SociologyMT

ISSUE 2, APRIL 2026

L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty of Arts

Department of Sociology

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Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Malta.

sociologymt@um.edu.mt

SociologyMT Issue 2 (2026)

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Research Article

Choosing Childfree: The Experiences of Women in Malta

Valerie Visanich and Solange Bonello

Correspondence: valerie.visanich@um.edu.mt

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of women in Malta who voluntarily choose to live childfree, situating their decisions within a sociological framework that considers personal choice alongside prevailing pronatalist ideologies in a context of very low fertility. Malta, like other Southern European countries, has experienced a sharp decline in birth rates and now records the lowest fertility rate in Europe. This demographic shift forms the backdrop to recent pronatalist measures and renewed emphasis on childbearing. Broader structural changes, including expanded access to higher education, increased female participation in the labour market, and evolving gender relations, have reshaped life trajectories, enabling women to prioritise autonomy, careers, and reproductive choice.

The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative approach that values the lived experience of childfree women. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 15 women aged 35 and over who had voluntarily chosen not to pursue motherhood while living in Malta. Thematic analysis was used to explore how participants construct identity, exercise agency, and navigate social expectations.

Findings show that decisions to remain childfree stem from enduring self-awareness, careful reflection, and a desire to maintain autonomy, rather than from rejection of children or motherhood. Although participants described fulfilling lives without regret, their accounts also revealed persistent normative pressures, subtle stigma, and gendered expectations framing motherhood as compulsory and childfree lives as deviant. While these women exercise agency, their choices remain negotiated within enduring cultural, familial, and institutional constraints.

Keywords: childfree; choice; motherhood; Malta; womanhood

Introduction

In recent years, demographic decline and persistently low fertility have become central policy concerns across Southern Europe. According to a 2024 analysis of fertility trends, many Southern European countries, including Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Malta now have fertility rates far

below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, largely driven by late marriage, unstable economic conditions, and changing family plans (Eurostat, 2025; Stone & Wingerter, 2024). Understanding Malta's fertility decline requires a sociological lens that looks beyond policy prescriptions to an understanding of the shifting cultural, economic, and gender dynamics that shape reproductive choices.

Specifically, this study focuses on the experiences of childfree women in Malta, in view of personal choice as well as economic and cultural influences that shape fertility decisions. This is explored within the cultural norm that describes motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment for women as part of 'hegemonic femininity' (Gillespie, 2003).

Broader social transformations, such as greater access to education and increased female participation in the labour market, have redefined traditional gender roles and reshaped women's trajectories (Visanich, 2020). These developments highlight the value of autonomy and self-determination, influencing how women approach decisions related to marriage, family formation, and childbearing. Yet, women are increasingly understood as semi-autonomous agents, negotiating 'compromised choices' about personal development with cultural expectations (Visanich, 2020).

This study constructs an image of childfree women in Malta by establishing a research-based discourse that separates motherhood from womanhood, and generates insight into meanings of motherhood. Through analysing women's experiences, the study seeks to counteract the widespread social prejudice that frames childfree women as lonely or self-centred. Additionally, the narratives presented for this study have challenged the idea that women are biologically programmed to want to become mothers particularly when their fertility years are declining.

It is worth noting that the term childless refers to "the condition of being without children...implies that everyone who does not have children would like to have them" (Dubofsky, 2014, para. 4). In contrast, the term childfree acknowledges the choice factor and "means that one does not want to have children at all" (Dubofsky, 2014, para. 4).

While acknowledging the value of understanding the males' perspective of being childfree as an intriguing sociological study, this research is purposely focused only on women's childfree choices. It aims at understanding the diverse motivations to be childfree, including prioritising personal freedom or a desire for alternative life projects. Particularly, it is intended to add empirical knowledge of women's experience to challenge the "social construction on the female identity as woman and mother" (Minnaar, 2018, p. 81).

Mandatory Motherhood

Motherhood has historically been positioned as a central marker of womanhood, particularly within societies where femininity is closely tied to caregiving, reproduction, and family formation (Hays, 1996). Sociological research shows that motherhood is often framed not merely as a personal choice but as a moral and social expectation, reinforced through cultural norms, welfare systems, and labour market structures (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Reher, 1998). The choice not to

become a mother is often regarded as a deviation from cultural norms, situated within a framework that distinguishes between normal and abnormal expectations of gendered bodies (Martin, 2001).

Pronatalist norms, embedded within heteronormative life-course expectations, shape pressures to become parents (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020). By analysing narratives from childfree couples, Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2020) explore the diverse pathways through which individuals come to reject parenthood, highlighting how these decisions emerge from a complex interaction between personal agency and dominant pronatalist ideologies. Their comparative approach of India and Canada reveals both similarities and differences across cultural settings, contributing to a deeper understanding of childfree choices as non-conformist responses to entrenched social norms.

This cultural expectation to become parents has shaped discourse surrounding women and childlessness, which has too often been overshadowed by the multifaceted realities of infertility (Tonkin, 2017). This outlines the prevalence and pervasiveness of "the motherhood mandate" (Russo, 1976), which is the societal belief that motherhood "is a woman's raison d'etre" (p. 144) and all women want children, along with the concomitant pressure to have them. Aponte (2019) contends that the notion of the 'biological clock' is used to place guilt on women who challenge the traditional norms of motherhood.

In addition, family legitimacy is often equated to parenthood, and voluntarily childfree married couples have to navigate through these dominant cultural norms (Fidanci et al., 2024). Drawing on relational dialectics theory, Fidanci et al. (2024) show how couples negotiate tension between the discourse that defines families as necessarily including children and a counter-discourse that frames couples themselves as complete families. This tension often generates feelings of guilt, as childfree couples internalise societal expectations that portray childlessness as a personal and moral deficiency.

In line with this, Denson et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence of a negative social bias toward individuals who choose to remain childfree. Their findings indicate that discrimination against childfree individuals is significantly associated with perceptions of narcissism, processes of dehumanisation, and perceived violations of pronatalist norms. Overall, the research demonstrates that choosing not to have children elicits systematic negative evaluations and discriminatory attitudes within pronatalist social contexts.

Moreover, stigma constitutes a significant consequence experienced by women who choose to remain childfree. Park (2002) examined how women and men manage stigma and social pressure around their choice of not having children in the United States. Based on interviews and a focus group, participants used strategies such as passing, identity substitution, condemning critics, asserting self-fulfilment, and redefining childlessness as valuable. These techniques ranged from defensive acceptance of pronatalist norms to proactive reframing of childfree life. Ultimately, the findings show that childfree individuals engage in identity work to protect self-worth and legitimise their choice.

Such expectations are often mitigated or rendered less relevant in the context of diverse life circumstances, particularly for individuals living with a disability. Engwall (2014) investigates voluntary childlessness, which refers interchangeably to childfree, in relation to normative constructions of adulthood in Sweden, with a specific focus on childfree women and men with intellectual disabilities. The study challenges conventional assumptions that equate adulthood with parenthood. Participants instead defined adulthood through alternative dimensions of everyday life, including autonomy, social relationships, employment, and independent living.

The elements of choice and activism have been central to recent scholarly discussions on childfree identities (Anisin, 2025; Donath, 2017; Rismarini & Adira, 2025). Research spanning several decades demonstrates that trajectories to the decision to remain childfree are highly diverse. As early as 40 years ago, studies documented a wide range of motivations, including disinterest in children, career orientation, perceived economic advantages, reluctance to relinquish a childfree lifestyle, expanded opportunities for self-fulfilment, and political or ethical concerns related to global overpopulation (Houseknecht, 1987).

More recently, notions related to childfree advocacy as a collective and activist phenomenon, rather than an individual choice, were the focus of Alexei Anisin's (2025) article. The study analyses eight advocacy groups as case studies, drawing on their public content, manifestos, and digital communications to explore how childfree identities and choices are collectively constructed and promoted. These groups challenge dominant reproductive norms by framing childfree living as a legitimate and empowering lifestyle choice. Anisin (2025) identifies key advocacy trajectories, including those centred on climate change, reproductive autonomy, and digitally-mediated, identity-based activism. Advocacy organisations and online communities reshape public discourse by contesting assumptions that parenthood is essential to fulfilment or social legitimacy, mobilising childfree decision-making through both offline activism and online networks (Anisin, 2025).

Moore (2021) further demonstrates how online spaces, notably the childfree subreddit, function as sites of information sharing, support, and collective resistance, enabling the construction of a stable childfree identity that rejects narratives of regret in favour of autonomy, while challenging normative links between gender, identity, and parenthood. The presence of social media influencers promoting childfree lifestyle are also impactful in contemporary reproductive decisions (Rismarini & Adira, 2025). Acknowledging strong cultural expectations around marriage and reproduction, Rismarini and Adira (2025) examine reactionary groups in public debates by social media influencers in their promotion of childfree lifestyles.

Cultural Conditionings and Personal Choice

In contemporary societies, shifting gender roles and changing expectations around family life have significantly shaped reproductive behaviour. These changes are particularly visible in Southern Europe, where fertility decline has emerged as a complex demographic challenge with long-term social and economic consequences (Visanich, forthcoming). Current figures reveal

critical lows in Malta (1.06), Spain (1.12), and Italy (1.18), all beneath the EU average of 1.38 (Eurostat, 2025).

In response to persistently low fertility rates, Malta has implemented a range of family-supportive policies over the past decade. Key initiatives in Malta include extended parental leave, free childcare, and tax incentives (Government of Malta, 2025). The *Social Plan for the Family 2025–2030* sets out a comprehensive framework to foster family growth. Financial supports were also expanded in the 2025 budget, including higher children's allowances and tiered birth and adoption bonuses (€500 for the first child, €1,000 for the second, €1,500 thereafter) (Vassallo, 2025).

In view of such pronatalist norms, women experience various societal expectations and reactions to their childfree choices. One example is related to contraception in reproductive decisions. Women who seek sterilisation in order to remain childfree experience barriers in accessing it, despite it being a safe and effective form of contraception (Moore, 2021). Medical reluctance is driven by pronatalist assumptions and unfounded concerns about future regret, which contrast with empirical evidence indicating low regret among childfree women (Moore, 2021).

While Orna Donath's (2017) study takes the perspectives of mothers, her study treats critical questions about reproductive rights and explores the phenomenon of challenging the cultural taboo that frames motherhood as a natural and unquestionable role for women. Based on interviews with women from diverse backgrounds, Donath (2017) conceptualises regret as a feminist issue, defining it as a retrospective evaluation of motherhood as a life choice shaped by societal pressures and limited life biographies that push women into motherhood while silencing those who question it. She argues that instead of shaming such women, she discusses the structures that restrict their choices on reproductive rights. In effect, this work raises critical questions about reproductive rights, gender expectations, and women's choices.

Women's decisions to remain childfree reflect choices which are motivated by desires for autonomy, career fulfilment, and alternative life projects, rather than rejection of femininity itself (Gillespie, 2003; Park, 2002). Despite facing stigma and cultural pressures that frame childlessness as selfish or incomplete (Park, 2002), childfree women actively assert their right to self-determination, thereby expanding the boundaries of socially recognised female identities. As Donath (2017) argues, legitimising the choice not to reproduce is integral to broader struggles for reproductive justice and gender equality. Decisions for women to be childfree are also based on an awareness of the degree of work and responsibility involved in taking care of a child.

Contemporary narratives frequently frame parenting as a demanding, high-stakes endeavour that requires significant emotional, temporal, and financial investment. The emergence of 'intensive parenting' norms (Faircloth, 2023) emphasising close involvement in children's education, extracurricular activities, and personal development, has heightened these pressures. Faircloth (2023) interprets this shift as a cultural transformation that renders parenting increasingly labour-intensive, driven by the rise of infant determinism, namely the belief that early childhood experiences decisively shape lifelong outcomes. Although the demands of intensive parenting are

not experienced uniformly across lines of race, class, gender, or geography, they have nonetheless become a dominant standard that many parents feel compelled to meet.

The situation in Malta

The decline in birth rates and the growing inclination to remain childfree in Malta cannot be understood in isolation from broader economic and cultural dynamics. While this context is necessary to situate discussion, it is in no way suggesting that the economic conditioning is solely the guiding principles for choosing to live childfree. Women's autonomy in this decision is equally relevant. Yet, rising property prices, increasing living costs, and the pressures associated with maintaining an adequate standard of living constitute critical factors shaping individual and collective decisions regarding parenthood. However, it is worth mentioning the role of the family in property ownership. Cassar (2024) finds that the family, as a key institution in Malta and Southern Europe, facilitates homeownership through co-residence, intergenerational transfers, and social and cultural capital, thereby reproducing social advantage, albeit unevenly across income, wealth groups and the increasing housing prices.

Several dynamics are fuelling the real estate market. Higher incomes, an increase in foreign workers, and the growth of tourism, especially demand for short-term rentals, have all contributed to sustained housing demand (European Mortgage Federation, 2024). Rising living expenses, elevated property values, and scarce rental options in city centres often delay the transition to independent living, cohabitation, and family planning. Consequently, access to reasonably priced housing has become one of the significant obstacles to forming households and having children (Visanich, 2020, 2024). While government policies such as rental subsidies and housing assistance exist, their impact on fertility behaviour has been limited. Moreover, in view of the present high employment rates among both men and women, significant work-family conflict persists, with challenges in balancing paid work and family responsibilities influencing their fertility intentions (Borg & Camilleri, 2024). Alongside these economic and demographic issues, Malta has also seen noteworthy cultural change. Landmark reforms, including the introduction of civil unions in 2014 and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2017, illustrate this trajectory.

Over the past fifty years, women's life trajectories in Malta have undergone profound transformation, marked by greater personal choice and autonomy. Expanded access to higher education and participation in the labour market have enabled women to exercise more independence in shaping their lives, particularly regarding career and family decisions (Visanich, 2020, forthcoming). These developments reflect broader societal changes, yet they are not free from tension. Women often navigate their choices within the framework of persistent cultural expectations and family obligations; a pattern also evident across Southern Europe. This duality is captured by the notion of compromised choices, where decision-making reflects a balance between the opportunities created by increased social and economic empowerment and the constraints of enduring traditional norms (Visanich, 2020) Thus, while women today enjoy unprecedented freedoms compared to earlier generations, their life paths continue to be shaped by both progress and the weight of cultural continuity.

Despite extensive attention to economic and cultural conditioning on fertility decisions, the role of agency based on bodily transformation and embodied experience in women's decisions to remain childfree has been largely overlooked. Research on childfree individuals has paid limited attention to the body, with only occasional references to fears of childbirth pain or anticipated bodily changes, which are typically treated as peripheral motivations (Park, 2005; Veevers, 1979). In contrast, Peterson and Engwall (2014) foreground embodiment in their analysis of childfree women, showing that participants articulated a positive feminine identity grounded in embodied self-knowledge. Rather than citing external constraints, women described an awareness of their "silent bodies", as bodies without a perceived biological urge to reproduce, and positioning bodily knowing as central to their sense of self, and independent of motherhood (Peterson and Engwall, 2013).

Methodology

Using an epistemological lens that values lived experiences as sources of knowledge (Harding, 1993), this study explores, through a qualitative approach, how childfree women negotiate their identities within a society that remains shaped by enduring cultural norms and expectations surrounding motherhood.

A qualitative approach enables the exploration of individuals' thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the phenomenon under study (Schutt, 2009). Descriptive research further supports this by allowing an open and emergent understanding of the phenomenon in its own right (Elliott, 1999). This study draws on semi-structured interviews with 15 women, aged 35 years or over, who voluntarily chose not to pursue motherhood, examining both their decision-making processes and the social responses they encountered. The minimum recruitment age was set to focus on women who were well into their childbearing years, as fertility is widely recognised to decline from the age of 35 and more rapidly thereafter (Solomon, 2019; Scott, 2019). Establishing this age threshold was challenging, particularly given the strong interest expressed by younger women in participating in the study. The latter is presented as a key finding, highlighting how younger women are often regarded as too young to make definitive decisions in fertility-related research.

Participants were recruited through social media posts on public pages. The call for participants was for women living in Malta but not necessarily Maltese. Data was generated through in-person, semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. All efforts were taken to respect the sensitivity of the topic "because motherhood, childlessness, and faith lives are very personal topics, and it is intrusive and inappropriate to assume how women might identify in regard to maternal based on the presence or a perceived absence of children" (Llewellyn, 2016, p. 66). All ethical clearance from the University of Malta was ensured before proceeding to fieldwork (ID:1981_31052019). The interviews were carried out in July, August and September 2019. Additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities.

The research does not assume a single universal truth applicable to all women and therefore avoids presenting any one definition as definitive. Instead, it recognises each participant's unique lived experience while also emphasising the diversity of childfree women through the inclusion of participants with varied life circumstances. Table 1 illustrates the diverse backgrounds of the participants, which strengthened the findings by offering broader perspectives and recognising diversity.

Throughout the research process, questions were framed in a manner that minimised potential researcher bias and avoided conveying judgment. Engagement with participants' personal accounts required a careful and reflexive approach. This ensured that the analysis avoided patronising assumptions or interpretive biases and instead foregrounded the women's own voices and perspectives.

Table 1: *Participants' demographic information*

Pseudonym	Age	Status	Occupation
Linda	50	Single	Director
Anna	53	Member of a religious order	Manager
Charmaine	46	Widowed	Administration
Jennifer	35	Single	Manager
Lorraine	41	In a relationship	Pharmacist
Marie	40	Married	Psychologist
Sharon	39	In a relationship	Administration
Olivia	38	Single	Psychologist
Abigail	36	In a relationship	Teacher
Amanda	38	Separated	Administration
Lexi	35	Separated, currently in a relationship	Administration
Fiona	42	In a relationship	Educator
Catherine	47	Widowed, currently in a relationship	Unemployed
Franny	38	Single	Clerk
Thea	35	Single	Manager

Findings

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of meaning across participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis of the data identified

three central themes in the experiences of childfree women in Malta: (i) Expectations of motherhood, (ii) fertility decisions, and (iii) societal reactions to childfree choices. These themes emerged from the fieldwork, reflecting participants' own priorities. Expectations of motherhood highlight enduring social and cultural pressures framing motherhood as normative. Fertility decisions capture diverse, personal, and embodied considerations, including autonomy, lifestyle, health, and the physical demands of pregnancy. Reactions to childfree choices reveal subtle stigma, moral judgements, and the strategies women use to navigate societal expectations. Together, these themes illuminate the interplay of agency, bodily awareness, and social constraint in shaping childfree identities.

