourists. These aspects are particularly important for countries that like Malta depend largely on the hospitality industry. Hence, the bus service quality of the host country needs to satisfy the tourists' requirements, and knowing the tourists' attitudes is essential.

3. Overview of the Case Study: Malta

The following sub-sections provide an overview of the bus service before the reform, as well as after the reform. Before going into that, however, it is important to understand the context in which this case study is developed.

3.1. Malta as a tourist destination

Like many small-island states, tourism plays a major role in the Maltese Islands' economy [9]. It forms 35% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [13]. Eighty-six percent of the tourists who visit Malta use the bus [14]. Consequently, the bus service needs to serve the Maltese population and to cater for the tourists' demands.

Around one million tourists visit Malta annually; in 2013 tourist visits amounted to 1.5 million [57]. The peak season is summer. In 2012 37.2% of tourists visited Malta between July and September, compared with 28% between April and June, 20.7% between October to December, and 14.1% between January to March [9]. Tourists generally visit Malta for a holiday (85%), for business or professional reasons (7%), or to learn English as a foreign language (5%) [57].

Most tourists who visit Malta are British (29%), followed by Italians (15%), Germans (9%) and French (7%). The average length of stay in 2013 was 8 nights [9]. Tourist occupancy rates in collective accommodation is generally highest in 4-star hotels (67%), followed by 5-star hotels (64%), 3-star hotels (55%), aparthotels (49%), and hostels (45%).

Malta is composed of six districts. The two most heavily populated districts are the Northern Harbour and Southern Harbour Districts where 29% and 19% of the Maltese population live respectively [58]. These two districts are located around the Grand Harbour, which is on the Eastern Coast of the main island, Malta. Fifteen percent of the population lives in the Northern District, which is more rural, and is characterised by beaches and bays that attract tourists. These three districts are the main locations where tourist accommodations are found in Malta, adding to the population densities and daily traffic congestion.

3.2. The bus service before the reform

For 40 years prior to a reform in 2011, the bus service in Malta was operated under a liberalised market [59]. There were 400 bus owners, most of whom were also bus drivers. Together these bus owners and drivers formed the Public Transport Association (PTA). These owner-operators owned 508 buses, which operated on a day-in day-out roster [59]. The service was regulated by the State, who granted exclusive rights to operate to license holders, prohibited direct competition in the sector by restricting market access, restricted bus importation by other companies, and prohibited other organisations from operating a service along set routes, on a schedule, or that picked up passengers from bus stops [60]. The bus service was considered ancient and quirky [19].

The bus fleet included 166 second-hand coaches imported from the UK. Bus owners custom-built an additional 200 buses [61]. These vehicles were characterised by high floors, narrow entrances, and narrow gangways. Another group of buses was composed of 142 modern, low floor purpose built King Long buses. Only these low floor buses complied with Euro III emission requirements [61].

In 1995, government started to subsidise the bus service [62]. By 2010, the subsidy had reached €9.6 million [63]. The subsidy allowed fares to be among the lowest in Europe [64]. Information for passengers was available via the PTA website. Bus termini were equipped with notice boards that indicated departure times from starting points [59].

3.3. The reform – an intervention for behaviour change

The main aim of the bus service reform in 2011 was to change mode use of the Maltese population, from car use to bus use [65]. Additionally, the 2008 White Paper, which heralded the reform, had seven objectives. These were to (i) improve network planning; (ii) change the bus fleet to comply with EU emission standards; (iii) remove the exclusivity of rights to operate; (iv) apply a roster system following EU regulations; (v) provide an efficient government subsidy; (vi) provide information to customers; and (vii) increase and enforce regulation [65].

A competitive tendering approach was selected as the contracting model for the procurement of the bus service. Arriva Malta won the bid, and became the operator of the new private bus company on the 20th November 2010 [61].

3.4. The reformed bus service: issues and consequences

The implementation of the bus service reform took place overnight on the 3rd July 2011. On day one of operations, the new operator encountered serious problems. One of the issues was that 100 drivers did not show up for work. With a fleet of 264 buses [66], this meant that the service was launched with a shortage of 38% of the workforce. The second issue regarded technical difficulties to the electronic information system. Two years into operation the most pressing concerns for the Maltese were unreliability and punctuality issues [67][68].