Expectations of motherhood

One transversal finding that emerged from interviews was participants' decision to be childfree in view of their understanding of motherhood, reflecting normative definitions and societal expectations. Nine out of the fifteen participants associated the term motherhood to responsibility, commitment and self-sacrifice throughout a woman's life. Franny (38 years old) highlighted this perception with the following statement:

> Caring for children and that you do everything for them basically your life is theirs. It's like one minute you have your life to yourself and then suddenly you have to share everything with someone else, be it time, money and of course your energy… so I would say motherhood means a big responsibility towards another human being.

On the other hand, other participants acknowledged that motherhood encompasses some form of responsibility and care but also made reference to love and positive attributes:

> I would probably take a fairly wide view on it, I think motherhood encompasses being responsible for somebody, looking after somebody, making sure that the needs and requirements of somebody or something as it could be an animal are very important to you… a much more intense feeling of love and responsibility. (Linda, 50 years old)

The rest of the participants defined the general concept of motherhood as the process of having and raising children. Thea (35 years old) particularly defined motherhood as a *"tick box"* that women are expected to fulfil and argues that some women may pursue motherhood because it is perceived as the next expected stage in life rather than a genuine desire to have and raise children. Thea also defined motherhood as life changing, which would deny their autonomy if they become mothers, since it is permanent throughout an individual's life particularly for mothers rather than for fathers. Fiona (42, years old), who describes herself as a feminist, emphasised that motherhood is a role of responsibility which is always placed upon women to deal with on their own. She also believed that even if adequate help is given to a mother by her partner, it is still socially expected that the main responsibility of raising children is carried out by the woman herself.

This ties in neatly with studies on the complex interaction between personal choice and agency with dominant cultural norms on motherhood (Fidanci et al., 2024; Bhambhani & Inbanathan,

2020; Rismarini & Adira, 2025). As observed by Gillespie (2003) and earlier studies such as Houseknecht (1987), many participants attributed their decision to remain childfree to a reluctance for relinquishing a childfree lifestyle, strong desires for autonomy and career progression, as well as concerns that childbearing and childrearing would impede these priorities. For the majority, while they acknowledged the advantages of parenthood, they viewed it as a life course transformation of such magnitude that felt overwhelming and undesirable.

A number of participants outlined how difficult it was to relate to the idea of pursuing motherhood on any level. Nonetheless, it is clear that participants perceived motherhood as involving great responsibility in life that merits dedication and much devotion towards one's children. For many, motherhood did not align with their personal values, life goals, or sense of identity. In line with Fidanci et al. (2024) study on pronatalist expectations, participants stated that motherhood is an externally imposed expectation rather than an intrinsically meaningful choice.

> I don't want to be limiting myself to that, there are people for whom I hold very strong feelings for who are obviously not my children but who I go to great lengths to make sure that they ok… but I wouldn't class those as a motherhood capacity. (Linda, 50 years old)

> Hard work, something that I am not interested in doing. It's very time consuming, takes a lot of energy, it takes a lot of sacrifice none of which I am willing to do. (Maire, 40 years old)

Alternatively, other participants stated that whilst motherhood is not something they ever wanted to pursue, they still perceive motherhood as a very beautiful journey.

> To me motherhood is actually something beautiful but it needs a lot of dedication, it also reminds me of my mother's experience and how you have to give up your life for someone else. It requires a lot of responsibility but still it remains beautiful and I do appreciate that it gives you something fulfilling that is hard to compare. (Jennifer, 35 years old)

Interestingly, the majority of participants reported having decided to remain childfree at an early stage in their lives. When asked to reflect on the age at which they recognised that motherhood was not a desired life path, nine participants indicated that this realisation occurred very early on. Several women were unable to identify a specific age, noting instead that their lack of desire to pursue motherhood had been a consistent and enduring aspect of their self-understanding. On the other hand, another four women interviewed explained how they decided to remain childfree later in life but still within their childbearing years. Both Sharon (39 years, old) and Amanda (38 years old) had decided not to pursue motherhood in their early thirties. They both shared how when they were younger it was not something they considered or thought about and postponed the idea to a later stage. Subsequently, when they reached their thirties, it became quite evident that the desire to have children never occurred, and they were both of the same idea that one should not pursue something merely for the sake of societal expectation.

Fertility Decisions

Following the discussion on when participants consciously decided not to opt for motherhood, it was equally important to understand why they took this decision. The question was deliberately formulated to minimise any implication of judgment and instead to elicit participants' reasoning underlying their decision. A number of the childfree women interviewed referred to the sense of dependency associated with childcaring and the demanding task of motherhood in line with 'intensive parenting' norms (Faircloth, 2023):

> The feeling that someone is dependent on me is the biggest factor. I travel, have long hours of work and study too. I focus a lot on myself and my career and invest in myself and my future, so the thought of having someone constantly depending on me is too much of a responsibility. For instance, even if you want to travel, it's just too much. (Jennifer, 35 years old)

In addition, other participants shared how they find it difficult to relate to children and thus would not consider pursuing motherhood. Thea (35 years old) spoke about feeling stressed and anxious around children and how she would not be able to cope with becoming a mother as this would mean that her desires would be compromised. Thea further explained how she has never felt any urge to have a baby and, on the contrary, always thought of the idea as something that would only make her unhappy. Similarly, Lorraine (41 years old) shared how she has no maternal instinct and thus cannot see any reason why she would pursue something that she completely does not relate to. In addition, other participants spoke about their experiences as never having looked at motherhood as something that would complement their lifestyle.

Other narratives continue to challenge the stigma and cultural pressures framing childlessness as selfish (Park, 2002) but, on the other hand, assert that their decision was informed by an awareness of the significant responsibilities involved in raising a child. An interesting insight was that of Sharon (39 years old) who was raised in a children's institution throughout all of her childhood and adolescent life. Sharon claimed to have had a very loving and supportive network within the institution. However, she also shared how she knew far too well what it meant to live without the presence of a mother and thus had consciously decided not to opt for motherhood particularly in her thirties. Sharon claimed that she was far too occupied with trying to make a life for herself without the help of anyone else and thus having children would have complicated her life much further.

Moreover, another two narratives that contributed to the different factors as to why motherhood is not pursued were that of Charmaine (46 years old) and Linda (50 years old) who were both born with a physical disability.

> I am very thankful to my mother who gave me life but I was never ready to bring a child into this world and let her or him go through what I have experienced with my disability. (Charmaine, 46 years old)

Likewise, Linda (50 years old) explained how she was heavily influenced by the way her mother had to sacrifice so much for her as a child, since she spent most of her childhood in hospital. Therefore, according to Linda motherhood always encompassed some form of self-sacrifice and commitment.

> I also really hate that your body changes… even the process of pregnancy makes me panic when I think about it. (Jennifer, 35 years old)

> I also never wanted that role because as an athlete I always thought it would ruin my body. I know there are other alternatives like adoption but having my own kids was never an option. (Fiona, 42 years old)

Analysis of participants' discourse revealed that their childfree decision was based on careful considerations. With respect to the perceived benefits, all fifteen participants emphasised, albeit in different ways, that a sense of autonomy was the most significant advantage of remaining childfree. In addition, participants identified other positive dimensions, such as greater financial flexibility and the availability of liquid assets. Some also noted that remaining childfree allowed them to avoid potential challenges commonly associated with raising children, particularly as children grow older.

Correspondingly, participants were asked if there were any negative aspects to not pursuing motherhood. A number of participants could not provide any negative aspects to their respective choices whilst some women elaborated a little further:

> I really can't think of any because if it is something that you don't want then nothing can really change your mind. I think I would consider some aspects as negative things only if I had wanted children but couldn't have which isn't my case. I genuinely can't think of any negatives because I see it holistically…sort of part and parcel of making a decision after all. (Franny, 38 years old)

Societal reactions to childfree choices

The participants' accounts illustrate how responses from family and friends varied, yet common themes emerged. While overt pressure was not universal, subtle comments and indirect reminders were a frequent experience. Several participants reported family members questioning or challenging their decisions. Echoing studies on 'normal' versus 'abnormal' expectations of gendered bodies (Martin, 2001), Abigail (36 years old) described her parents' conviction that her choice was "*not normal*", with her father reminding her that she should consider having children. Fiona (42 years old) recounted a more complex narrative: her mother, shaped by her own experience of marital violence, initially discouraged her children from parenthood as a safeguard for freedom. Later, following her separation, this perspective shifted as she expressed a desire to become a grandmother. For two participants, both identifying as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, family expectations of motherhood persisted regardless of sexual orientation.

For participants with disabilities, family responses revealed a different dynamic. Charmaine (46 years old) shared that relatives had difficulty accepting her marriage, making the possibility of children seem unthinkable to them. Linda (50 years old) explained that her family preferred she focus on education and career independence rather than childrearing. These narratives suggest that in some cases, women are exempted from maternal expectations when family members view them as unsuited to parenthood due to disability or other circumstances. This is in line with Engwall's (2014) study on dominant assumptions that equate adulthood with parenthood, demonstrating that for individuals with disabilities, child-freeness is not necessarily experienced as a deficit or deviation.

Most participants reported strong support among like-minded friends, with thirteen women noting that many of their peers were also childfree. Such networks provided a sense of validation and community. However, traces of expectation persisted: Linda (50 years old) described friends assuming she would eventually change her mind, while Anna (53 years old) noted curiosity about her choice. In contrast, Jennifer (35 years old) explained that her friends who were mothers never doubted the permanence of her decision. Marie (40 years old) highlighted a gendered dimension, observing acceptance from female friends but criticism from male peers. The persistence of subtle comments, indirect pressure, and gendered critique outlines how normative assumptions about motherhood continue to shape women's lived experiences.

> It's more the men who think it's unusual and what's wrong with you, isn't that the whole point and why did you want to get married if you didn't want to have children. The men in my group have gone on to have children but the women less so, which is quite interesting (Marie, 40 years old).

Friendships, whether childfree or not, were generally described as more supportive than family, as they are chosen relationships built on mutual respect. By contrast, families were more often sources of pressure. Overall, like-minded friendships provided the strongest validation of childfree choices. The findings of this study highlight the diverse ways in which women contribute to society beyond the sphere of motherhood. At the same time, the narratives reveal that societal prejudices toward childfree women persist within the Maltese context, despite broader shifts in contemporary attitudes.

> I would say from society more widely, I have been often asked questions… what's wrong with you, it's not normal, it's not natural. I have often been told that I would change my mind, not so much now though that I'm older, but in my twenties I was often told that I would change my mind and that I was too young…that I didn't know myself and that it's the most natural thing in the world and you'll meet someone and you'll really want a baby… I was told I'm selfish, you just think of yourself. Especially from my male friends and that all the reasons given are selfish and that it isn't the point of life. (Marie, 40 years old)

The sense of guilt on not pursuing motherhood, and how women are running out of time because of their 'biological clock' (Aponte, 2019) were discussed by participants. The narratives

reveal how societal norms continue to equate childfree choices with selfishness, framing women's pursuit of alternative life paths as a deviation from socially prescribed motherhood. Several participants internalised this label, describing themselves as "*selfish*" yet did so without remorse, suggesting a reframing of the term as a rejection of judgment rather than an admission of guilt. Notably, some participants expressed relief at reaching the end of their reproductive years, as this milestone alleviated external pressures to justify their decisions. Thus, while childfree women exercise agency, their freedom of choice remained shaped by complex negotiations with enduring cultural expectations.

A recurrent theme in the narratives concerns society's presumption that childfree women would eventually regret their decision. Yet, the accounts reveal a strikingly different reality: all fifteen participants asserted that they had never regretted their choice, and many had never experienced serious doubt about it. This is in line with Moore's (2021) study on questioning the pronatalist assumptions about future regret among childfree women. While some acknowledged moments of reflection under specific circumstances, these did not translate into regret. For instance, Abigail (36) described feelings of guilt, not from her own convictions, but from the weight of others' judgments, while Sharon (39) emphasised her voluntary decision yet expressed empathy for women who involuntarily remain childless. Sharon's reflections underscore that voluntarily and involuntarily childfree women share common struggles in navigating a society that continues to idealise motherhood as the pinnacle of womanhood.

Critically, these narratives highlight that regret is less a lived reality than a social projection imposed upon childfree women. Even if the possibility of regret exists, participants insisted that such risk is theirs alone to assume.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of childfree women in Malta, offering insight into how reproductive choices are negotiated within a social context shaped by pronatalist ideologies. While participants described their decisions to remain childfree as deliberate, reflective, and self-determined, the findings reveal that women's freedom of choice is neither absolute nor uncontested.

Participants reported experiencing subtle yet persistent forms of social judgement arising from externally imposed expectations of motherhood, consistent with the findings of Fidanci et al. (2024) on pronatalist norms. Such judgement manifested through assumptions of eventual regret, expectations that participants would "*change their minds*", and the moral framing of childlessness as a deviation from normative constructions of womanhood.

Importantly, the degree to which women experience freedom from reproductive pressure is not uniform. Participants' accounts highlight how intersecting factors, such as sexual identity, disability, and the perception of motherhood, mediate both the intensity and form of social expectations. While the exemption of women with disabilities from normative maternal

expectations emerged as a notable theme, this finding points to the need for more sustained theoretical and empirical engagement with the intersections of disability, embodiment, and reproductive norms in future research.

Participants articulated a diverse range of motivations for remaining childfree, outlining that the choice to live childfree cannot be reduced to a singular explanatory framework. These motivations included a desire for autonomy, resistance to the demands of a sacrificial or dependent lifestyle, health-related concerns, the physical implications of pregnancy, and formative observations of motherhood within families of origin. Consistent with Gillespie (2003) and earlier studies such as Houseknecht (1987), many participants attributed their decision to strong aspirations for autonomy and career progression. Crucially, participants did not dismiss or devalue motherhood as a life path for others, instead framing their decisions as personally meaningful choices rather than ideological opposition to maternal identities.

In line with existing research (Anisin, 2025; Donath, 2017; Fidanci et al., 2024; Rismarini & Adira, 2025), participants described actively their resistance to marginalisation by asserting personal agency and rearticulating their choices in ways that counter dominant pronatalist narratives. These include instance of negative social bias toward individuals who choose to remain childfree (Denson et al., 2025), stigma (Park, 2002) and strong cultural expectations around marriage and reproduction (Rismarini & Adira (2025) and possible regret they might experience in the future (Moore, 2021). Concerns about regret were largely absent in this study. While moments of reflection occurred, particularly in relation to extended family, these were framed as contemplative rather than destabilising. Given the average age of participants, the findings suggest that childfree identities are stable and enduring rather than provisional.

The study also situates individual experiences within the broader policy landscape. Recent family-supportive initiatives in Malta, such as expanded childcare provision, financial incentives, and flexible work arrangements, are framed as responses to persistently low fertility rates (Government of Malta, 2024, 2025). While these measures may reduce practical barriers to parenthood, they remain grounded in a pronatalist policy logic that prioritises reproduction and risks obscuring the structural and cultural conditions shaping reproductive decision-making. Consequently, such policies may coexist with, rather than challenge, the normative pressures that marginalise childfree women and other non-conforming life courses.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that childfree women in Malta lead meaningful and fulfilling lives grounded in autonomy, self-determination, and embodied self-knowledge, yet continue to navigate enduring social and institutional constraints. Their narratives challenge the conflation of womanhood with motherhood. Advancing gender equality therefore requires not only respect for women's reproductive choices but also a critical re-examination of the cultural norms, moral assumptions, and policy frameworks that continue to delimit women's autonomy over their lives.

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Research Article

A Place for Art: Art in the Museum and on the Body

Daniel Henry Solberg Bell

Correspondence: daniel.solberg-bell.22@um.edu.mt

Abstract

This article explores how spatial and contextual settings of art – specifically the museum and the human body – shape its perception, legitimacy and value. Drawing on sociological, aesthetic and spatial theory, particularly the work of Bourdieu, Dickie, Latour, and Zolberg, it compares how art is experienced and interpreted within institutional versus embodied spaces. Drawing on interviews with a museum curator and tattoo artist and a youth focus group, the analysis shows how art's value emerges through spatial placement, emotional response and audience interaction. By foregrounding embodiment, affect and place, it proposes a four-part model in which art is understood as; an object or experience (A), eliciting aesthetic response (B), in front of an audience (C), within a specific context (D). This dynamic framework captures how both elite and everyday forms of art acquire meaning, value and legitimacy. This article offers a comparative insight into how art is valued and legitimised across settings.

Keywords: art; aesthetics; legitimacy; spatial context; museums; tattoos

Introduction

Art is shaped by spatial and embodied context, yet this dimension is often overlooked. Whether encountered on a gallery wall (Figure 1) or a human arm (Figure 2), the setting is not a neutral backdrop but actively constructs value and interpretation. Through a sociological comparison of museum art and tattooing, this study examines how location shapes how art is seen, understood and for whom it is intended.

The guiding question is: how does context shape the perception and value of art in contemporary society? This involves interrogating how space, authority, embodiment and audience co-produce meaning and shape boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' art. Museums frame artworks through institutional authority and historical distance, whereas tattoos exist within personal, mobile and lived space. By placing these two forms of art side by side, this research uncovers how spatial environments not only frame but transform artistic meaning.

The comparative focus of this study emerged from academic inquiry and lived encounters with museum culture and tattooing. Museum visits highlighted the rituals, silence and authority

structures of institutional art, while later engagement with tattoo culture revealed tattoos as embodied expressions of memory, identity and social affiliation. These contrasting encounters prompted the central question of this research: if both forms evoke aesthetic response and cultural meaning, why are they treated differently and how is that distinction shaped by context?

***Figures 1 and 2**: Contrasting contexts: paintings in the museum and tattooed art on the body*

This comparison is supported by existing sociological literature which views art not as a static object, but as a relational phenomenon shaped by history, power and place. Zolberg (1990) argues that art must be understood within the institutional and social frameworks that grant it value, while Becker (1982) and Dickie (1974) explore how definitions of art arise through collective activity and institutional recognition. Tattoos, which were once stigmatised as markers of deviance (Sanders & Vail, 2008), now occupy a shifting space between marginal and mainstream, challenging traditional aesthetic hierarchies. As Atkinson (2003) and DeMello (2014) have shown, tattoos have undergone a cultural renaissance, emerging as legitimate artistic expressions rooted in the body and everyday life. Their increasing visibility raises important questions about how we assign value and legitimacy to different forms of art.

To explore these questions, this study draws on a multi-theoretical framework composed of four interrelated strands. First, the sociological construction of art is approached through Becker's concept of *art worlds*, Dickie's Institutional Theory, and Zolberg's (1990) analysis of cultural hierarchies. These theorists provide a foundation for understanding how museums operate as powerful arbiters of artistic legitimacy. Second, aesthetic theory, particularly Dewey's (1934) conception of art as experience, along with Herrero (2009) and De La Fuente's (2010) emphasis on affect and perception explains how value emerges through sensory and emotional engagement with art, regardless of form. Third, theories of embodiment and identity, drawn from Bourdieu (1984), Atkinson (2003) and DeMello (2014), help to illuminate how people's dispositions toward art – including their tastes, interpretations and behaviours – shape engagement across contexts. Within this lens, tattoos function not only as artistic acts but also as identity-making practices inscribed on the body. Finally, spatial theory, including Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005), placemaking (Courage, 2020) and sense of place (Redaelli, 2019), grounds the analysis in an understanding of how art is co-constituted by the physical and symbolic spaces it inhabits.

The research is based on a qualitative methodology combining elite interviews with a museum curator and a tattoo artist, a focus group with young adults, and observational and visual examples from personal encounters with both museum exhibits and tattoo culture. This methodological approach allows for a rich, comparative analysis of how different actors (curators, artists, wearers and viewers) interpret and assign meaning to art in divergent contexts.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing project of democratising art discourse by challenging static and hierarchical notions of value, legitimacy and artistic worth. It invites the reader to consider not only *what* art is, but *where* art is, and how that question alters our understanding of art's meaning and function.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding art's complexity across different spatial and embodied contexts requires a theoretical lens that is interdisciplinary and relational. The framework brings together four overlapping areas of theory: sociology of art, aesthetics, embodiment and spatial theory, to explore how meaning is co-produced in museum and tattoo contexts. Rather than treating art as a fixed object with universal qualities, this analysis positions it as a socially embedded practice shaped through networks of actors, spaces, bodies and institutions.

Art as Social Construction: Institutions, Hierarchies and Legitimacy

Sociological theories of art challenge the notion that artistic value arises from innate aesthetic superiority. Instead, they argue that what counts as art is constructed through institutional frameworks and cultural hierarchies. Becker's (1982) concept of the *art world* illustrates how artistic production and recognition emerge from collaborative systems involving artists, curators, audiences, funders and critics. Art, in Becker's view, is not created in isolation but through shared conventions, roles and negotiated meanings.

Expanding on this, Dickie's (1974) *Institutional Theory* identifies art as any human-made artifact presented for appreciation within an artworld system. Rather than evaluating an object's quality, Dickie offers criteria for identifying something as 'art' based on its institutional status. His five interrelated conditions; including the roles of artist, artifact, public and institutional systems, emphasise that classification and recognition are social acts, not aesthetic absolutes. This is particularly relevant when comparing museum works, which benefit from institutional validation, with tattoos, which often remain excluded from formal classifications.

Zolberg (1990) further interrogates the cultural hierarchies underpinning these classifications. She argues that fine art has historically been associated with elite institutions and specialised knowledge, while popular or commercial forms are often marginalised. However, tattooing – often assumed to fall within popular art – was not explicitly recognised within her classifications. This dichotomy reflects broader social stratifications, wherein symbolic capital is distributed unequally. DiMaggio (1987) reinforces this view by showing how elite institutions, such as museums and arts

councils, shape aesthetic categories and public tastes through their role as cultural gatekeepers. Together, these theorists highlight how legitimacy is conferred by social structures, making art a relational rather than intrinsic designation.

Aesthetic Theory: Emotion, Experience and Engagement

Where institutional theories account for legitimacy, aesthetic theory examines how value and meaning emerge through embodied, emotional engagement. Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience* offers a model for understanding how viewers interact with art in formal and informal settings. For Dewey, aesthetic value arises not from the object but from the sensory and affective response it evokes through an immersive, structured experience. The unity of perception, emotion and memory transforms everyday encounters into meaningful artistic events.

Herrero (2009) extends Dewey's view by describing artworks as "emotional objects" whose value is co-produced through affective response rather than market criteria such as rarity or authorship. Likewise, de la Fuente (2010), drawing on Gell, argues that artworks possess agency: they capture attention and provoke emotional reaction, functioning as active participants in social life rather than passive objects of interpretation.

This repositioning of art as relational and affective allows a broader understanding of what constitutes an aesthetic experience, whether gazing at a painting in a gallery or examining a tattoo on skin. Eldridge's (2003) tripartite model of representation (media, object, manner) further reinforces that all art forms aim to reflect, express, or reinterpret reality through distinct sensory modes. These aesthetic theories underscore that value is not inherent but emerges through context and interaction.

Embodiment and Identity: Taste, Habitus and the Inscribed Body

While aesthetic engagement is sensory, it is also shaped by the embodied social subject. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *habitus* offers a lens for understanding how individuals acquire dispositions that influence their capacity to interpret and appreciate art. Central to this is the notion of *taste*, which Bourdieu conceptualises not as a neutral or individual preference, but as a socially conditioned judgement shaped by one's position within the social field. Taste functions as a mechanism of distinction, marking boundaries between groups and legitimises certain cultural forms over others. What one finds beautiful, moving, or worthy of attention is deeply informed by accumulated cultural capital and learned sensibilities.

These embodied dispositions – posture, tone, gaze and comportment – are not merely individual quirks but cultivated through socialisation (Figure 4). Within the museum, these behaviours manifest as silent observation, reverent stillness and constrained movement practices that signal familiarity with the codes of legitimate culture. Such performances of taste reflect an internalised aesthetic orientation and function as markers of social class, reinforcing the museum as a space of distinction. Thus, aesthetic perception is never divorced from power; it is structured by and reproduces social hierarchies.

Shilling (2014) argues that bodies do not merely reflect social expectations but produce meaning through their practices. Museums therefore shape, and are shaped by, the bodily dispositions of their visitors. In contrast, tattoos represent an alternative embodiment of aesthetic engagement. Rather than appreciating art through disembodied spectatorship, tattooing inscribes the artwork into and through the body.

Figure 4*: Embodied performances of cultural capital in the museum (illustrating Bourdieu's notion of habitus and taste as markers of social distinction)*

Atkinson (2003) and DeMello (2014) highlight how tattooed bodies operate as autobiographical canvases, displaying identity, narrative and affiliation. These inscriptions challenge dominant aesthetic norms by collapsing distinctions between artist, artwork and audience. Tattoos, then, are not merely images on skin; they are lived, emotional and political performances of identity.

Spatial Theory: Place, Power and Relational Contexts

Spatial theory grounds this inquiry in the idea that space is not neutral but co-constitutive of meaning. Redaelli (2019) conceptualises space as a relational and emotional construct shaped through cultural practices and memory. Her notion of *third places* – social environments distinct from home (first place) and work (second place), where the physical and imaginary coexist – frames both museums and tattoo studios as meaningful sites where people gather, interact and construct shared or personal narratives (Figure 5). In these spaces, identity formation and symbolic communication are fostered through the interplay of setting, social relationships and cultural meaning. These are not just places where art is seen or made, but where it is anchored within socially embedded structures.

Figure 5: *The museum as a lived social space, where meaning emerges through the interaction between visitors, artworks and the spatial environment.*

Courage et al. (2020) and Catalani et al. (2018) add that placemaking is both a physical and interpretive act, driven by community involvement and identity construction. Theories of '*sense of place*' and '*place identity*' show how people become attached to environments that reflect or shape their self-conceptions (Proshansky et al., 1983). Museums often invite a collective historical identity rooted in nationhood or heritage, while tattoos foster individualised, mobile place-attachments inscribed on the skin.

Latour's (2005) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a bridge between embodiment and spatiality. ANT dissolves rigid distinctions between human and non-human actors, arguing that meaning emerges through dynamic networks of interaction. In a museum, this includes artworks and viewers as well as lighting, frames, signage and spatial layout (Figure 6). In tattooing, actors include the artist's hand, the machine, the skin and the narratives that infuse designs with meaning (Figure 7). These networks shape interpretation and legitimacy, demonstrating that neither space nor art is static, yet both are co-produced in real time.

Figure 6*: Museum architecture as actor (columns structuring how artworks are framed and experienced)*

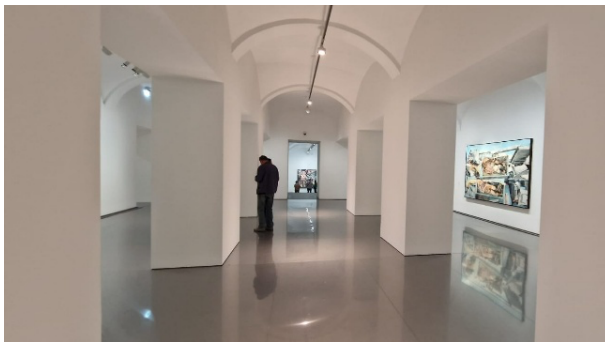


Figure 7: *Tattooing as network (artist, machine and body co-producing art in real time) (Campbell, 2021)*

What emerges across these strands is a view of art as contingent and relational, made meaningful through the networks in which it is situated. These theoretical perspectives collectively inform the analysis that follows, which examines how artistic meaning is produced across institutional and embodied spaces.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative framework to explore how the perception and value of art are shaped by spatial context. This approach elicits in-depth, narrative-based data that capture subjective interpretations, cultural nuances and the symbolic and material dimensions of space (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). This aligns with the study's exploratory focus on lived experience and context-bound meaning-making.

Data was collected through two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and a focus group incorporating photovoice activities. Two interviews were conducted with professionals in their fields: a museum curator from MUŻA, Malta's national art museum and a practising tattoo artist. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and was conducted in-person, in the participant's working environment. Neither participant was interviewed more than once, although follow-up clarification was conducted by email**.** The semi-structured format balanced thematic guidance with open-ended reflection, enabling participants to articulate their perspectives on the artistic process, audience interaction and spatial presentation.

The focus group consisted of eight university students aged 18–30 and was carried out in three stages. Prior to the meeting, participants completed an individual photovoice task, each submitting three images of tattoos they liked or disliked, along with brief explanations. This grounded the discussion in participants' own aesthetic and social contexts.

During the in-person session, the group first visited MUŻA, where they completed a parallel task: selecting three artworks from the museum collection and noting their reactions, including attention to placement, atmosphere and curatorial framing. This activity lasted approximately 60 minutes and was completed individually.

Afterwards, a facilitated discussion was held in a nearby venue and lasted about 90 minutes. The first half focused on tattoo images and the second on museum artworks, allowing participants to compare how value, meaning and legitimacy were assigned across embodied and institutional contexts. This structure enabled reflection on both content and setting, highlighting how aesthetic judgement is shaped by spatial experience.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used. Key informants (curator and tattooist) were selected based on their expertise and involvement in their respective fields. The focus group participants were recruited through social media and personal networks. Snowball sampling widened the pool of participants, though it risks limiting representational diversity (Seale, 2018). This approach was appropriate for a qualitative study prioritising depth over breadth.

Ethical procedures followed the guidelines of the University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: ARTS-2023-00255). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the research objectives, their right to withdraw and the handling of personal data. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms; professional titles were used for interviewees and colour-coded identifiers for focus group participants. Audio recordings were used for transcription and analysis, then deleted. Photovoice participants were instructed to avoid photographing identifiable individuals or copyrighted materials, in accordance with data protection protocols.

The data analysis followed a thematic approach based on Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase method. All interview and focus group transcripts were first transcribed verbatim, then read repeatedly to establish familiarity before initial codes were generated. Coding was conducted manually using an inductive strategy, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories that aligned with the six analytical sections presented below. Throughout the process, reflexive notes were kept acknowledging the interpretive role of the researcher and to ensure transparency in the analytical decisions.

Like all qualitative work, this research is limited in its capacity to generalise. The use of a small, non-random sample, shaped by snowball sampling, may have led to homogeneity in responses. The focus group structure may have influenced the openness of some individuals due to peer dynamics. The photovoice activity also required creative expression that may not have been comfortable for all. Reflexivity was employed to account for the subjectivity inherent in both the data and its interpretation.

Findings

1. What Counts as Art?: Definitions, Legitimacy and Boundaries

At the heart of the empirical material and broader debates lies a fundamental question: what counts as art and who has the authority to decide? This question is tied to processes of legitimacy and exclusion that determine what is recognised as "art" and what remains outside its boundaries.

In interviews, the curator initially avoids rigid definitions, suggesting instead that art is something one is "*passionate about*", blurring the line between work and identity. Yet this open interpretation is later nuanced by a return to institutional markers: "*It's all about the artist… you check if the artist is significant, if their works are represented in other museums... if the work has been published".* This aligns with Dickie's (1974) view that art is defined not by intrinsic qualities but by recognition within an authorised artworld network. In this model, legitimacy is granted externally, through gatekeeping structures that both validate and exclude.

In contrast, the tattoo artist offers a more democratised, embodied conception of art. For them, art is "*anything that evokes emotion in someone else… even a well-made painting, a performance, or a dish, if it gives nothing, is just [craft], not art*", and follows by "*There is this misconception that a tattoo should have a meaning. It doesn't have to*". This fluid approach challenges narratives

that tie artistic value to symbolism, complexity, or elite approval. It resonates with the affective turn in aesthetics, as described by De La Fuente (2010) and Herrero (2009), who argue that art's worth increasingly resides in its capacity to produce sensory and emotional responses rather than conform to institutional norms.

Focus group participants echoed this plurality. Some tattoos were discussed as deeply symbolic (e.g., semicolons representing resilience or "*Seek discomfort*" as a motivational mantra), while others were selected purely for aesthetic enjoyment, such as a chili pepper tattoo described as "*just something fun and small*".

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a dialog between institutionally conferred notions of art and more intimate, lived experiences of artistic value. The shifting boundaries reflect broader negotiations of cultural authority, emotional resonance and the power to define meaning itself.

2. Value: Emotional, Cultural and Symbolic Dimensions

Artistic value is rarely reducible to a single axis. Value emerges at the intersection of emotional resonance and cultural affiliation. Rather than being an objective measure, value is socially constructed, contextual, and negotiated between creator, audience and broader cultural codes (Crippen, 2014; Zolberg, 1990).

In the museum context, the curator describes value as; "*a big word which encompasses so many aspects".* They describe value as dependent on historical relevance and institutional validation. Recognition of the artist's name, the artwork's presence in other museum collections and its appearance in publications function as markers of worth. This reflects the idea that the *artist's* accumulated cultural capital – gained through education, exhibition history and symbolic recognition – enhances the perceived legitimacy and value of their work (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet, the curator also acknowledges personal and affective forms of value. When recounting a gift of two pocket-sized images of Jesus Christ, objects with no economic or artistic prestige, they state: "*They hold personal value for me, and I keep them with me every day".* This juxtaposition reflects Herrero's (2009) concept of "*emotional objects*", whose significance arises not from institutional endorsement but from lived experience, memory and affective attachment.

These personal dimensions were echoed strongly in both the tattoo artist's reflections and the focus group. The tattoo artist plainly states, "*It's the person that owns the art who gives it value… not the monetary value, but what they think about it".* This reframes value as internal and experiential, in line with Dewey's (1934) assertion that art's meaning emerges through its integration into one's life narrative. Many tattoos described by participants commemorate emotional turning points and become symbolic artefacts embedded with memory and transformation. One participant's tattoo covering a surgical scar featured the sun and moon alongside a quote about darkness and light (Figure 8). This inscription functions as both aesthetic intervention and therapeutic reclaiming of the body.

Figure 8: *Sun and moon tattoo over a surgical scar – transforming trauma into healing and aesthetic meaning.*

Cultural value also featured prominently. Tattoos were often tied to heritage, subcultural, or aesthetic taste. This reflects how value is layered through personal, social and cultural dimensions, consistent with Bourdieu's model of taste as a socialised practice. Similarly, the museumgoers did not always value complexity or authorship; one participant celebrated a childlike drawing for its innocence and emotional sincerity: "*It's so childish and I'm so happy that it's in this official space".*

Both contexts challenge the idea that symbolic meaning is required for emotional or aesthetic value. Several participants and the tattooist emphasised that some tattoos are "*just for decoration*" appreciated for visual form and technical skill alone. This parallels how museum visitors admire craftsmanship regardless of conceptual depth. What emerges is not a singular definition of value, but negotiations shaped by who is involved, where art is encountered and how it is lived; a dynamic that also structures artist–audience relationships explored in the next section.

3. The Artist and the Audience: Visibility, Interaction and Intimacy

The relationship between artist and audience reveals a powerful contrast between museum art and tattooing, not only in medium and setting but also in how power, visibility and interaction is structured. While museums typically preserve a distance between creator and observer, tattooing collapses this divide, rendering the artistic process intimate, co-produced and emotionally charged.

In institutional settings, the artist is often absent physically and symbolically. As the curator candidly remarks, "*In the contemporary art sector, it's all about the manager, the marketer and the people looking after the artists*". Here, the museum becomes the primary mediator, shaping both the presentation and interpretation. Curators select and frame pieces according to institutional priorities pedagogy, preservation and prestige, leaving limited space for direct engagement between creator and audience. Even when attempts at interaction exist, it is constrained by sanctioned channels such as guided tours, wall texts, or digital apps.

Yet, moments of interaction can subvert these hierarchies. One focus group participant describes a museum installation that invited visitors to draw on a digital screen beside a classical sculpture (Figure 9). The experience revealed both admiration and self-doubt: "*You're told very quickly that you're trash*". This moment transformed the viewer into a (failed) creator, reinforcing appreciation for the artist's skill while demonstrating how participatory design can destabilise passive consumption.