An issue that concerned tourists was reportedly the fare structure [69]. Tourists had to pay a different, higher fare than Maltese citizens; this was considered discriminatory. Several complaints were filed to European Members of Parliament (MEPs) [69]. These complaints led the European Commission to launch formal legal proceedings against the Maltese government about this issue. Following investigations, the European Union executive decided that the bus fare infringed EU law. The Maltese Government was asked to rectify this illegality by replacing the fares and allowing non-Maltese citizens to benefit from the same fare structure as Maltese citizens [70].

Meanwhile, Arriva Malta was reported to suffer from over €70 million in debts, and unless Government intervened, liquidation was imminent by the end of its second year of operation (2013) [71]. Consequently, the Government bought the bus company at a nominal value of €1 [71], thus nationalising the service. In January 2014, the Government temporarily became the operator and regulator of the bus service. The new state-owned bus company was named Malta Public Transport. During this time, the focus was to improve the punctuality issues of the bus service, and provide a basic level of service, while looking at options to find a suitable operator; hence, the nationalised bus service was not substantially different from that provided by Arriva Malta.

Following a call for Expressions of Interest (which took place on the 27th January 2014) [72], a selection process based on the lowest financial bid resulted in the Spanish Company, Autobuses Urbanos de León (ALESA) becoming the new operator. This announcement was made public on the media on the 20th December 2014 [73]. The bus company name remained the same: Malta Public Transport [73], and operations started on the 8th January 2015 [74].

4. Research Methodology

This research forms part of an over-arching study that looks into attitudes regarding the bus service, of Maltese citizens, as well as tourists visiting Malta. The methodology used for this larger study is a mixed methods approach that encompasses the collection of quantitative and qualitative data.

This paper focuses on the tourists' attitudes towards the bus service after the reform was implemented. The research findings presented in this paper refers to the qualitative data only, collected from in-depth interviews. This data was collected between July 2014 and October 2014, one year after Arriva Malta left the island. At the time when this qualitative data was being collected, the Government was temporarily operating the bus service, and informal discussions were reportedly underway with the Spanish company [75]. Hence, some of the interviewees were aware that there would be another change to the operator.

Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted to explore tourists' attitudes towards the bus service in Malta. Three localities in Malta (Valletta, St Julians/Sliema area and St Paul's Bay) that are frequented by tourists were visited on different days and at different times of day. The tourists were intercepted on the street; care was given to balance the gender and age groups. Only those that had used the bus service during their visit were selected for interview. The tourists were briefed about the topic and the duration of the interview; they were informed that they could stop the interview anytime they wished. Those who agreed to conduct the interview were recorded. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Eight of the interviewees were returning tourists who had previously visited Malta before July 2011; hence, they had also experienced the bus service before the reform took place. Table 1 shows general information about the interviewees, including the code assigned to each to maintain anonymity, their gender, age, length of stay, and the type of accommodation in which they were staying.

The in-depth interview participants had varied personal characteristics. Table 1 shows that the interviewees included eight females and nine males. The age groups vary between 21-30 (eight interviewees), 31-40 (two interviewees), 41-50 (one interviewee), 51-60 (two interviewees) and 60+ (four interviewees). The interviewees mostly were visiting Malta for a holiday; two were visiting for education purposes, and four for business purposes.

The participants stayed in Malta for 15-21 nights (four tourists), six stayed for 4-7 nights, and another six for 21+ nights, another interviewee's length of stay was between 8-14 nights. Eight of the interviewees rented a self-catered apartment, four stayed in a 3-star hotel, and one in a 4-star hotel. Two participants lived at their friends' house, one resided with a host family, and another one in a hostel. The districts where the interviewee accommodations were located were the Northern (eight interviewees), Northern Harbour (seven interviewees), and the Southern Harbour Districts (two interviewees).

The interviews were semi-structured; all participants were asked the same eight questions to keep the discussion consistent with the over-arching study. Prompts were also used, however, throughout the interviews, to keep the interviewees talking [76]. From the eight questions, the following two questions are relevant for the purpose of this paper.

• Question 1: What is your opinion about the bus service in Malta?
• Question 2: How would you describe the bus service quality? Can you recall some experiences?

Each recorded interview was transcribed. The transcripts were analysed by means of a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), Atlas.ti version 6.2 [77] using a thematic analysis approach. This analytical method identifies recurring themes from data, but does not involve counting the contents [78]. The themes were assigned through unrestricted coding, thus allowing an inductive approach to interpreting the themes. Phrases were selected as the basic unit of analysis for the level of detail for coding with themes. Each unit (phrase) was coded with a theme, which were then grouped into six major themes. Figure 1 shows a sample of the procedure used to assign the final six themes.