Figure 9: *Interactive installation – from viewers to creators*

Unlike the distanced encounter of museum viewing, tattooing unfolds as a shared interaction shaped by dialogue, touch and emotional presence. The tattooist describes the practice as emotionally attuned: "*Usually, people are quite anxious to get their tattoo. By providing a setting that is comfortable, easy and private... you get that feeling of a safe space".* The tattoo session becomes a shared experience; therapeutic, confessional and tactile. This reflects Becker's (1982) understanding of the *art world* as a cooperative network rather than a single isolated creator, positioning tattooing as a clearer example of collective artmaking than the museum model.

However, the artist–audience relationship in tattooing operates across two stages. During the tattoo process, the audience is primarily the wearer, who experiences the artwork being created in real time through pain, trust and intimacy. Once healed, it enters a second phase of public consumption, where the audience shifts to strangers, acquaintances, or social groups who encounter the tattoo on the body without the artist present. Thus, tattoos move from a co-produced private artwork to a publicly visible aesthetic object, creating two different forms of spectatorship – one embodied and relational, the other social and observational.

Focus group participants underscored this intimacy. One participant notes that "*Maybe the artist is a relative or a friend of yours, or someone who represents something important to you*". Tattoos were described as meaningful not only for their visual form but also for who enacted them. Another participant noted, *"Having it done by my cousin made it feel even more special",* after

memorialising their grandmother with a butterfly tattoo (Figure 10). The relationship between artist and wearer thus becomes part of the artwork, embedded in its origin story and lived significance.

Figure 10: *'Butterflies' tattoo for a late grandmother, inked by a cousin.*

Furthermore, in the second stage, the boundaries between creator, canvas and audience blur in the tattoo domain. The wearer becomes both the bearer and the public display of the art. Tattoos are not housed in frames but walk through cafés, classrooms and conversations, generating spontaneous encounters and interpretations. As Herrero (2009) suggests, this affective co-presence transforms the viewer into a participant, with interpretation occurring in real-time and in close proximity.

Ultimately, the divergence in artist–audience dynamics reflects broader aesthetic and cultural logics. Museums maintain a vertical hierarchy rooted in expertise and institutional framing; tattoos embody a horizontal model of co-authorship, grounded in trust, presence and relational meaning-making. Each offers different modes of artistic exchange, one governed by curation, the other by connection.

4. Space and Context: Museum Walls vs. Human Skin

Space plays an active role in shaping how art is experienced and valued. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and spatial theory (Proshansky et al., 1983), the contrast between institutional and embodied art spaces highlights how environment co-produces aesthetic response and social legitimacy.

The curator notes that artworks "*need to be kept in a specific environment to ensure they don't deteriorate too quickly… we can't afford that*", illustrating how museums treat space as a controlled environment rather than a neutral backdrop. In this context, space is curated not only for preservation, but also to guide behaviour, modulate response and reinforce institutional authority. Focus group participants frequently noted how spatial arrangements influenced their engagement. Several remarked on artworks placed in corners or dimly lit areas, describing them as overlooked

or undervalued. One participant initially mistook a humidifier for an artwork (Figure 11), a misrecognition that underscored how peripheral placement can diminish perceived legitimacy:

> I thought the humidifier was the artwork at first -it was so tucked away in the corner, in the dark. It didn't feel important and I think that says something about how it was valued. Compared to the piece in the centre, this one felt more like a random object than something to be celebrated.

These spatial cues form part of a visual hierarchy that shapes what is noticed, admired, or ignored.

Figure 11: *Modern artwork misread as humidifiers – highlighting spatial cues in legitimacy.*

Another participant recounted feeling overwhelmed and alienated when encountering a grand display of classical busts above a staircase (Figure 12). Despite recognising their technical beauty, the spatial symbolism – pedestals, symmetry, elevation – communicated elitism and exclusion:

> I hate it…I was so intimidated. I didn't know who these people were… the way they were displayed made me feel like I had to bow down to them. I thought; why are you here? Who invited you? But at the same time, I had this feeling of, who invited me? I felt like I wasn't worthy to be there.

Such reactions reflect Proshansky's notion of *place identity*, where environments evoke emotional and cognitive responses that mediate belonging. Even in more open-plan, modern institutions like MUŻA, the tension between inclusion and authority persists.

Figure 12: *Classical busts on pedestals – embodying hierarchy, distance and exclusion.*

In contrast, tattooing unfolds within different spatial logics, experienced through the body, the studio and the street. Tattoos are not placed on a static wall but on a mobile, aging, breathing surface. As the tattoo artist explains, spatial choices are not arbitrary: "*You have to follow the lines and shapes of the body… it's not a canvas or paper – it's skin, which is alive and changes*". This dynamic relationship introduces a temporal dimension absent in the museum: the tattoo moves, stretches and fades, evolving with the person who wears it. Rather than resisting change, the artist embraces it: "*I love that the tattoo changes… it's very silly to try to go against that*".

The tattoo studio is framed as a space of intimacy and safety; private, emotionally charged and interactive. The artwork does not remain confined to this space. Once healed, it enters everyday social life, carried on the body and exposed to selective visibility. Participants noted that tattoos are positioned deliberately, sometimes concealed from family, sometimes displayed to signal identity or invite interaction. A participants shared "*I placed my first tattoo here [forearm] so I could cover it with my sleeve as well, because my parents didn't know about it".* In this way, the body becomes both the site and medium of exhibition, with skin operating as a mobile, lived surface of meaning.

The comparison shows that space does not simply contain art but actively shapes what it becomes. In museums, space stabilises meaning through preservation, distance and institutional framing. Tattoos, by contrast, are inseparable from the living body, creating art that is mobile, intimate and subject to change over time. These distinct spatial economies – one anchored in institutional legibility, the other in corporeal immediacy – shape how art is created, valued and remembered.

5. Identity and Embodiment: Art as Self-Narrative

Art does not simply express identity; it participates in producing and performing it. In both museum settings and tattoo practices, the construction of self is mediated through art, yet the modes and intensities of this differ. While museums frame identity through collective, historical, or curated narratives, tattooing enables a more immediate, personal and embodied articulation of the self. As the empirical data suggest, tattoos are not only expressions of identity, but also tools through which identity is lived, remembered and remade on the skin.

For the museum curator, identity emerged through a long-standing relationship with the institutional art world. They describe their curatorial journey as shaped by familial influence, cultural capital and a historical moment in Malta when curatorship was still emergent: "*It's not just work, it's part of who I am*". Their account demonstrates how identity in the museum field is not simply chosen, but cultivated over time through access, education and institutional embedding; what Bourdieu (1984) terms habitus.

However, identity within the museum is typically presented through layers of mediation. Artworks are framed through labels, catalogues and institutional narratives, often distancing the viewer from the artist's original intent or personal story. The observer's encounter with art is interpretive, shaped by curatorial framing, academic discourse and spatial arrangement. As such, identity in museum contexts often operates as a cultural script, available for contemplation, but not for co-authorship.

Tattoos, on the other hand, collapse this distance. The tattoo artist describes the practice as deeply personal and frequently therapeutic: "*Sometimes tattoos mark important events in your life... a particular moment like an accident that you want to immortalise on your skin*". Participants reinforced this biographical dimension, describing tattoos as "*chapters*" or "*journals*" that visualise their emotional and psychological landscapes. One participant, for instance, placed tattoos on parts of their body they once felt uncomfortable with, transforming spaces of insecurity into sites of empowerment: *"I place the tattoos in spots where I felt uncomfortable with previously, to sort of cover that or change my perception of my own body*". Another participant captured the relational nature of this process, remarking, "*It's something that's part of you, but someone else made it for you*". The tattoo is therefore both self-authored and co-authored, blurring the line between personal identity and shared creative labour.

This dual function – being visible to others and meaningful to the self – renders tattoos especially potent as identity artefacts. They operate simultaneously on public and private registers. Tattoos therefore function as both self-expression and social signal, with placement shaping whether they remain intimate or become public.

Cultural identity was also expressed through tattoos, with participants drawing on migration histories, national symbols and subcultural references – from Finnish queer iconography to Japanese Yakuza motifs. These designs situate tattoos not only as personal markers but as expressions of belonging within wider cultural and geographic narratives. As Atkinson (2003) and

DeMello (2014) note, tattooing often mediates the tension between individuality and collective identity, allowing the wearer to resist and participate in dominant cultural norms.

In sum, tattooing reveals identity as a dynamic, situated and embodied process. Where museum art invites viewers to reflect on curated representations of identity, tattoos offer an unmediated, lived inscription of self. They assert authorship in flesh and time, granting individuals not only the right to display who they are, but to continually redefine it.

6. Evolving Legitimacy: From Margins to Mainstream

Legitimacy is not an intrinsic property of art but a socially negotiated status that changes over time. Both museum art and tattooing have undergone shifts in recognition – though along different trajectories – shaped by institutional authority, media visibility and cultural discourse.

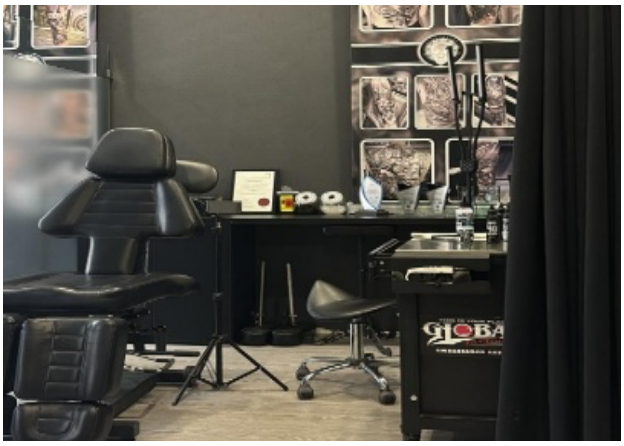
Museums, once associated with exclusivity and elite cultural distinction, have increasingly adopted the language of accessibility and public relevance. As the curator reflects, "*in the past, museums were places for the few, not the many*", a stance gradually eroded since the 1970s. The curator also notes, "*We want museums to feel like gardens or parks*" (Figure 13). Yet despite these gestures toward democratisation, preservation demands still dictate climate control, display barriers and interpretive signage. Thus, legitimacy within the museum remains tied to established criteria: provenance, publication, curatorial selection and the cultural capital of the artist. Even as the audience widens, the mechanisms that determine what *counts* as art continue to rely on hierarchical structures of validation.

Tattooing has travelled a different path. Once stigmatised as a mark of deviance or subcultural resistance, it is now broadly accepted as a form of aesthetic self-expression. The tattoo artist credits popular media for accelerating this shift: "*TV programs we had in the early 2000s, like Miami Ink... showed that tattoos have their stories and meanings, so they became mainstream*". But the shift is not merely representational. As Vail (2008) and Kosut (2015) show, tattoo communities have redefined the practice as art – through conventions, collector culture and the transformation of tattoo "shops" into curated "studios" resembling miniature galleries (Figure 14). The growing use of the term *body art* aligns tattooing with the evaluative language of fine art, legitimising it through criteria such as linework, composition and style.

Focus group reflections confirm this mainstreaming but also expose its limits. While younger generations treat tattoos as culturally normative, participants still noted contexts – workplaces, older relatives, formal settings – where visible tattoos remain socially risky. As Thompson (2015) argues, the tattooed body has shifted from signalling deviance to performing a stylised self, yet this transition remains uneven and contested.

Importantly, legitimacy is not only negotiated against the outside world but also *within* tattoo culture. Participants drew boundaries between tattoos seen as meaningful and those dismissed as 'basic,' 'trendy,' or copied from Pinterest, mirroring distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art in the museum world. Even within a democratised medium, hierarchies of authenticity persist.

Figure 13 and 14: *MUŻA courtyard – opening museums to public space; Tattoo studio – reframing the 'shop' as an art space.*



Together, the cases of museums and tattoos show that legitimacy is not granted once and for all but continually produced through networks of recognition, circulation and value-making. What enters the museum – and what enters the skin – are both subject to shifting cultural negotiations over who has the authority to define art.

Discussion and conclusion

This article examined how artistic meaning, value and legitimacy shift when art is encountered in two sites: the museum and the tattooed body. Rather than treating these as separate cultural spheres – one institutional, one everyday – the study demonstrates that the same sociological mechanisms operate across both, but are differently emphasised depending on context. By comparing museum artworks and tattoos, the analysis reveals how art is defined not by medium or tradition, but by the relational arrangements through which it is made meaningful: the interaction between object, audience, space and emotional or interpretive response.

The comparison across the six themes demonstrates that what counts as art is not fixed, but negotiated through overlapping systems of expertise, affect and social recognition. Institutional definitions in the museum echo Becker's (1982) and Dickie's (1974) claims that art status is conferred through authorised networks, while tattooing supports Herrero's (2009) and de la Fuente's (2010) argument that affective response can function as a criterion for artistic legitimacy. In terms of value, museum artworks accumulate worth through cultural capital and circulation, consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) analysis, whereas tattoo value operates through personal narrative and embodied meaning-making, resonating with Dewey's (1934) and Zolberg's (1990) accounts of experiential valuation. The artist–audience dynamic reflects Becker's (1982) model of art as a collective process: museums preserve hierarchical separation, while tattooing enacts a horizontal, relational authorship grounded in co-presence and trust. Regarding space, the museum reproduces what Redaelli (2019) and Latour (2005) describe as spatially curated authority, whereas

tattoos produce a mobile, lived art space on the body itself. Identity also diverges: museum art represents identity through collective narrative, while tattoos perform identity in line with Shilling's (2003) body-as-project and Thompson's (2015) view of body art as agentive inscription. Finally, legitimacy emerges through networks in both settings, but while museums rely on institutional power (DiMaggio, 1987), tattoos negotiate it through shifting norms and everyday recognition.

Taken together, these findings support the argument that art is best understood not as an intrinsic category but as a relational process. The study's four-part model – art object, aesthetic response, audience and spatial arena – offers a way of analysing this process without reproducing hierarchies between elite and popular forms. What changes between the museum and the tattoo is not the structure of meaning-making, but the distribution of power within it. Museums privilege institutional authority, professional curation and historical distance; tattoos foreground immediacy, intimacy and embodied authorship. Both operate as art worlds, but with different centres of gravity.

This relational understanding of art reframes debates in the sociology of culture. Whereas much prior scholarship treats museum art and tattooing as separate cultural fields (Atkinson, 2003; Hanquinet, 2013; Kosut, 2008), this study compares them directly and shows their shared logics of value, negotiation and spectatorship. The findings extend Redaelli's (2019) work on "third places" for art by demonstrating that tattoos function not only as mobile artworks but as continuously re-situated aesthetic encounters embedded in daily life. Likewise, while Becker (1982) conceptualises art as collective action, the tattoo process offers a vivid example of co-authorship in practice – one in which artist, wearer and future viewers are materially implicated in the work's meaning.

The comparison also exposes two trajectories of legitimacy. Museums are expanding access while retaining curatorial authority; tattoos have gained social acceptance while still facing selective stigma, especially across generations and professions. Yet both remain shaped by boundary-drawing. Just as museums distinguish between 'masterpieces' and 'minor works' tattoo communities differentiate between meaningful, custom pieces and mass-produced flash designs. Legitimacy is not a property of institutions alone but a recurring cultural practice that operates at multiple scales.

There are limitations to this study. The sample is small and geographically specific, drawing on Malta as a cultural setting where Catholic heritage, postcolonial identity and contemporary art policy intersect. Additional work could test the relational model across other sites – street art, digital art, religious iconography, festival art – where context similarly alters meaning. Mixed-methods or longitudinal research would help examine how art's value changes over time, particularly in aging tattoos or shifting museum fashions.

Nonetheless, the findings make two central contributions. First, they demonstrate empirically that context is not a background variable in art perception, but a constitutive dimension of meaning-making. Second, they argue for a more horizontal view of artistic legitimacy, one that

recognises embodied and everyday art practices as analytically equal to institutional ones rather than derivative or inferior.

If art happens in the encounter – between object, body and space – then the museum wall and the tattooed arm are not opposing cultural territories, but different configurations of the same interpretive process. Recognising this opens the door for a more plural sociology of art, one that moves beyond medium-based distinctions and focuses on how art is lived, shared, and made meaningful across the spectrum of cultural life.

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Research Article

For a global sense of place: Beyond 'native' and 'migrant' in St Joseph High Road, Ħamrun, Malta

Godfrey Baldacchino, Julian Axisa, Marlena Abela, Francesca Bartolo, Luigi Busuttil, Isaac Caruana, Martina Debattista, Chanelle Hili, Ylenia Maria Mifsud, Renata Antonella Romano. Rosaya Vella, and Lola Venables Morrison

Correspondence: godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt

Abstract

A particularly busy main road in the central town of Ħamrun (population: 10,500), exemplifies an intricate coming together of the local and the global in contemporary Malta. Here, commercial and other service outlets have overtaken residential units; and as the Maltese-born population ages and moves out, migrants have moved in. The names and labour force of many retail outlets now express national identities beyond Malta. Shop owners, managers and workers who are not Maltese-born weave generally uplifting narratives of achieving security and success in Malta, offering testimonials of resilience and hope. In contrast, the native-born rue their current predicament, and speak nostalgically about a mythic past. There are also differences within 'native' and within 'immigrant' groups; and there is evidence of locals working with immigrants, and vice-versa, suggesting some assimilation and integration. This article presents a particular street as redolent of experiences and articulations that are constructed and consumed within, between and across 'native' and 'migrant' subjectivities. It is inspired by Doreen Massey's poignant reflections on Kilburn Road, London, and is based on the physical navigation on foot of St Joseph High Road, Ħamrun**,** on a Saturday in November 2024 by a class of 11 University of Malta sociology students and their professor.

Keywords: commercial outlets; diversity; Ħamrun; house names; Malta; migrants; native born; progress; sense of place; St Joseph High Road

Introduction

> "Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations; but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be *the street*, or a region or even a continent" (Massey, 1994, p. 155; our emphasis).

Places are not containers, attributed with a fixed or coherent identity, merely 'made' by virtue of the physical area that they occupy or delineate. Rather, they are "centres of meaning" and "fields of care" (Cresswell, 2002): defined and imbued with multiple meanings by different

social groups and over time. A place is "a crossroads, a particular point of intersection of forces coming from many directions and distances" (Solnit, 2007, p. 1). Places are thus made and remade, (re)imagined, contested and (re)configured by multiple users and actors. Places are "full of memories and expectations, old things and new things, the familiar and the strange, and much more besides. What else is capable of this massively diversified holding action?" (Casey, 1996, p. 24).