Table 1: General information about the interviewees

Code	Gender	Age	Reason for Visiting	Been to Malta before 2011	Mode Use	Length of Stay	Type of Accommodation	District of Accommodation
T1	Male	21-30	Business	Yes	Bus	21+ nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern
T2	Male	21-30	Holiday	Yes	Bus	8-14 nights	Friends' House	Northern
T3	Female	21-30	Business	Yes	Bus	21+ nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern
T4	Female	21-30	Education	No	Bus	21+ nights	Host Family	Northern
T5	Male	21-30	Business	No	Bus	21+ nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern Harbour
T6	Male	41-50	Business	No	Bus	15-21 nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern Harbour
T7	Female	31-40	Holiday	No	Bus	4-7 nights	3-Star Hotel	Northern Harbour
T8	Male	21-30	Holiday	No	Bus	4-7 nights	3-Star Hotel	Northern Harbour
T9	Female	60+	Holiday	No	Bus	4-7 nights	3-Star Hotel	Southern Harbour
T10	Female	21-30	Holiday	No	Bus	4-7 nights	Hostel	Northern Harbour
T11	Male	51-60	Holiday	Yes	Bus	4-7 nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Southern Harbour
T12	Male	60+	Holiday	Yes	Bus	4-7 nights	3-Star Hotel	Northern Harbour
T13	Male	31-40	Holiday	No	Bus	15-21 nights	Friends' House	Northern
T14	Female	60+	Holiday	Yes	Bus	15-21 nights	4-Star Hotel	Northern
T15	Female	51-60	Holiday	Yes	Bus	15-21 nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern
T16	Male	21-30	Education	No	Bus	21+ nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern Harbour
T17	Female	60+	Holiday	Yes	Bus	21+ nights	Self-Catered Apartment	Northern

Table 2 lists the six themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, and gives a brief description of each. The main themes ('time', 'information', and 'impact on the environment') reflect some of the factors used in the European Standard for Public Passenger Transport – Service quality definition, targeting and measurement [43]. The description of each theme provided in Table 2 reflects the interviewees' evaluation of the bus service. Another theme that is visible in Figure 1 is 'expectations'. It is not included in Table 2 because as discussed in the literature review, section 2.3, expectations are necessary to acknowledge, but should be considered with caution. These themes are analysed in more detail in section 5.

Table 2: The six themes that emerged from the thematic analysis

Main Themes	Description
Time	Punctuality issues and unreliability. Amount of time spent waiting for the bus, travelling by bus, and waiting (on the bus) for people to pay the driver
Information	Includes schedules about the bus service both online, on-board the fleet and on bus stops and interchanges
Bus Drivers	Men and women driving the bus, often their behaviour influences the experience of the customers
Fare	The fee paid for a journey or for an amount of journeys, reflecting the fare structure
Fleet	The vehicles used to provide the bus service
Impact on the Environment	Pollution emitted from the fleet, particularly air and noise pollution

you have to wait for a long time
they are not reliable
But I think that punctuality is hopeless → Time

we can easily get information from the bus station
From tourist information, also from a friend of mine, that when I said that I'm going to Malta she said oh they have very good buses there
you don't get a lot of information, about what's happening → Information

The drivers, they should be more slowly, slow down before the bus stops
with the corporative image all the bus drivers dressed uniform
well about the drivers, it's horrible how they drive → Bus Drivers

this is very cheap
you know it can be cheaper than a taxi
it's very cheap → Fare

maybe upgrading the fleet and maintaining the service
they were a bit old and some of them they caught fire. This is very scary
they were nice…because they were the old buses → Fleet

the most negative part is that they use the air conditioner, I think it's on Freon, and maybe they could destroy the Ozone
All the buses here are fairly old diesel buses with particulates extracted
Obviously there's fumes, but I haven't really seen it → Impact on the Environment

it was a public holiday, compared to other days, so you would expect that, to be less buses on a public holiday
sometimes it's a bit crowdy but what can you expect but otherwise, so far I'm very happy
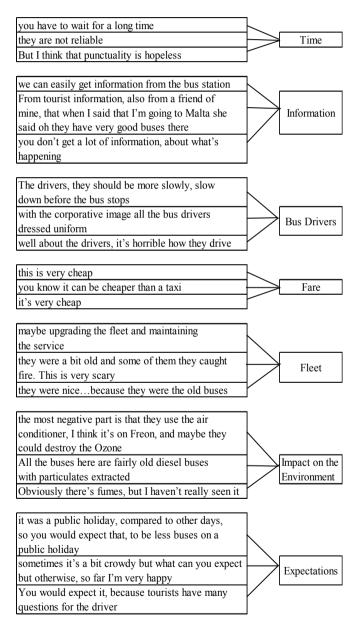You would expect it, because tourists have many questions for the driver → Expectations

Figure 1: A sample of the procedure used to assign the themes

5. Analysis

While visiting Malta, all the interviewees used the bus as their main mode of transport. The following sub-sections explore the tourists' evaluations of the bus service in Malta. A discussion of the main findings is included, providing insight that some bus service quality characteristics require further improvements that could make bus use easier for tourists.

5.1. Time

Problems of punctuality and unreliability dominated this theme after the bus service reform. The bus service before the reform was considered by the interviewees to be a good service with regard to punctuality and reliability. This is revealed by Tourist T1 (Appendix A, #1), who said that before the reform the bus service was more reliable. The problems started after the reform, with the Arriva Malta bus service (as stated in section 3.4).

The new service level agreement specified maximum waiting times, and increased route lengths. Failure to abide by the specified maximum waiting times led to long hours of waiting for the next bus to arrive. In fact, Tourist T3 (Appendix A, #2) said that because the buses were full up she had to wait for one hour for the bus, which influenced her activities. Tourists T4 and T16 also supported this comment (Appendix #4, #5). According to Guiver et al. [6] a bus delaying by half an hour is unacceptable, and in Malta's case there were instances when tourists had to wait at least an hour. Another tourist T17 (Appendix A, #6) blamed waste of time to the fact that tourists had to pay the driver on-board the bus.

The interviewees described these situations as "horrible" and "annoying" (Tourist, T3). Tourist, T16 expressed his frustration by saying "sometimes I think I go crazy". Delays cause frustrations [79]. The tourist participants' use of words (e.g. 'crazy' and 'horrible') imply that these conditions are amongst the worst to describe a bus service. These could reflect negatively on the hospitality industry, which might put off tourists from choosing Malta as a destination. Generally, tourist participants' comments reflected their concerns regarding the time spent waiting or travelling by bus; some tourists, however, did not mind the long journey but voiced their concerns for the local commuters (Appendix A, #7, #8, #9).

Within the nationalised service, the Government tried to improve the timing issues by using sub-contracted vehicles to increase the fleet. Tourist T1 (Appendix A, #10) suggested that the nationalised service improved, but it was not perfect. The downside to this approach was that not all of these newly introduced vehicles were accessible and compliant with EU environmental standards. Hence, time-related issues need to improve to make the bus service attractive to tourists, but it should not be to the detriment of the environment.

5.2. Information

The bus service before the reform had provided limited information, and tourists who visited Malta during this time relied on the information that they obtained from the tourist office in the capital city, Valletta. This form of acquisition of information continued even after the reform, as stated by tourist T17 (Appendix A, #11).

With the Arriva Malta bus service, information provision improved, as observed by Tourist T1 (Appendix A, #12). In fact, online information increased with a journey planner (although this was seldom updated) [80]. Electronic information on-board vehicles indicated the next bus stops, and major and secondary interchanges included electronic displays. As discussed in section 3.4, the problem with this electronic information was that the I.T system did not work properly from day one of operations. This problem persisted into the nationalised service, although during this time some major interchanges did show the correct time for when the next buses were due [80].

Tourist T11 observed another information related problem. He described the situation at the Valletta interchange as "haphazard", because there was very limited information and some confusion with sudden changes to bus route numbers. People relied on hearsay as stated by tourists T3, T2, T5, and T15 (Appendix A, #14, #15, #16, #17) or as tourist T13 observed, asked the driver questions. The latter method of obtaining information contributed to delays and thus to the journey length (Appendix A, #13). Hence, the tourist participant responses imply that information related issues also led to timing problems.

As seen from the tourists' observations, the reformed bus service increased the amount of information provided in Malta and increased the number of methods by which information was disseminated. The introduction of the 'tallinja card' has reduced contact with the bus drivers when boarding the buses. It is a pay-as-you-go card that allows passengers to top-up online before using the bus service [81]. As observed by Tourist, T13 (Appendix A, #13), tourists however, still have questions regarding the places to visit. Consequently, it is necessary that there is more information provided on bus stops that is related to the bus service (for instance, correct times), and related to touristic areas, and interchanges.