Places have become consumed and articulated via their increased (and disrupted) connections to so many different other places and networks around the globe, socially (such as via diasporic links and social media), economically (such as via supply chains) and financially (such as via cryptocurrencies) (e.g., Free & Hecimovic, 2021; Kang, 2009). A growing visibility of migrants in daily life is one outcome of such trans-border articulations, raising questions about various forms of cohabitation (de Wenden, 2022, p. 11). Yet, places remain keenly local in their diverse global repertoire. And, in assembling the global in the local, or vice versa, places can avoid being feared, despised or lamented as poor and superficial versions and vestiges of what they have replaced. They can be what Massey (1994) has called "progressive": manifesting a new, differently rich, global sense of locality.

With the contemporary local hopelessly entangled with the turbulent and shifting global, the same assemblage would have actants working to lock and stabilise its identity (nostalgic 'locals', for example); as well as others pushing it towards change and to transform itself into a different assemblage altogether: with immigrants moving in and replacing the locals, who die off or move out, for example (DeLanda, 2006). The consequent dislocations, discontinuities and disjunctures can be seen to continually destabilise places; but they can also be understood as repurposing them, assigning them a new vitality and meaning (Price, 2004).

Different tales are thus crafted and (re)told; and their meanings wobble, morph and shift over time. Identities are made and re-made, discursively (Torkington, 2012). It would be a shame to essentialise such stories within a binary straitjacket: those of 'locals', waxing nostalgic about the 'good old days' and the life that has been lost; and those of foreigners, excited about starting new lives.

Perhaps a measure of affinity between such two idealised 'solitudes' –and the yank of territorialisation versus de/re-territorialisation (DeLanda, 2006, p.13) – is whether, how much and in what way(s) do their actors and proponents 'cross over' and become 'glocal' (Beyer, 2007), imbricated in each others' affairs. This can happen, for example, with the active presence and employment of foreign workers in locally-owned and/or run outlets; and with the presence and engagement of local workers in foreign-owned and/or run outlets. Thus: "glocalisation allows for a twofold conception of cosmopolitanism: first, as situational 'openness' within local contexts and, second, as detachment from local ties", as would be manifest in the language, culture and origin of people and the products that they sell and trade (Roudometof, 2005, p. 113).

Organisation of the text

This paper proceeds by first describing the locality of Ħamrun and its main thoroughfare, St Joseph High Road, in a context of changing demographics. Next is a review of the research

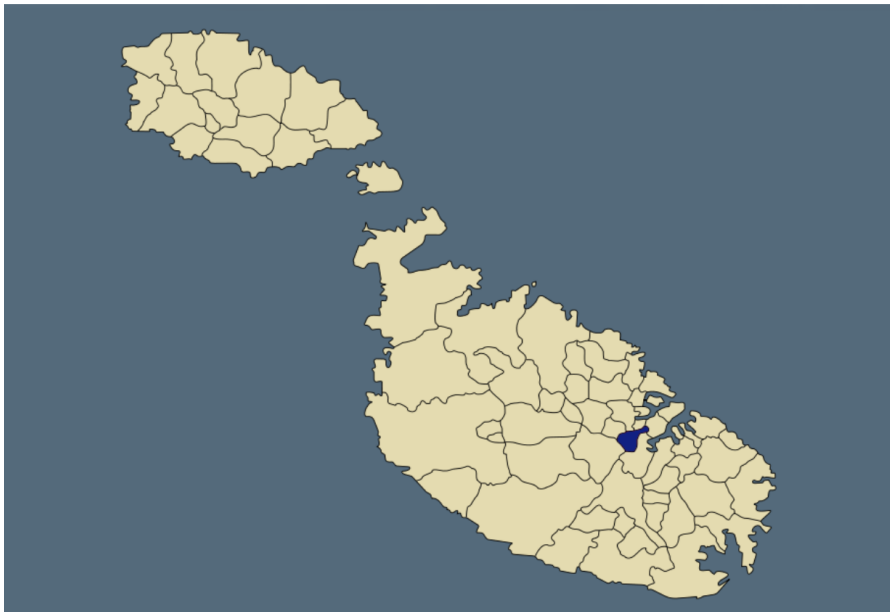
design and the methodological basis for the collection of the 'street-specific data' that serves as the basis to the subsequent analysis. The data comes in three formats: (1) statistics pertaining to the nature of housing stock and whether and how it is in use; (2) information about the names of residential and commercial outlets; and (3) comments and fieldnotes reported from casual conversations engaged with those adults who happened to be on St Joseph High Road at the time of the fieldwork.

Statistical data gleaned from Population Censuses and Electoral Registers helps to situate Ħamrun as an urban, high-population density locale. Just like other parts of Malta, recent years have seen an accelerated decline in the number of Malta-born residents and their replacement by immigrants. The streetscape manifests this transformation, with so many retail outlets whose 'national identity' is also sported in their name.

It is for such reasons that the focus of the paper then shifts to the names of residences and commercial outlets. Both the house names and the shop names tell stories; they communicate identities to passers-by. Shop names are a familiar sight all over the world; but house names are a rather exotic pastime that gripped twentieth century Malta, especially during the decades of expansion of owner-occupied buildings (Baldacchino et al., 2023). The names of houses and shops constitute low-hanging fruit in sociological research in the Maltese Islands, since they are public and patently visible. They are here examined to suggest and illustrate some of the diversity of the street under study.

Next and lastly is a 'light touch' examination of the people behind these names of homes and outlets: residents, owners, managers and other workers, customers and clients, men and women, young and old, all somehow active on St Joseph High Road on a particular November morning. Their statements offer interesting insights on their assessment of the changes underway in this street. Meanwhile, nativist references to 'national identity' are only resorted to by a fraction of Maltese-language respondents.

Figure 1: *Location of Ħamrun in the Maltese Islands (marked in blue)*



Source: Ħamrun Local Council Website

Ħamrun

Ħamrun is a locality in central Malta, hemmed in by Marsa, Pietà, Santa Venera and Qormi (see Figure 1). It is now a densely built-up urban area of 1.1 km^2 which offers no room for horizontal settlement expansion. Its population is 10,514, according to the latest 2021 Census, almost as much as it was in 1921 (NSO, 2022, p. 38, Table 3). There is only one public square. There are no other open public spaces such as playing fields, or gardens. So it should come as no surprise that population density in Ħamrun is more than four times the national average: 8,400 in Ħamrun versus 2,000 persons per km^2 nationally (computed from NSO, 2022).

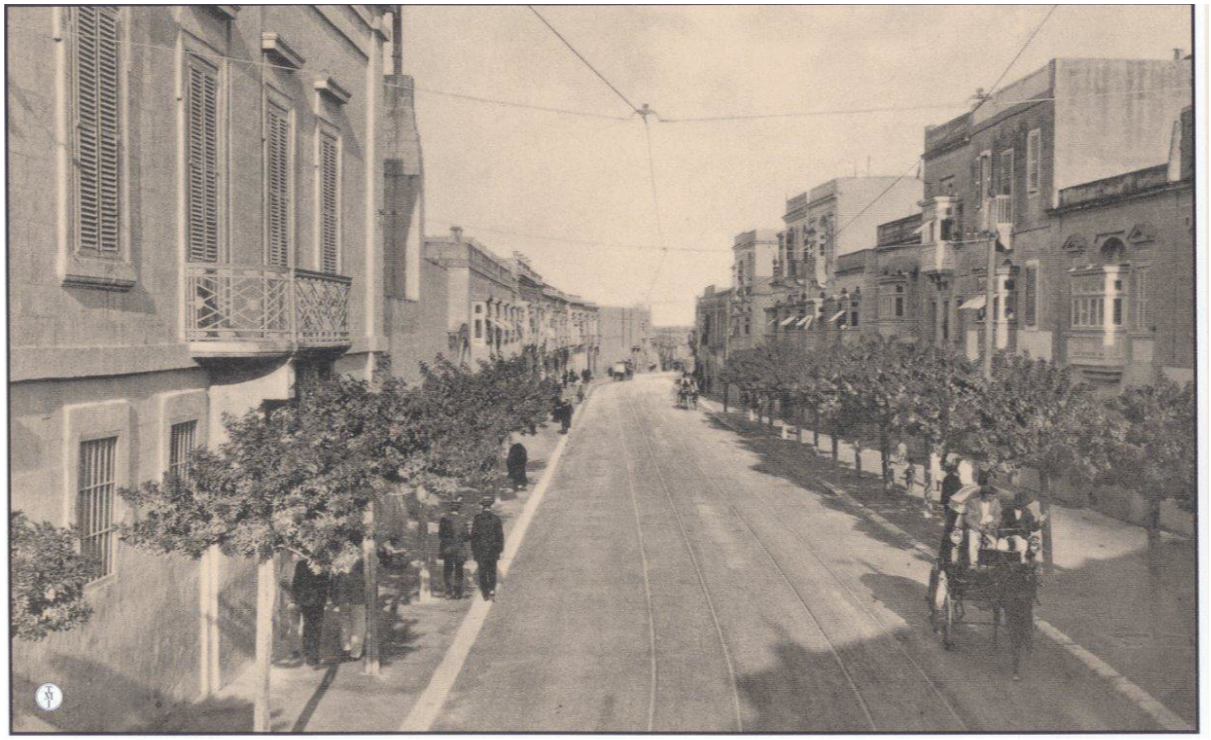
Ħamrun has undergone major changes in recent years, given the sharp rise in the cost of rental accommodations in surrounding localities such as Birkirkara or Valletta. The average monthly rents in the locality remain relatively low by nationwide standards: €6.45/m^2, compared to €12.15/m^2 in B'Kara and a staggering €87.70/m^2 for Valletta (Indomio, 2025); and €943 for Ħamrun, compared to €1,214 in Gżira and €1,048 in B'Kara (Housing Authority, 2025). Such, more affordable, rental rates attract less affluent people from various migrant communities, who then patronise and make use of its shops, streets and other private and public spaces; as residents and consumers, as workers, investors, entrepreneurs and employers (Indomio, 2025). This influx of migrants has been especially significant to this locality, turning Ħamrun into what Fenster (2004) would describe as an 'ethno-town'. In such towns, ethnic (non-Maltese) stores are ubiquitous and emblematic: they constitute a diverse range of shops and retail outlets providing ethnic coffee, spices, snacks and other cuisine items, as well as clothing and home accessories from, or reminiscent of, the countries or regions of origin of the migrants now living in the area, who would presumably demand, appreciate and consume such commodities. Thus, immigrants inject new colour and vitality, a renewed sense of vigour, enterprise, economic dynamism and life into the locality, with the consequent appropriation, or sharing, of public and private spaces (Grech Mallia, 2021, p. 39). The richly diverse smellscape wafting out of the many shops on the main street of Ħamrun is matched by the equally varied smells of deodorants and perfumes amongst the pedestrians.

St Joseph High Road

Just over one kilometre long, St. Joseph High Road – *Triq il-Kbira San Ġużepp,* in Maltese – is the main thoroughfare and commercial district that serves as the vibrant core of the locality of Ħamrun. The road connects Valletta and its suburbs to Santa Venera (where St Joseph High Road continues for another 0.5 km), Birkirkara, Mrieħel, Attard and the roads to Rabat and beyond. St Joseph High Road is a noisy and busy street, with regular traffic congestion (and concomitant air pollution), especially at peak hours.

St Joseph High Road is densely built and populated. Also referred to as *Strada Rjali* (Kingsway), it was an upscale neighbourhood in the early 20th century, with trees lining the street and served by a tram service (Figure 2). No less than five cinemas operated on the same street: the Odeon, Trianon, Radio City, Rex and Hollywood (the last occupying the site of the current Daniel's Mall) (Cachia, 2024).

Figure 2: *Section of St Joseph High Road in the 1920s, showing stately homes, trees and the tram line*

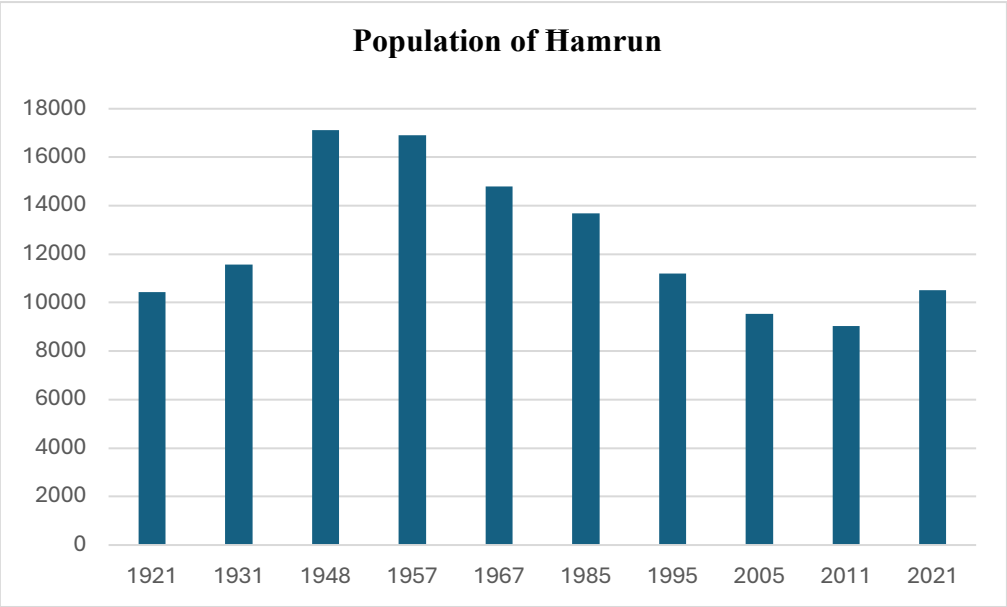


Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/bomba08/5333518181

Some 26,000 persons lived here temporarily during the Second World War (1940-3), often in cramped conditions. The 1948 census recorded Ħamrun's highest ever resident population: 17,124 (NSO, 2022, p. 19). The population has been sliding since, and the pattern has only been reversed in the last few years, mainly thanks to immigrants moving in (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

Table 1 and Figure 3: *Population of Ħamrun, 1921-2021*

Year	Population
1921	10434
1931	11580
1948	17124
1957	16895
1967	14787
1985	13682
1995	11195
2005	9541
2011	9043
2021	10514



Sources: National Census Exercises; NSO (2022, p. 38, Table 3).

Dwellings are closely built, one next to the other, and there is now just one public open area – Fra Diegu Square – and the only one noticeably vacant plot along this whole stretch of road, close to the confines with Santa Venera, is under construction. The streetscape consists mainly of stately three-storey buildings, with impressively carved stone facades, many of which have seen better times. Most residences, built around a century ago, remain standing; but many are now vacant or uninhabited, and have evident signs of neglect and abandonment. The Planning Authority (PA) notices affixed to many front doors attest to renovations underway, mainly to convert spaces to rental accommodation or commercial/ office space. Judging from the names on these PA applications, ownership of these buildings remains firmly in the hands of the native-born Maltese. Busuttil (2003) could state that the commerce-related hustle and bustle of the street enabled "people from all over the island [to] engage themselves in shopping and other activities" (p. 44). The expansion in commercial and retail outlets is matched by a decline in residential numbers: as is evident by comparing electoral registers.

Busuttil (2003) noted a fixed stock of 493 units along St Joseph High Road; a total number that has not changed by much over decades. But the residential-commercial mix in land use *has* changed, and has recently stabilised. Residential properties declined from 391 in 1952 to 232 in 2002; while non-residential (mainly commercial) properties increased from 102 to 261 in the same period (Busuttil, 2003, p. 49). By 2024, no shift in this residential-commercial mix could be observed, suggesting a saturation effect. On fieldwork day, 156 residential units (terraced houses, maisonettes, apartment blocks) and 219 commercial and other outlets were observed operating on St Joseph High Road; with another 76 residences and 42 outlets not in use. The latter were observed in various stages of abandon and neglect or renovation.

We also compared three general election electoral registers: those for April 1960, April 2002 and October 2024 (see Table 2). The data confirms the general decline of the voting – and therefore mainly Maltese born – population of Ħamrun. It also shows a steeper decline of such voters on St Joseph High Road, which has crashed by almost two-thirds in 64 years, indicative of how the extant residential space here is largely being taken up by migrants, who mostly lack

voting rights, especially for general elections. Indeed, there is now a difference of around 2,600 persons between the voting and the official resident population of Ħamrun (7,902 versus 10,514). In any case, various foreign-born residents of Ħamrun *have* secured voting rights, as the 2024 electoral register suggests.

Table 2: *Voters in General Elections from Ħamrun and St Joseph High Road: 1960, 2002-2024*

Electoral Register	Electoral District including Ħamrun	Total Voters from Ħamrun	Total Voters from St Joseph High Road	Names of the First Two Voters from St Joseph High Road on the Register	Names of the Last Two Voters from St Joseph High Road on the Register
April 1960	6th	8611	956	Abela Adelaide, Abela Agnes	Zrinzo Joseph, Zrinzo Maria Concetta
April 2002	1st	8236	468	Abela Carmela, Abela Maria Concetta	Zerafa Tessie Elisabeth, Zerafa Newstead Mark Anthony
October 2024	1st	7902	300	Abdelbagi Alisha, Abdelbagi Claire Marie	Zhang Guo Hui, Zhang Tan Hui

In the 20+ years since Busuttil (2003) researched her dissertation, St Joseph High Road has, like Malta, witnessed a steady internationalisation. Malta has undergone a historically unparalleled transition from a labour exporting to a labour importing economy (Baldacchino, 2017). The "people from all over the island", referred to by Busuttil (2003) who frequent, live on, or work in this busy road now include many who are foreign born. Officially numbering over 150,000, the non-Malta born constitute some 30% of the resident population in the country (TMI, 2025). Their visibility on St Joseph High Road is manifest in multiple ways, including in the products, services and names of the retail outlets (and the languages and scripts used in their naming); and in the country of origin of the employees and of the clients of these shops.