Clearly, there still needs to be further improvement, particularly with regard to the amount of information provided and its accuracy. A crucial concept regarding information is providing sufficient information to meet a variety of needs, while at the same time keeping it simple to assimilate [51]. Operations management at the main interchanges need to be improved, to eliminate "haphazard" (Tourist, T11) situations.

5.3. Bus Drivers

Before the bus service reform, the bus drivers were renowned for their negative attitude, and lack of customer care [82] as is expressed through the negative experience of tourists T1, and T3 (Appendix A, #18, #19). With the privatised service, the drivers' behaviour with the customers improved. Tourist T1 described the bus service as becoming more professional, and the bus drivers were better than in the old service (Appendix A, #20).

The bus service reform improved the working hours of the bus drivers. They started to work a 40-hour week, abiding by EU law [80]. Following Arriva Malta however, new issues regarding bus drivers arose. Towards the end of the operation of Arriva Malta and on into the nationalised service, bus driver attitude started degrading, as reported by tourists T4 and T9 (Appendix A, #21, #22). Another issue was overcrowding on the buses, which according to tourist T7, seemed to stress the driver (Appendix A, #23).

These findings show that, although bus drivers improved with regard to customer care and the company image, for instance by wearing a uniform; other issues arose due to repercussions from the main problems with the bus service. The time-related issues had an effect on the performance of the drivers' driving manner, as they rushed to reach their destinations on time. Evidently, the need to be punctual, together with the overcrowded buses, stressed the drivers.

This situation negatively affected the tourists' experience on the bus. The bus drivers drove in a more reckless manner. This driving behaviour, combined with sudden braking, made tourists feel unsafe and insecure. Issues with negative bus driver behaviour are reported elsewhere, such as their impatience - not waiting for all customers to sit before driving [83]. As stated by Lumsdon [2] "driving staff make or break" the bus service. Bus drivers are expected to empathise with the customers; hence, it is essential that bus drivers be trained accordingly. The operator would in this manner invest in the bus drivers, so it is imperative not to lose them by diminishing the rate of turnover that is associated with this type of employment [84].

5.4. Fare

Although, before and after the bus service reform, the fare structure was considered affordable and cheap, other issues were related to it. Such issues included not being given the correct change and having to pay the driver on board the bus. Tourist participants recalled situations in which they either were robbed by the bus driver, or witnessed a similar situation. Bus drivers often failed to give the proper change to tourists, as indicated by tourist T1 (Appendix A, #24).

This behaviour improved under the Arriva Malta and the nationalised services and is expected to improve further in the newly privatised, ALESA service, with the introduction of the 'tallinja card'. With this new service the fares changed in July 2015, making them more expensive if a ticket is bought on the bus [81], thus discouraging people from buying tickets from the driver, hence reducing travel time. The interviewees suggested similar initiatives to reduce the long waiting times, including buying tickets from machines before boarding the bus. The interviewees (tourists T5 and T10) mentioned the cheap bus fare as a major benefit in the bus services that operated in Malta (Appendix A, #25, #26).

From the 17 interviewees, only one participant – tourist T17 (Appendix A, #27) mentioned the issue of the difference in fare structure between tourists and Maltese citizens (refer to section 3.4). Such 'discrimination', as described by the MEPs, negatively affected the attitudes of tourists.

5.5. Fleet

The old bus service offered by the PTA operated with an old fleet. Most of the tourists liked the old buses, because they had character, and they fondly remembered their journey experience on board the bus as an adventure. Tourists 15 and 17 amusingly described the buses as the "bone shakers" (Appendix A, #28). These buses, however, were not easily accessible, and polluted the environment.

With the Arriva Malta bus service, the fleet improved in terms of accessibility, because they were low-floor buses. The reformed bus service introduced articulated vehicles. These were however, second-hand vehicles, imported from London, and they were large for the narrow Maltese roads. The vehicles were poorly maintained, which led to most of them catching fire [85]. The interviewees (tourists T3, and T17) mentioned occasions when the articulated buses caught fire, and expressed their fear and state of insecurity when using them (Appendix A, #29, #30). In the nationalised service, Government removed the articulated vehicles [86].

The reform brought with it newly built buses that improved on-board accessibility [65]. The problem, however, was that at times bus users felt uncomfortable. Overcrowding on the buses in major touristic areas led the tourists to suffer several bad experiences. Some examples include, as stated by tourists T19, and T15, missing the bus stop because they could not alight the bus, as well as being robbed on the bus (Appendix A, #31, #32, #33).

The pressing issues regarding punctuality and reliability indirectly affected the supposedly improved factors of on-board accessibility and pollution, negatively. After Arriva Malta terminated its operations on the island, an immediate intermediate solution to increase the fleet, and improve travelling times, was to re-introduce and sub-contract old vehicles [86]. Although the nationalised bus service eliminated the articulated vehicles, which were criticised by the tourists, the service was characterised by a mix of different buses. The fleet included buses that adhered to EU standards, however others were once again polluting the environment.

Robbins [16] stated that the capacity of a public transport operator is dependent on the fleet and their size. The findings from this research suggest that although the old buses had character, the new vehicles are perceived as being more environment friendly with reduced emissions. A larger fleet, or vehicles that cater for a larger number of customers, can contribute to solving some of the time-related issues. The Maltese case study illustrates, however, that vehicles must be sized as to be able to operate within the infrastructure available. The chairperson of the new operator ALESA also supports this view [87].

5.6. Impact on the Environment

Most of the interviewees did not notice any pollution from bus exhausts after the reform (example, Tourist, T7). The vehicles were Euro V and Euro VI compliant; hence, although they used fossil fuels, they abided by EU standards regarding emissions. This means that exhaust fumes should not be visible. This resulted mainly from the requirement imposed on Arriva Malta to operate with Euro V vehicles. Other tourists (Tourists, T5 and T10, Appendix A, #34, #35), however, noticed that the buses run on fossil fuels, they also mentioned that since the new buses were air-conditioned they emitted more pollution. The tourists suggested changing the vehicles to alternative fuels, such as electric or hybrid.

Government had to increase the fleet size to improve time related issues [87]. These additional vehicles were a source of pollution because they did not comply with the European emission requirements. Consequently, the nationalised service experienced a downgrading in this matter, as observed by tourist T10 (Appendix A, #36).

5.7. Expectations

As discussed in the literature review, section 2.3, it is necessary to acknowledge expectations, but they should be considered with caution. Consequently, the theme 'expectations' is not listed in Table 2.

The thematic analysis, however, indicated that the in-depth interview participants had specific expectations of the bus service. Their expectations derived from their experience of the bus service. Tourists, T6, T10, and T13 (Appendix A, #37, #38, #39) mentioned their experiences on waiting times, and overcrowding. In the same instance, they mentioned expectation as a way to defend the service, for example "you would expect it" (Tourist, T13).

5.8. Other issues

The tourists mentioned two other issues, rivalry, and culture. The interviewees noticed these two factors while on holiday in Malta. Rivalry refers to an apparent on-street competition between Maltese car drivers and bus drivers. According to tourist T1, the Maltese car users do not give priority to the buses. This behaviour by the car drivers indicates a lack of respect towards alternative modes of transport, when compared to the interviewees' countries of origin (Appendix A, #40).

The other identified factor is culture. The interview participants (tourists T1, T3, T8, and T9) particularly referred to the bus drivers' manner of driving. Similar to Maltese car drivers, bus drivers drive fast, and in a reckless manner (Appendix A, #41, #42, #43, #44).

6. Conclusion

The bus service in Malta is the main mode of public transport; tourists share it with Maltese citizens. Tourists' knowledge of the bus service is limited when compared to Maltese citizens, especially regular bus users. The in-depth interviews undertaken in this research reveal that tourists visiting Malta have the same basic needs as tourists who use public transport in other countries. The issues that tourists face include mainly time related issues, limited information, and lack of comfort.

Other issues that affected the tourists' attitudes involved a combination of factors, for instance, long waiting times on bus stops; together with missing the bus because it is overcrowded, influences the accessibility of the tourists. Another example is the feeling of insecurity and lack of safety from the driving behaviour.

The findings suggest that bus service operations need to be designed in such a way that the service is attractive to the tourists. In an island state like Malta, where tourism is a main contributor to the economy, it is important that tourists are satisfied with the bus service. Tourists who are unsatisfied with the bus service could change their next holiday destination as a result, or make a bad review about Malta to their friends and other potential visitors, thus putting them off visiting.