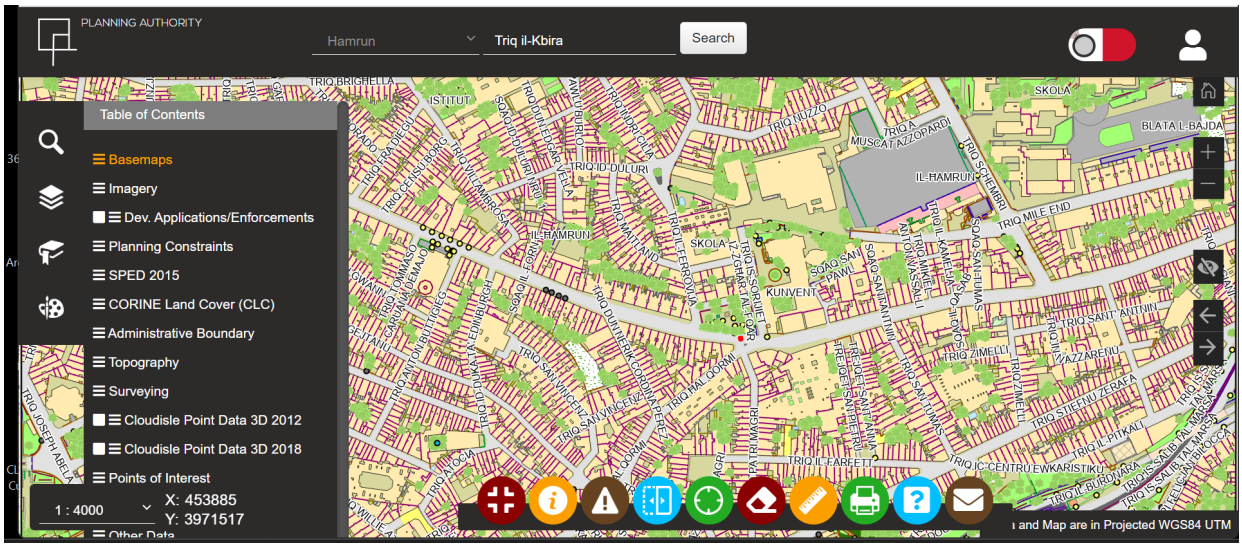
Research Methodology

The mixed 'data' on which this paper is based was mainly collected from a session of participant observation on St Joseph High Road that took place on 23rd November 2024. The morning came with a fresh north wind, so the day was colder than it had been so far that month. It was also a Saturday, a 'black bag' garbage collection day, and many stores were marketing 'Black November' sales. This combination made for a busy streetscape.

Five teams of students, consisting of two or three students each, were tasked with monitoring and recording various details of St Joseph High Road, each team having been allocated a section of the road in advance and encouraged to enter in casual free-flowing conversations. Their professor was also on site, walking up and down the road and striking his own dialogues. All five teams had at least one member fluent in the Maltese language. The Planning Authority online Map Server provided a handy graphic that identified all the 'plots'

of property, whether residential, commercial or other use, along the road under scrutiny (see Figure 4).

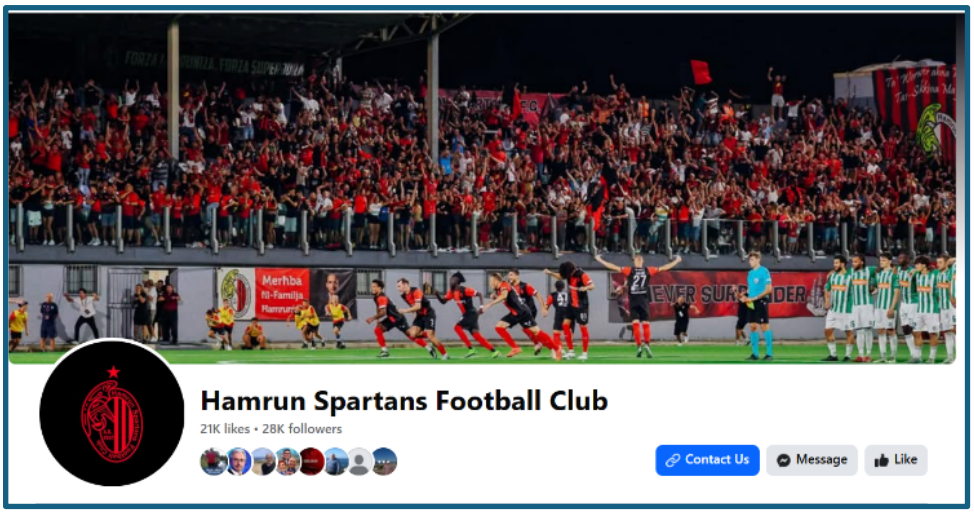
Figure 4: *Section of St Joseph High Road, divided by plots (screenshot)*



Source: Planning Authority Map Server: https://pamapserver.pa.org.mt/

The students monitored the number of residential premises, noting their house names (if any) and whether they were vacant, dilapidated or in use. The students were also asked to label all non-residential (and mainly commercial) units according to 'national identity'. To do so, they were encouraged to observe the function of each non-residential unit, its name, and the language (and script) in which the name was fully or partially written. And so, for example, the Ħamrun Spartans Football Club was identified as 'local' (see Figure 5a); while the Namaste Nepal Mini Market was labelled as 'non-local' (see Figure 5b).

Figure 5a: *Ħamrun Spartans Football Club: Facebook page (screenshot)*



Source: https://www.facebook.com/HamrunSpartansFCOfficial

Figure 5b: *Namaste Nepal Mini Market Facebook Page (screenshot)*

Source: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61558026875111

In the course of this fairly mechanical operation, students were encouraged to enter into casual and unscripted conversations with passers-by, shop operators, police officers on the beat, residents and anyone else who happened to be on St Joseph High Road at the time. The students were asked to note the different narratives that people provided about the road and its goings on. No questionnaires or questions were prepared, in order to maintain a completely fluid and spontaneous, often discursive, conversational format. A Research Ethics application for this fieldwork was submitted and recorded with the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta (Ref: ARTS-2024-00408). The event concluded by lunch at Daniel's Mall, located on the same road (See the large yellow shape in Figure 6b). Debriefing was conducted in class at the UM campus during the following week.

Findings

Data (Quantitative)

On the day of the fieldwork, the students took note of 261 commercial and service outlets on St Joseph High Road. Of these, 42 were not in operation, with clear signs of abandonment or neglect, leaving 219 operational units. Of the latter, 145 (66%) were identified as 'local', bearing local functions, with mainly Maltese (MT) or English (EN) names, and with Maltese owners and employees. Another 41 (19%) were identified as 'non-Maltese', sporting foreign names (and possibly also expressed in a third language – that is, neither in MT or EN – and non-Roman script). The remaining 33 operating units (15%) are described as of mixed identity, with evidence of both local and non-local/foreign content in their name. The largest of these establishments with mixed use is Daniel's Mall (https://daniels.mt/). The location of these 219 operational outlets, and their suggested 'national identity', have been plotted on site maps (see Figures 6a-b-c-d).

The Figures confirm how many non-Maltese shops seem to cluster and clump together: two, three, four or five next to each other. Many of these outlets converge on two sections of St Joseph High Road: that between the corner with Railway Street and with Villambrosa Street; and that between the corner with Giovanni Barbara Street and St Mary Street. In the area immediately adjacent to St Cajetan's Parish Church, the maps suggest that there are very few residential units left (see Figure 6c).

Figure 6: *Sections of St Joseph High Road, with shop and retail outlet plots colour coded by outward identity (Rendered by Julian Axisa).*

Figure 6a: From the Anton Buttiġieġ Monument, Blata l-Bajda, to the corner with Schembri Street: both sides of the road.

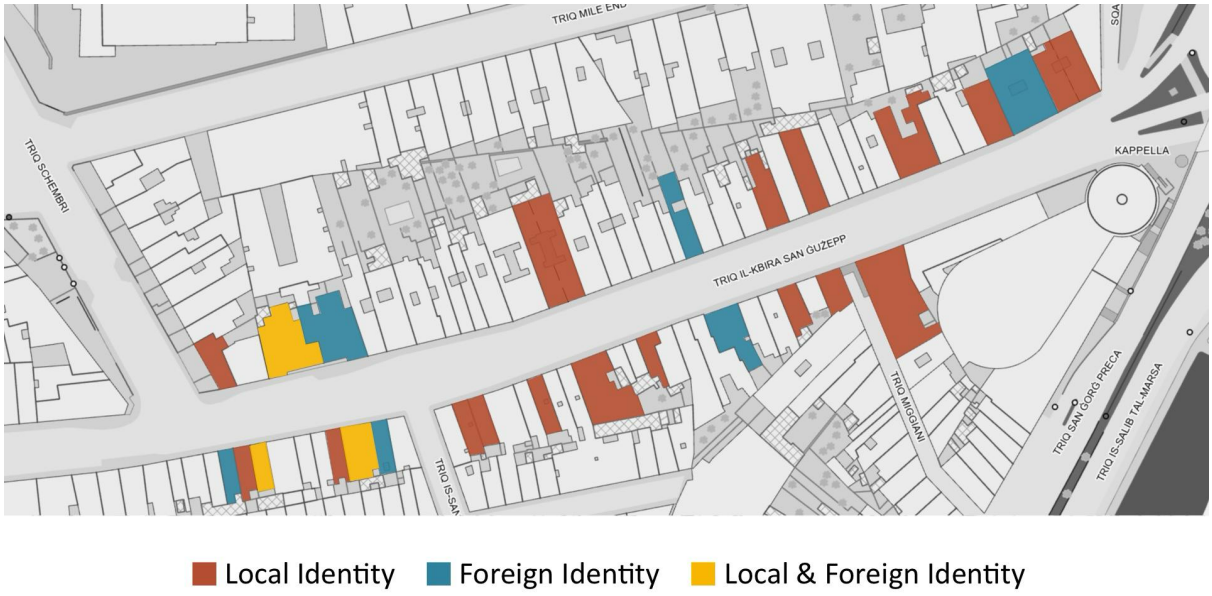


Figure 6b: From Schembri Street to Fra Diegu Square and corner with Qormi Road: both sides of the road

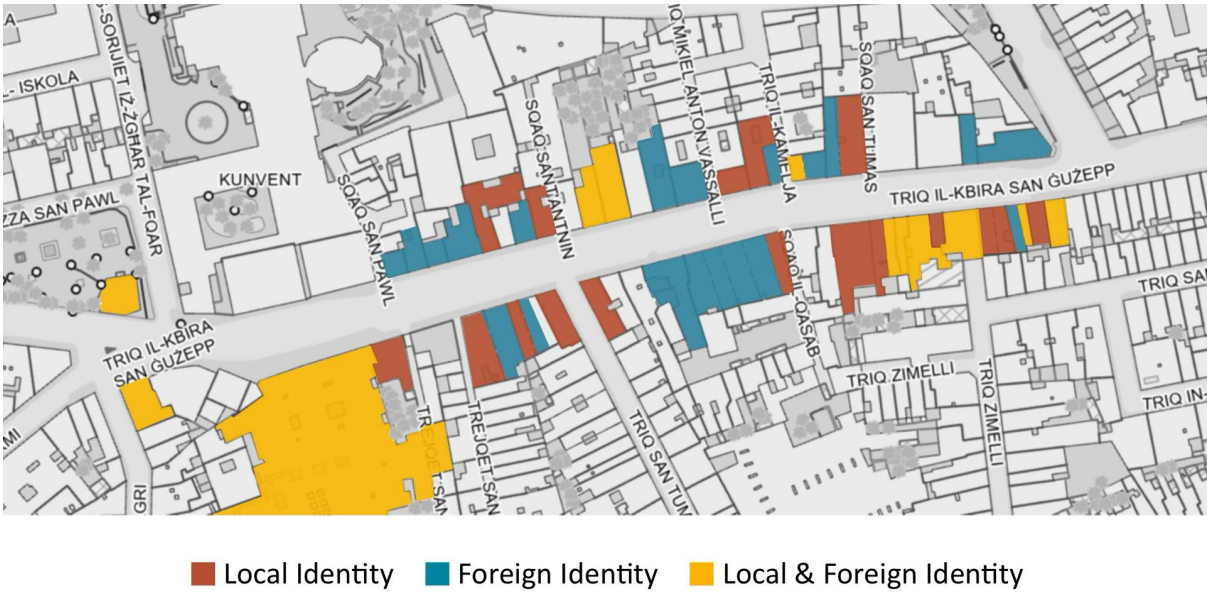


Figure 6c: From Fra Diegu Square / corner with Qormi Road to corner with Ċensu Borġ Street: both sides of the road.

Figure 6d: From Ċensu Borġ Street to Brewery Street: both sides of the road.

Data (Qualitative)

We move next to a review of the qualitative data secured from fieldwork in St Joseph High Road. This is organised in three sections. The data is mainly forthcoming from the description and analysis of the names (where they exist) of, first, houses; and second, of non-residential units. Thirdly and lastly, snippets of insights and statements drawn from casual conversations follow.

The names of houses

There are 232 numbered residential units on St Joseph High Road, Ħamrun. Of these, 61 (28%) show clear signs of being vacant or abandoned; while another 15 (7%) were visibly undergoing some kind of renovation and restoration on the day of the fieldwork.

Out of the 156 residential units in current use, 43 (28%) have a house name. This is a low rate when compared to a national mean of around 66% (Baldacchino et al., 2023). It confirms the trend that properties which are generally rented (rather than owned) are less likely to be named. Only three dwellings have names in the Maltese language: *Id-Dwejra, Omm Tiegħi, Fiduċja Tiegħi* and *Il-Ġawhra.* Most house names (16 out of the 43, or 37%) are in the English language, continuing the national trend (Baldacchino et al., 2023). Others in Italian and Latin follow. Names with mixed language use include Maison Debono and Mizzi House. There are only two examples of the resort to a combination of people's names – presumably, the owners or the residents – in house naming here: JoeClare and VinCarm. References to the religious – a fairly common tendency in Malta, especially in older housing stock – include *Pompei, Cuor di Gesù, Lourdes, Ave Maria* and *St Anthony*.

The names of service outlets

A total of 219 operational commercial and service units were noted on St Joseph High Road on the day of the fieldwork. Apart from 'shops', these outlets include: the St Cajetan Parish Church, a chapel, two bank branches, a hall, a Catholic Action branch, a telecom company branch, a local library, a National Lottery branch, the Ħamrun Spartans football club, a barber and two opticians. Only five shops and outlets have fully Maltese names: *Fava, Imqaret, Il-Kenur, Strada Rjali,* and *Vetrina*. There are 140 other shops and other service outlets that suggest Maltese ownership: however, many of their names, or parts thereof, are in English. These include: Blata l-Bajda Pharmacy, Bonnici Insurance, Carabott Jewellery, Cost Borg Coffee, Dr Buttigieg Advocate, Farrugia Furniture, Farrugia Sacco Advocacy, Jesmond Mizzi Financial Advisors, Mifsud Advocates, S Debono Jewellers, and Simons.

There are then 41 other operating outlets whose names betray a kaleidoscope of local/Maltese and foreign/non-Maltese national identities. Most of these outlets' names are also in English, but exhibit a link out of Malta through the association with what is locally interpreted as a foreign name or place. These outlets include (in alphabetical order): Afghan, Aleppo Food, Alghazi Clothes Shop, Alghazi Shopping Mall, Amira's Empire Grocery, Babylon Mini Market, Benghazi, Dubai Jewellery, El Mister Shawerma, Eritrean Food, Glory of Africa, Golden Lily Chinese Restaurant, Huasha Garden Massage, Insha Allah Mini Market, Jaijai, Korean Food Express, Little India, Mabuhay Convenience Store, Namaste India, Namaste Nepal Mini Market, the Shallom Electronic Shop and Repair, Vinarik Clothes Alterations, and the Sudanese Migrants Association Office. Other names are strictly in a foreign language, but may still be expressed in a Latin alphabet: Adamfo PA (hairdressing), Baba Ganaush (café, restaurant and butcher), Dr Ibrahim Hussein, Halweyat (nuts and sweets), and Xing Long are examples. These outlets' names are sometimes reproduced in a different language (including non-Latin characters), presumably that of the shop owner: these include Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Korean and Nepali (see Figures 7 - 12). The livery and signage of these commercial outlets carry symbols of identity: the outlet's name, expressions in a foreign language and alphabet,

and possibly one or more flags of foreign countries. The intent may be to declare and pivot this sense of difference; but the widespread use of English suggests an intention to attract shoppers who are not necessarily of the same ethnic background: other migrants, the native Maltese and visiting tourists.

Figure 7: *Shop Facade: Namaste Nepal Mini Market (Note also Nepali flag on the right).*

Figure 8: *Shop Facades: Alghazi Clothing and Aleppo Food Stores*

Figure 9: *Shop Facades: Dual Zone (Electronics) and Babylon Mini Market (with Halal sign in Arabic)*

Figure 10: *Shop Facade: Dubai Jewelry (in both Arabic and Latin script). There is more Arabic script below the blind, on a white background.*

Figure 11*: Shop Façade: EuroFusion Fruit and Vegetable Seller (with the flags of the European Union, Malta, Philippines, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in that order)*

Figure 12: *Baba Ganaush Café', Lebanese Restaurant and Take Away (with Halal sign), and Butcher (also with Halal sign).*

Snippets from casual conversations

The students (in pairs) and their professor strolled along St Joseph High Road, entering into casual and spontaneous conversations on the pavement, in the square, and in various shops and retail outlets, with subjects who self-identified in various ways, including 'Maltese' and 'immigrants'. Methodologically, such encounters make for less intrusive and more natural, person-to-person interactions. No conversations were audio-recorded.

Native Maltese respondents were generally quick to acknowledge the ways in which Ħamrun has changed, for better or for worse, because of the exodus of locals and the influx of foreigners who have taken their place, both as residents and/or as the owners or managers of commercial outlets. There is a widespread, sentimental longing or wistful affection for an idealised past, when Ħamrun was a 'proper' community. There is also ambivalence about the presence and impact of so many foreigners. A few of these respondents, directly or otherwise, intimate that the locality and the street have worsened – the place is less safe, dirtier, more foreign-feeling – and all of this is due to the presence and behaviour of immigrants. Notably, comments about public safely refer mainly to women and children.

Notes, excerpts from which appear below, are not necessarily verbatim transcriptions, but are based on the reflections of the students and their professor, jotted down as quickly as possible after particular conversations were concluded:

> 'An elderly man stated that he saw Ħamrun change a lot due to foreigners. His sister, who also lives there, feels insecure and is afraid to go out after 4pm.'
>
> 'A woman from Żurrieq said that she visits Ħamrun frequently because she finds it very central and accessible. She does a lot of her errands here. When she visits St

> Joseph High Road, she said that she feels as if she is in Istanbul. She pities the foreigners, but she prefers to keep her distance from them.'
>
> 'Five young men invited us to the bar of the Ħamrun Spartans Football Club and shared some interesting stories about Ħamrun. While they acknowledged that Ħamrun has experienced numerous changes, their main complaint was the quantity of rubbish along the streets which, they believed, diminished Ħamrun's appeal. They also expressed their belief that Ħamrun is not safe for women at night.'
>
> 'A Maltese store worker shared some of her experiences at work. She described an instance where a man [a foreigner] entered the store, begged for money and refused to leave unless she gave him something. He only ran away when she threatened to phone the police.'
>
> 'A 30-year old shop owner expressed pride in being both a resident and native of Ħamrun. Although she could choose to live elsewhere, she strongly prefers to stay in her home town. She worries, however, that the Ħamrun her young daughter is growing up in is very different from the one she had known as a child, when she was able to play freely on the streets.'
>
> 'A Maltese elderly woman argued that St Joseph High Road is never finished, it is always under construction. New businesses keep cropping up, while filthy foreigners leave filth. She preferred how the street was before, with nice houses.'
>
> 'An old woman noted that it may be unsafe for the few children to play outside these days.'

And, with a not-so-subtle nod to an Indian stereotype:

> 'What a smell of curry! We got ourselves in a poor situation, and we will find ourselves in an even worse predicament.'

This is worth reproducing in the Maltese original: '*X'riħa ta' curry hawn. Kemm ġejna ħażin, u kemm għad irridu niġu agħar.'*

Other native Maltese-speakers observe a faster tempo and activity in the locale. The reversal in population decline of recent years is felt as increased traffic, noise, pollution, and a general sense of racket and disorder, captured in the Maltese word *ġenn*. Although they may not say so explicitly, the influx of migrants has boosted business and custom:

> 'A Maltese middle-aged man, a store owner, admits that he does not like to generalise; but Ħamrun, he states, has become a hub of craziness. He no longer lives in Ħamrun; he has gone to live in a quieter area.'
>
> 'A Maltese man, owner of a craft business, stated that the street has become very busy, noisy and polluted.'

Indeed, another sub-set of native Maltese speakers gave credit to how immigrants are supporting the local economy, through their labour, their demand for goods and services, and their philanthropy:

> ‘A woman reflected on how, years ago, she was advised not to open a shop in this area. Twenty years later, many foreigners are her clients. Foreigners are a big part of her business.’
>
> ‘A Maltese woman and shop owner said that she was not complaining about the transformation of the street since she turns a profit anyway because of the foreigners and not so much because of the Maltese.’
>
> ‘In an ethnic food outlet, the Maltese owner said that he was the only Maltese worker in his establishment. Given the nature of the work and its requirements, foreign workers are mainly employed. Moreover, he admitted that finding Maltese workers for such work is very hard, because of long working hours and weekend demands.’
>
> ‘A police officer from Ħamrun was on the beat. S/he disagreed that Ħamrun had a higher crime rate than other localities. The number and type of most infringements were petty and average: careless parking, or recycling schedules not properly observed. S/he also said that some foreigners are very kind and helpful to locals, especially to the elderly. A foreigner helps his/her grandmother with her groceries.’
>
> ‘A Maltese shop owner automatically assumed that we [the students talking to him] were all foreigners, even though one of us was Maltese. He apologised and explained that he is so used to foreigners nowadays as they make up most of his customers and employees.’
>
> ‘A couple of Ħamrun residents admitted that the street is always changing. There are many foreign shops now, which, they declare, is a shame. But then, they don’t complain because their shopping needs are met. They prefer a shop to be run by foreigners than one that is closed down.’
>
> ‘An 80-year old woman is a Ħamrun resident. In spite of her brother’s misgivings about being out late, she feels quite safe. She appreciates the locality for its convenient shopping options: the town has everything she needs. ‘

Two senior citizens highlighted what may be an irreversible change, an outcome of demographic replacement, and evidence of the locale’s dynamism:

> ‘A man has lived in Ħamrun for many years and has seen it change. ‘Things are different now’, he muses. ‘What is called ‘progress’ may not actually be progress. The Maltese in Ħamrun are mostly old and when they die they are replaced by foreigners. That is the way things are.’
>
> ‘An old woman reflected on how she has seen the number of children in Ħamrun decrease markedly of late.’

Various non-native born Maltese speakers were encountered along St Joseph High Road; but they (and we) were more wary, less willing or less able to enter into casual conversations. Many were shop workers: unlike shop owners and managers, they may need to focus more closely on their work, assist clients promptly and generally maintain their productivity. For them, English (or Maltese) may be a third or fourth language; their proficiency in these

languages may be poor, making them less likely to engage in conversation. Still, a number did stop to chat with us.

Their stories are positive overall. They focus mainly on the added value that their presence in Malta has delivered, to themselves, to their families and to Ħamrun, their new home or worksite. Beneficiaries of the migrants' presence and activity include the Maltese-born:

> 'A Syrian refugee who left his homeland in 2014, transited via Turkey and settled in Malta in 2016. He was a teacher in his country, and is now selling imported food items, including chocolate. When asked about how St Joseph High Road has changed, he alerted me to how much more diversity and variety there is now on this street. "There are now 40 different types of chocolate, instead of just two", he proudly asserted.'

> 'Another woman took pride in being called 'Mama Africa': she helps the foreigners who are a big part of her business. She says that her clients love her so much.'

> 'A 30-year old Indian national was sitting on a bench in the Square. He said that he has lived in Ħamrun for 6-7 years. He highlighted its convenience and accessibility, noting how everything he needs is available locally.'

The increased business and traffic and general activity noted by the native Maltese respondents is also observed by these newcomers to Ħamrun:

> 'Two foreign restaurant employees complained about the heavy competition amongst businesses for clients. Traffic and parking are major issues. Their un/loading parking spot is often taken up by unauthorised vehicles. LESA (Law Enforcement System Agency) officials have been called in. But: issues can escalate with their presence, and things just get worse.'

In some cases, their comments also throw some light onto divisions and reputational hierarchies *within* the generalised 'migrant community':

> 'Two Chinese who own service outlets said that they were scared of 'Black people' because they sometimes steal. They added that they sometimes give away clothes for free to those foreigners in need.'

Analysis and Reflections

St Joseph High Road, Ħamrun, has been experiencing a radical change in land use in recent decades. Residences occupied by a relatively old population are giving way to office, commercial and rental space. A clear population decline amongst locals has been offset lately by the arrival and settlement of (younger) migrants, some of whom have sensed a business opportunity and have opened and operate their own retail outlets. Such shops demonstrably cater to fellow immigrant needs; but also to domestic customers.

Amongst those respondents who self-identify as 'locals' or 'natives' – what is left of the indigenous (and ageing) Maltese stock of residents and of outlet owners and managers – a number find the narrative of Ħamrun as a 'progressive sense of place' rather 'woke' and hard

to swallow. St Joseph High Road may be (again) a busy, bustling, commercial and residential streetscape, reminiscent of its *Strada Rjali* glory days. However, their interpretation of interconnected waves of incoming foreign residents, foreign workers, and of foreign goods sold from and by foreign-operated ethnic outlets may be couched as a 'zero-sum' narrative: one of sad displacement and of a romanticised version of a nostalgic past that has been irrevocably 'lost' (Laslett & Schürer, 2021). The present predicament is sarcastically derided as 'progress' or development – *żvilupp,* in Maltese - and interaction with the newcomers and their cultural baggage may be wary and hesitant. This leads the remaining and surviving 'natives' to feel as if they are the 'last of their kind': disjointed, displaced and 'out of place' in their own country and locale.

In sharp contrast, the newcomers' interpretation is upbeat. They feel euphoric and proud of their ability to establish roots in a new country, start a business or land a job. This is particularly so if they had started off as refugees in Malta, with little economic or social capital. They are probably aware of subtle or more overt expressions of discrimination and racism in their regard; although none of the data we collected shows this; but their overall assessment is and remains cautiously positive. If they launch into comparisons, their reference points are overseas, including the places and homes they have left; and not Ħamrun-as-it-is-imagined-to-have-been … which, of course, they would not have known.

The situation warrants deeper scrutiny. We have noted references to differences not just between but also within 'local' and 'non-local' categories. Evidence of a street brawl on St Joseph High Road that made it to the local news pitched Syrians versus Syrians (Calleja, 2022). There is also evidence of immigrants – some recently arrived; some already having spent many years in Malta – working with and for locals, and – to a lesser extent – vice-versa, suggesting elements of assimilation and integration into the host society. There is also evidence of locals shopping at shops run by foreigners, especially for particular and speciality products as well as arguably lower prices. And vice versa: local owners are relieved and grateful that foreigners have 'picked up the slack' and maintained some level of consumer demand in the area.

What has been happening to Ħamrun and its main street, is symptomatic of what is occurring in several other localities in the Maltese Islands: Shore Road (*Triq ix-Xatt*) in Gżira, Valley Road (*Triq il-Wied*) in Birkirkara, and Hompesch Road-Żabbar Road (*Triq Hompesch-Triq Ħaż-Żabbar)* in Fgura are apt and mature examples of a similar transition to a more diverse streetscape.

Conclusion

A road is a conventional feature of urban morphology, and so particularly suited to place analysis. After all, roads are theatres of public life: therein, goods, money, vehicles, people and pet dogs are moving at different speeds and for different ends, and doing so differently at different times of the day. Together, these components gift a road with a distinctive signature; its analysis enables one to "grasp the social life and the changing forms of the road itself" (Capineri, 2016, p. 132; Fyfe, 2006). A street is thus a complex coming together of multiple interests and use conflicts. When the number of (mostly small) shops exceeds the number of

homes, as has happened on St Joseph High Road, Ħamrun, then a commercial atmosphere can be expected to prevail and justify the social interactions underway on that street.

A total of 156 residential units and 219 commercial units and outlets were operating on *Triq il-Kbira San Ġużepp* on Saturday morning, 23rd November 2024; with another 76 homes and 41 outlets not in use. A loose assembly of residents and shoppers, owners and workers, navigated this space. The were briefly joined by a group of university students, and their professor. It is easy and tempting to essentialise these persons into 'local' or 'native', and 'foreign' or 'immigrant' categories – as the students' fieldwork exercise initially intended – and then spin contrasting narratives from such a premise. But the situation is more mixed: casual conversations with different people who happened to be in the dynamic space called 'St Joseph High Road' on that Saturday morning provide some indication of this complexity, fluidity and colour.

On this street, the names of just five (out of 219) commercial and service outlets, and of just three (out of 43) named residences, are only and fully in the Maltese language. Instead, the English language gains a clear prominence. Meanwhile, for those unable to navigate English or Maltese, conversing in their native language – Punjabi or Arabic, Swahili or Tagalog – may offer some solace; this may be possible in Ħamrun's main street, as such communities settle in and settle down. This linguistic landscape may bear a close resemblance to other, unfolding social dynamics, where trade and employment help 'build bridges' and act as vital currencies of conviviality and interconnectivity.

In Doreen Massey's poignant rendering of another 'High Road' – Kilburn, in the borough of Camden, North-West London – she argued (1994) that every place has "multiple identities" which can either be "a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both" (p. 153). St Joseph High Road is a place today that is more obviously and visibly a product of its linkages with other places; and these linkages evoke and stoke both conflict and richness. In St Joseph High Road, foreigners are moving in and getting by; while ageing, disgruntled native-born Maltese observe a general craziness, and reminisce wistfully of allegedly better days.

Acknowledgements

The Ħamrun fieldwork was one assessment component for the study-unit SOC 2079 *Sociology of Space and Place*, offered by the Department of Sociology at the University of Malta during the 2024-25 academic year. A special thanks to Julian Axisa for preparing the street maps. All photos were taken by Godfrey Baldacchino on 23rd November 2024.

Disclaimers

The authors declare no conflict of interest in writing this article. They also declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence was not used in any way during the preparation or the writing of this article.

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Research Article

Experiences of community and mobility within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan

Sara Mari Cardona

Correspondence: cardonasmari@gmail.com

Abstract

This article addresses the ways in which notions of community and mobility are intertwined and how these unfold within the context of the area of the parish of Saint Sebastian in Ħal Qormi, which is located in the central part of Malta. Data for this research was collected primarily through semi-structured qualitative interviews with people who have a connection with Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, specifically residents, people who have family ties in the locality, members from community-based organisations, people who used to live in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, people who run local businesses in the area, as well as the parish priest and the mayor. In addition to this, first-hand experiences and observations within the locality as well as the consultation of online media sources, such as community Facebook pages and online newspaper articles, further enriched the research, providing a wider context for the better interpretation of data. This article problematises the relationship between community and mobility and argues that community can and does accommodate a range of mobilities. Therefore, this research paper argues that mobility and community do not cancel each other out.

Keywords: community; community-based organisations; locality; mobility; parish

Introduction

This research paper addresses the ways in which notions and experiences of mobility and community are intertwined and how they unfold within the context of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan. Throughout this paper the term community is addressed as a contested term with a multiplicity of meanings. Moreover, the term mobility is used to refer to international migration, domestic mobility as well as people passing through the locality via cars and public transport.

The research question was addressed within the context of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan since the locality has seen considerable demographic changes, which include a drastic increase in non-Maltese residents in recent years, as well as the domestic mobility of Maltese residents across different localities. According to the Census of Population and Housing 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2023, p. 30) the number of non-Maltese people residing in Ħal Qormi increased from 132 people in 2011 (from a total resident population of 16,394 people in Ħal Qormi), to 2,136 non-Maltese residents in 2021 (from a total resident population of 18,099 people in Ħal Qormi). According to the latest data published by the National Statistics Office (2025, p. 13), as at 31 December 2024, Ħal Qormi had a population of 4,495 non-Maltese

residents and 15,546 Maltese residents, which equates to a total resident population of 20,041 people.

Such demographic changes are not a new phenomenon in Ħal Qormi, as Ħal Qormi's history is characterised by mobility. It should be noted that Ħal Qormi presently has two different parishes: the parish of Saint George, which was the first parish in the locality, extant till at least 1436, and the parish of Saint Sebastian which was set up in 1935. The area around the parish of Saint Sebastian developed around a statue that was placed on the outskirts of the town in 1814 by the people of Ħal Qormi to thank the saint for delivering them from the plague (Grima, 1984; Grima, 2001). Around 1880 a small church was built facing the statue, dedicated to the same saint, and a small but thriving community started sprawling around them. Since the surrounding area became increasingly populated, the quarter of Saint Sebastian eventually became a separate parish from the longstanding parish of Saint George. Furthermore, the Pinto Band Club which is now exclusively associated with the parish of Saint Sebastian initially operated in the parish of Saint George (Grima, 1984; Grima, 2001).

In light of this, the area around the parish of Saint Sebastian can be described as an area where tradition and change develop side by side and manifest themselves in the ways in which residents live out their daily lives within the locality. The highlight of village life is the annual week-long village feast or *festa* dedicated to Saint Sebastian, which takes place every third Sunday of July, at the height of the Maltese *festa* season. Another feast dedicated to Saint George takes place in the neighbouring parish every fourth Sunday in June. The parish church, the band club and other community-based organisations are deeply involved in the organisation of this annual festival.

Mobility and Community Attachment

In contemporary society, migration and mobility can be described as predominant social processes which impact the daily lives of migrants themselves as well as the experiences of residents within destination societies. In relation to this, Koser (2007, p. 25) states that the implications of migration are "probably most keenly felt in the social and cultural spheres of life". This is also highlighted by Phillips et al. (2014, p. 43) who state that "it is in the everyday spaces of the neighbourhood that the material and emotional consequences of social, cultural and religious difference and newcomer status associated with immigration must be negotiated". Therefore, these "everyday spaces of the neighbourhood" become the breeding ground for the formation of complex and varied relationships and social bonds between migrants and other residents.

Furthermore, since the process of migration is interlinked with change, migration adds another dimension of change to already dynamic societies. This points towards the importance of recognising the ways in which people are dealing with change within mobile societies. These changes within the social and cultural landscape of receiving societies might impact residents' notions of the place in which they live, thus impacting their sense of belonging and attachment to place. In light of this, residents' responses to the ever-increasing change that seems to characterise contemporary society, as well as the ways in which mobility and change are intertwined with notions of community and social relationships, become pertinent social issues.

This article addresses the interplay between mobility and community, namely looking at how notions and experiences of community might be defined in relation to mobility.

Community: Contested Meanings

Notions of community and the multiplicity of meanings which are attributed to the term permeate discussions concerning people's sense of belonging (or lack thereof) within contemporary society. This is especially so when discussing mobility and transience as well as the ways in which these processes affect residents' notions of home. Therefore, it is essential to problematise the term 'community' and address it as an elusive yet resilient term.

Shaw (2008, p. 24) highlights this by stating that "[m]uch has been written about the problematic nature of 'community', emphasising its distinctive character as a historically situated and theoretically contested idea". Shaw (2004) also stresses the importance of understanding the role that power relations play in shaping community life. Therefore, if the term community is not addressed and applied critically there is the chance of resorting to idealised and nostalgic renditions of community life. In addition to this, Shaw (2008) argues that while the term 'community' tends to be characteristically associated with togetherness and unity, the very concept of community implies a distinction between those who are considered to be part of the community and those who are not, those who are in and those who are out.

The definition of what constitutes community is adapted and altered depending on the context in which it is being used as well as on the agenda being furthered. Thompson (2000, p. 68) draws our attention towards communities as being subject to constant change and ongoing redefinition by stating that communities are "not static totalities". On the contrary, according to Thompson, communities are more aptly described as "fluid arrangements of different individuals, values, ideas and practices".