So far, very limited research has been carried out to understand tourists' evaluations of a transport mode when they visit a foreign country. The case of Malta's bus service operations reveals the importance of understanding tourists' attitudes towards a bus service, particularly before and after a bus service reform. While the tourists' attitudes suggest that the bus service reform in Malta has improved some of the service quality characteristics, there are other factors that are likely to need further improvement, particularly punctuality, reliability, and information. Since Malta is an island state, the case study serves also as a spatial laboratory that can be used in similar environments, as well as in larger countries.

For a country or location where tourism plays a major economic role, word-of-mouth marketing plays a central role to attract tourists. A happy and satisfied tourist reports a positive evaluation of the service received in the host country. In the light of the findings and conclusions made in this paper, we list suggestions for future planning and policy making related to bus service operations that are attractive to tourists.

- Collect data, for up-to-date statistics on bus use by tourists, for continual monitoring and improvement of the service,
- Assign the required importance to the different population segments that compose bus users as customers, particularly if the country or area being served depends on tourism,
- Focus on main service quality characteristics that might have immediate influence on the tourists' attitudes, such as 'time', 'information', and 'comfort', as well as consider the possibility of these characteristics having further indirect repercussions, such as stress, insecurity, and feeling unsafe,
- Consider the need for improvement of other external factors that influence the bus service, instilling a culture within the locals that respects public transport,

- Consider the tourists' expectations regarding the bus service. Identify the country of origin of the tourist visitors, and compare the bus service of the host country to their countries. This helps to improve the bus service, or to market a feature in the service that is unique to the host country, as well as attractive to tourists.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Quotations

Theme	#	Interviewee	Comment	Reference to Bus Service
Time	1	Tourist, T1	"From my point of view they were more reliable…"	PTA bus service
	2	Tourist, T3	"Sometimes they pass and they do not stop, because they are full."	Nationalised service
	3	Tourist, T3	"So sometimes you need to break your plans, because you can't do plans…you are waiting for one hour for the bus, and only one bus passes and it's full, so it doesn't stop and then you need to plan an alternative activity, because of the bus, and then you have no more time available."	Arriva Malta and the nationalised services
	4	Tourist, T4	"I think…they have to change the times…most of the time you have to wait very long because when the bus comes, usually it is full, and you have to wait more, for the other bus, and maybe the next one is full as well"	Nationalised service
	5	Tourist, T16	"It's really difficult, because it's all full, and you need to wait a long time…"	Nationalised service
	6	Tourist, T17	"…but you should be able to buy it (the ticket) before you go onto the bus. But it (the bus service) stops when there are four or five people in front of you and everyone is fiddling around, it's a waste of time."	Arriva Malta service
	7	Tourist, T1	"…all the buses came full up…so it took us like … one hour to wait and the buses passed…but they didn't stop because they all were full up…"	Nationalised service
	8	Tourist, T3	"…Maltese people don't take the bus because they know that it is going to take them so long so they try to avoid it."	Nationalised service
	9	Tourist, T11	"I think it's fine for us, because we're on holiday and we don't have any constraints. We have no rush."	Nationalised service
	10	Tourist, T1	"…I think the service improved, since the first time I came here…They're not perfect, but they are better than they were, for example with punctuality"	PTA and the nationalised services

Information	11	Tourist, T17	"…we always go to the tourist office in Valletta. So we always get the information from there. We always got the plan of the routes."	PTA, Arriva Malta and the nationalised services
	12	Tourist, T1	"There have been changes, like the new signs, electric signs that improved the service."	Arriva Malta and nationalised services
	13	Tourist, T13	"…tourists have many questions for the driver, where are the museums and all this…"	Nationalised service
	14	Tourist, T3	"My boyfriend was here and he was doing a three week course in English…So I heard about it (the bus service) from him."	PTA service
	15	Tourist, T2	"I came here to visit a friend and he told me about it"	Nationalised service
	16	Tourist, T5	"…I heard that we pay only €1.50 for a day, for all the trips…"	Nationalised service
	17	Tourist, T15	"We learned from the people around here…"	Nationalised service
Bus Drivers	18	Tourist, T1	"…he (the driver) was shouting at me on the bus…"	PTA service
	19	Tourist, T3	"…they were a bit rude…"	PTA service
	20	Tourist, T1	"…they are better than they were…it's more a professional service…better than the bus drivers of the old service…I trust them more because of the company image…"	Nationalised service
	21	Tourist, T4	"…they are crazy, the way they drive, because in my opinion they drive too fast, and when they drive past a corner they don't stop, they just continue driving, and they don't care if you are sitting, or if you are standing in the bus. So it's not really safe either."	Nationalised service
	22	Tourist, T9	"We had a lady driver, and she thought she was Louis Hamilton, heavy on the brakes, acceleration."	Nationalised service
	23	Tourist, T7	"…sometimes they are a bit overcrowded, and the bus drivers can seem a bit stressed"	Nationalised service
Fare	24	Tourist, T1	"The first time I came here in 2008, the bus driver forced a friend of mine to get off the bus, because he (the friend) wanted the change. It was just a few cents, but it's just a matter of getting the exact change, to make a point. …and he (the bus driver) refused…and he (the bus driver) ended up getting my friend off the bus…"	PTA service
	25	Tourist, T5	"…it's very cheap…I only pay €1.50, and I don't need to take the taxi, because it's too expensive"	Nationalised service
	26	Tourist, T10	"You don't need anything besides a bus card, and it's very cheap."	Nationalised service
	27	Tourist, T17	"And I think it's cheaper now than it did in the Arriva service. We always used the day	Arriva Malta and nationalised services

			return ticket. I seem to recall it cost about €2.60, and it's €1.50 now."	
Fleet	28	Tourist, T17	"…they had character of course. They're part of Malta's history. I mean some of them were a real mess but some of them were old, they've been kept very well, you know with maintenance and polish. I was sad to see them go."	PTA service
	29	Tourist, T3	"…the bigger buses…they were a bit old, and some of them caught fire. This is very scary."	Arriva Malta
	30	Tourist, T17	"These shakers you know (referring to the articulated vehicle) they're the worst. They should take them off the roads. I think the Maltese roads are not big enough for them."	Arriva Malta
	31	Tourist, T9	"The bus service is good, except when it's very busy. …once when it was crowded we got robbed €100."	Nationalised service
	32	Tourist, T15	"There's too many people, that's the only issue. It's a bit frightening at times"	Nationalised service
	33	Tourist, T15	"People wanted to get off the bus, on the way from the airport, they rang the bell, and they couldn't alight the bus because of the crowd, so the driver continued with the trip, so they weren't very happy. They couldn't fight the way through the people, there were too many people and they got stuck on the bus. They had to stop somewhere else and get another bus to where they were going."	Nationalised service
Impact on the Environment	34	Tourist, T5	"I think the most negative part is that they use the air conditioner, I think it's on Freon, and maybe they could destroy the Ozone, that's it."	Nationalised service
	35	Tourist, T10	"…they're (the buses) always running on air conditioning…this is not the most environmental friendly procedure…"	Nationalised service
	36	Tourist, T10	"…also I get the feeling that all the buses have been acquired from all different parts of the world…some of the older buses would probably be not so environmental friendly…"	Nationalised service
Expectations	37	Tourist, T6	"…not always on time, but you cannot expect that (it's always on time)…sometimes it's a bit crowded, but what can you expect…"	Nationalised service
	38	Tourist, T10	"…the less frequent buses, they don't run to the exact times. We had a couple of times that they were early and we missed the bus because of that."	Nationalised service
	39	Tourist, T13	"…and now of course, because it's tourist high season, I understand that sometimes it's late. You would expect it, because tourists	Nationalised service

			have many questions for the driver…"	
Other Issues	40	Tourist, T1	"From my point of view, Maltese people are a bit fed up with buses…they honk the horn all the time, and they are very aggressive with them (with the bus drivers), and they do not give way to the buses. They don't respect the bus drivers. I see a kind of rivalry between bus drivers and car users...In Spain people respect the public transport"	PTA service, Arriva Malta, Nationalised service
	41	Tourist, T1	"I don't know if it's part of the culture here. It's how they drive, it's reckless driving" – reference to bus drivers	Nationalised service
	42	Tourist, T3	"They drive very fast, in my opinion very very fast." – reference to car drivers	Nationalised service
	43	Tourist, T8	"Here (in Malta) the driving style is different (than in Italy). Maltese people drive on the left-hand side, like the British do, but in Malta, even car drivers are nervous." – reference to bus and car drivers	Nationalised service
	44	Tourist, T9	"I think it's in their nature, (how they drive) I think that's how they drive. So we cannot do anything." – reference to bus drivers	Nationalised service

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