Amit and Rapport (2002) state that while this sense of fluidity surrounding 'community' might allow for the term to be used in a vast array of contexts, the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to it also imply a lack of a singular all-encompassing definition, which may lead to the undermining of the term.

Albrow (2002) is concerned with addressing perceptions of locality, community, and culture by utilising globalisation theory within the context of Tooting, a district within the London borough of Wandsworth. He argues that residents of Tooting have varying, and at times opposing, perceptions and experiences of community. Some describe a strong sense of community, while others feel alienated and believe that "Tooting falls short of an image of community which […] it might have had or ought to have" (Albrow, 2002, p. 46), reflecting an idealised notion of a sense of community. Furthermore, others remain uncertain about the presence of community but go on with their daily lives indifferently. Albrow (2002) uses the term "sociospheres" to refer to the diverse social formations within Tooting in order to "convey the sense of varying but overlapping spatial scope, discrete movement and separateness" (p. 51). Furthermore, Albrow (2002) also acknowledges the possibility that people can form attachments which extend beyond their current place of residence.

Therefore, the term community has a multiplicity of contested meanings which are a testament to its resilience and allure within academic fields as well as beyond them. Due to

this, it is essential to approach the term critically to avoid giving into idealised and romanticised notions which might lead to the contrived homogenous portrayal of diverse groups of people and complex social relations.

Experiences of community in the local context

Within the Maltese context, in 1977 Boissevain addressed the ways in which domestic mobility might impact Maltese localities in the context of the events that were shaping Maltese societies at the time. Boissevain (2013 [1977]) stated that "bonds of loyalty in neighbourhoods, parish and club associations are declining in importance" (p. 172). According to Boissevain the main reason for this was that people were moving out of the localities they were born in. While mobility is a characterising element of contemporary societies, what Boissevain had predicted in 1977 did not materialise.

In fact, in 1993, using Naxxar as an example, Boissevain went on to revise his original statement by stating that "Maltese and Gozitans have also continued to celebrate their patron saints. In fact, they are being feasted as never before" (Boissevain, 1993, p. 156). Moreover, he referred to an "increase in certain celebrations – the festas of parish and neighbourhood patron saints and Passion Week" (Boissevain, 1993, p. 158). He further stated that "[t]his increase surprised me. Why had the decline of community level celebrations which after all, in the 1960s had seemed clear and logical, not continued?" (Boissevain, 1993, p. 157)

The parish-based village feast in Maltese localities is often described as a celebration of community, both by people who are involved in the organisation of the feast as well as by people who attend the feast. Visanich (2021) highlights the ways in which the "*festa* is a case of celebrating the community" through shared rituals that produce "the continuation of collective memory" (p. 11). This description highlights the idea of people coming together during the weeklong celebrations and points towards the importance of place in people's lives. People feel the need to return to the places where they grew up to participate in these celebrations. It looks like the *festa* produces a sense of belonging to place as well as to a community of people who identify themselves in relation to a place. In the case of this research, the *festa* is the one celebrated in the parish of Saint Sebastian where people identify not only as Qriema (natives of Ħal Qormi) but specifically as Bastjaniżi, that is natives of the parish of Saint Sebastian, as opposed to those who hail from the neighbouring parish of Saint George. The Bastjaniżi become an embodiment of community as described by Diener & Hagen (2022), who state that "to exist in a corporeal sense is to function within a network of places to which one is attached in varying degrees" (p. 181).

With regards to this, Anderson (1983) used the term "an imagined political community" to refer to a community in which not all the members know and have met one another (p. 6). Nonetheless, they all identify as members of the same community. This applies to local communities, where residents identify themselves with the local community even though it is impossible to know every person living in the locality. The term also encompasses those who might have moved but still consider themselves to be part of the local community. This is prevalent in Maltese localities as people tend to describe themselves in relation to their locality, for instance someone who identifies as a 'Qormi' or 'Qormija' (natives of Ħal Qormi). People

also identify themselves in relation to the parish, in this case as a 'Bastjaniż' or 'Bastjaniża' (natives of the parish of Saint Sebastian). The latter assumes deeper significance in relation to historical parish rivalry (see for example Boissevain, 2013 [1977]). Therefore, it is important to recognise that the term 'imagined' does not imply that such communities do not exist; on the other hand, as is stated by Breuilly (2016), the term imagined as used by Anderson refers to "envisioning something that we cannot see, but which is nonetheless real" (p. 629).

It can be further argued that during periods of change and uncertainty, practices which serve to foster a sense of belonging to place take on a more significant role and meaning. This could be seen during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering "the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on the celebration of the village feasts; and moreover, by looking at the public's response and reactions to not being able to celebrate the very much awaited village feast" (Cardona, 2022, p. 6). In a time when such celebrations could not take place due to health restrictions, people still felt very strongly about the subject and went out of their way to organise smaller celebrations that complied with the public health restrictions in place at the time, indicating the people's strong identification with localities and parishes, a relationship that they felt they needed to celebrate notwithstanding the pandemic.

This article aims to address the ways in which the notion of community is configured and defined within the area of the parish of Saint Sebastian in Ħal Qormi in relation to mobility. It addresses how the term 'community' is utilised discursively by residents of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan to refer to social relations between migrants and locals. Furthermore, this article also addresses lived experiences of community and how these experiences tie into the different mobilities within the locality.

Research Design

This paper presents a qualitative study based on a case study approach, enabling the researcher to investigate and locate the social processes at play within the context in which they exist while also producing intricate data.

Data was primarily collected by conducting one-to-one semi-structured interviews with people who have a connection with Ħal Qormi San Bastjan. These included residents, people who have moved to another locality but remain active within community-based organisations in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, people who do not live in Ħal Qormi but work there, as well as people whose family history may line up with the place's history in a meaningful way. Therefore, Ħal Qormi links the people in my study as they move from one context to another in their daily lives.

Using purposive sampling, participants with different characteristics were sought out to have a mixed sample that best addresses the main research question. The sample consisted of participants of various ages, genders, and occupations. Participants also had a differing relationship to the locality: some live in Ħal Qormi, others do not live there but have a connection with the area, some are involved within community organisations while others are not. Participants were mainly recruited through personal contacts within community circles. However, there were also instances of snowball sampling.

The chosen participants were located strategically within this intersection of mobility, locality and community, making their input an extremely valuable source of information. The final sample consisted of 22 participants which included high-standing people in leadership positions, namely the parish priest (*l-arċipriet*), the mayor and the president of the band club. Representatives from schools within the area were also interviewed.

The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 75 years. Out of a total of 22 participants, 13 were males while 9 were females. During the interviews, participants were asked about their lived experiences within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, namely experiences relating to notions of community and mobility. Furthermore, interviewees were asked about the ways in which they related to Ħal Qormi San Bastjan and whether they felt a sense of belonging to the locality.

Other data was collected through the consultation of online sources such as online newspaper articles which were concerned with current affairs in Ħal Qormi. I also regularly scrolled through community Facebook pages that are an excellent noticeboard of all that is going on, especially when it comes to community-based organisations and the local council. The band club, the local parish church, and other parish-based or band-club affiliated groups and organisations all have regularly updated Facebook pages that provide the wider canvas with all that is going on in the organisations and in the community. This placed me in a better position to produce intricate data and understand and depict life in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan as holistically as possible.

Participant observation was also carried out by attending community activities, such as the annual village feast in July, Good Friday and Easter celebrations, Christmas activities and Sunday mass. I also frequented the area on various days throughout the year at different times of day. Some key places where I carried out observations include the square in front of the band club, the church, *iz-zuntier tal-knisja* (the wide open staircase leading to the church's main door), De La Cruz public garden and playground, the bus terminus and the sprawling commercial area adjacent to it, as well as other streets around the town. I also visited the weekly open market which takes place every Saturday morning. This enabled me to observe first-hand the ways in which notions of community are enacted. Being present in the area I was studying enabled me to better understand what was being discussed during the interviews, ensuring that the data collected during the interviews was interpreted within the appropriate context.

A thematic data analysis was then carried out by reviewing and coding the interview transcripts, focusing on the parts which were relevant to the research questions. Notes were taken throughout the process of analysing the data. The processes of coding and note taking led to the emergence of the following themes: meanings of community, neighbourliness and transience, groups and organisations within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, change and nostalgia, the local community and social media, belonging and participation.

This research project was approved by the University of Malta's Research Ethics Committee (Application ID: ARTS-2023-00239). Participants' names are pseudonymised. Interviewees whose identity would be hard to conceal since they are public figures, namely the parish priest, the mayor and the president of the band club, all gave their formal written consent to be made identifiable.

Findings

Meanings of Community

Residents of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan have varying experiences of community within their locality. Most interviewees, especially those brought up in the locality, expressed the belief that the term community seems to be synonymous with a strong sense of parish affiliation and participation within community-based organisations. The latter includes the Pinto Band Club and the various commissions within it such as the Band Commission, the Culture Commission, the Narbona Theatre Commission as well as Akkademja Mużikali Pinto (the band club's music school). Other community-based organisations include the *festa* decorations group, the fireworks group, the parish ladies' circle, the bell-ringers group, the drama pageant group, the three confraternities within the parish and the parish youth group (IMPACT).

Interviewees highlighted neighbourliness as a facet of community by referring to the importance of forming part of a network of amicable social relations. Furthermore, the celebration of the village feast was generally regarded to be a symbol of a vibrant and active community. While some interviewees expressed concern regarding the loss of community, the notion of community still seemed to resonate with residents of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan across different generations (albeit to differing extents). Moreover, Philip, a 20-year old resident who was brought up in another Maltese locality and who has a different cultural upbringing related to the different ethnicity of one of his parents, stated that this sense of community and identification to the parish is palpable within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan; however, the interviewee located himself just outside of this tight-knit community, as an outsider who was looking in.

Residents of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan attempted to locate community within their lived experiences. Some participants stated that they experience a sense of community when they attend the village feast, when they visit the band club or other local hangouts, when they are greeted by fellow residents in the street, or when neighbours offer a helping hand in times of need. Other residents also referred to the ways in which the local community is experienced online, for example by forming part of and being active in community Facebook groups.

Neighbourliness and Transience

Notions of neighbourliness and conviviality are predominant within discussions concerning community. For the residents of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan the presence or lack of neighbourliness ties in with whether residents experience a sense of community and belonging.

Throughout the interviewing process neighbourliness emerged as a facet of community to the extent that the two terms were often used interchangeably by participants. Residents referred to an idyllic rendition of community, in which neighbours not only know one another but are also willing to help each other. This notion of community tended to intertwine with nostalgic memories of a fleeting sense of community that is threatened by an unwaveringly hectic present. Several interviewees expressed a sense of fear regarding the loss of community which they viewed as having been stronger in the past. Charlene, a 40-year-old resident, argued that a sense of community among neighbours seems to be the strongest among those who have been living in Ħal Qormi for a long time rather than among newcomers.

An influx of non-Maltese people who are living in Ħal Qormi tended to be interpreted as posing a threat to the dominant model of community, a model which is based on stasis as opposed to mobility. This also ties in with the idea of a shifting baseline in which residents tended to associate this idyllic image of community with their childhood. This new influx of new people is made up of people who settle down in Ħal Qormi as well as others whose stay in Ħal Qormi is temporary. Therefore, while Ħal Qormi was always considered to be a relatively mobile town, especially due to its proximity to the port, the sudden increase of non-Maltese residents living in Ħal Qormi seems to have had an impact on experiences of community within the town. This sense of transience is tied to a fear of loss of community as well as a sense of uncertainty brought about by constant change. In relation to this Charlene stated that:

> In the past, one needed to be from Ħal Qormi to live in Ħal Qormi. Foreigners did not come to Ħal Qormi. Nowadays even Maltese people come to live in Ħal Qormi in addition to foreigners, who in the past would not have come to Ħal Qormi. They were not part of the community in Ħal Qormi.

It should be noted that while the number of non-Maltese residents has drastically increased in recent years within Ħal Qormi, the town has always been a mobile locality. Therefore, the past described by Charlene might be a fictitious or imagined past which colours her perception and experiences of community. This is a testament to the elusiveness of the term community which is often idealised and associated with idyllic visions of a shared past. This idea of a community, in which neighbourliness is an essential component, tends to be concerned with stasis as opposed to mobility. Despite this, mobility and community often exist alongside each other in the same social contexts.

Interviewees stated that many immigrants that reside in Ħal Qormi do so on a temporary basis and are not really interested in forming meaningful connections with neighbours and in involving themselves within the local community. This element of transience and temporariness can be seen as posing a challenge to localities which are characteristically associated with neighbourly values and strong community ties, such as Ħal Qormi San Bastjan. With regards to this, the parish priest stated that:

> One of the disadvantages that we face is that often non-Maltese residents use Ħal Qormi as a passage. They come to Ħal Qormi for a short period of time and then they leave or else they come to Malta for a short period of time and then they go somewhere else.

His words seem to indicate that had they been residents for the longer term, their chances of becoming a part of the local community would have been greater. This is also expressed by Jason, a 50-year-old longstanding resident, who stated that

> These people are here to work and send money back to their families who live far away. They are just here to work so they are not really interested in forming part of our culture. They are in a situation where they are almost being forced to leave their country to work and make a better future for themselves and for their family in their home country.

The fact that newcomers tend to keep to themselves impacts the neatly crafted image of neighbourliness which is so highly valued by longstanding residents. Amy, a 22-year-old who has always lived in Ħal Qormi, stated that while she knows the longstanding residents who live on her street, she does not really know her new neighbours. Furthermore, she stated that newcomers, Maltese or foreigners, are not always willing to interact with other residents let alone build meaningful friendly relationships with them.

During the interviews residents reflected on the notion that while non-Maltese residents were living among them within the same locality, they did not necessarily form part of the local community as that entailed taking on an active role and participating in some way or other in the community, its rituals and structures.

This is exacerbated by the notion that different nationalities residing in Ħal Qormi are not necessarily interested in connecting with each other and tend to keep to themselves. Philip, who is a Maltese 20-year-old but has an Arab background, emphasised that there are residents of various nationalities who live close to his house, including Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese as well as Filipino neighbours. He stated that he did not really speak to his neighbours and tended to keep to himself, but his mother did occasionally speak to a Syrian family who lives round the corner as they are able to relate to each other as they have an Arab background.

The mayor also expressed his concern regarding the fact that immigrants residing in Ħal Qormi tend to keep to themselves, do not participate in community activities, and do not make use of services offered to them by the local council. This is not to say that non-Maltese residents are unwelcome in Ħal Qormi, as even elderly residents have come to accept their immigrant neighbours as part of the local social fabric. Nina, a 75-year-old who lives with her husband in the core of the neighbourhood, stated that:

> It's different because we've never had foreigners living on our street before, but now we've got used to it. It would be problematic if they had bad intentions or if there were fights or things like that, but as it stands our area is still quiet. (In Maltese the word quiet, 'kwiet', does not simply refer to a lack of noise but it also implies a sense of safety, calmness and lack of conflict.)

It can be said that the everchanging community within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan transcends the neatly crafted idyllic image of friendly neighbours who come together to help one another. Experiences of community within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan were diverse and tended to be comprised of complex social relations, between new and longstanding residents, incorporating both strong and weak ties, as well as feelings of trust and suspicion. Power relations also play a role in shaping the nature of the social relations between residents.

Diverse groups within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan

With regards to the different nationalities that are present in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, there are no established ethnicity-based immigrants' organisations. Despite this, there might be non-Maltese residents who form social ties with other residents. Non-Maltese residents tend to be better able to relate to other non-Maltese residents who have the same cultural background. This can be observed in the playgrounds, for instance, where Arab women can be seen talking to each other while their children play, or the groups of Indians who gather in the De La Cruz

garden in the evenings. There are also groups of immigrants who would be residing in the same household that often sit outside by their doorstep. These are prevalent images which have become part of the social fabric of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan.

The observation that the local community within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan is made up of smaller groups of people, was outlined by Ivan who stated that:

> If a sense of community exists, it is more likely to be found in the smaller places such as within churches, in the bars where people meet, in schools, workplaces. It is within these areas and maybe also in the streets that one can find a sense of community as Ħal Qormi is too big to have a single united community

Ivan is attempting to locate community in his daily lived experiences within the locality. His idea of multiple smaller groups within the locality also relates to the idea of an imagined community, in which residents might identify as being from of Ħal Qormi (Qriema). However, Ħal Qormi as a locality is too big to be able to know everyone who identifies as a Qormi or Qormija. These communities can be described as imagined communities in the sense envisaged by Anderson (1983) above. Members of these communities do not necessarily all know each other but within the collective imagination of those who identify as Qriema and Bastjaniżi exists an image of a community to which they all belong, including people who had migrated to Australia and come to Malta for the annual feast of Saint Sebastian and follow what is going on in Ħal Qormi via social media.

Participation and Belonging

Most of the interviewees described Ħal Qormi San Bastjan as their home and expressed a sense of belonging. This was especially true for longstanding residents. Other participants who had moved to Ħal Qormi San Bastjan during different stages of their lives each formed some sort of attachment to Ħal Qormi but to varying extents.

Participation within the local community was greatly linked to feelings of belonging as participation enables people to form social ties with fellow residents while also forming a greater sense of attachment to the place in which they live. Robert, a 21-year-old who is active in various community-based organisations, stated that:

> I wouldn't go to live anywhere else, but I wouldn't do so only because I'm involved in many activities in the locality. However, if I were to give my honest opinion, I would say that if I weren't attached to Ħal Qormi I wouldn't come to live in Ħal Qormi […] I prefer somewhere which is quieter.

Robert's attachment to his place of residence, which stems from his participation in community-based organisations, seems to have a great impact on the way in which he perceives and relates to Ħal Qormi San Bastjan.

Certain members from community-based organisations referred to their respective organisation as a sort of second family. Ivan, a 19-year-old resident, referred to friendships which he was able to form due to his participation in different community-based organisations in the locality. Matthew, who used to live in Ħal Qormi but now lives in a neighbouring town stated that:

> Now I live in Siġġiewi but I practically only live there, because I am still active in Ħal Qormi with regards to voluntary work. Currently I am involved in the *festa* decorations group, so I come to Ħal Qormi San Bastjan very frequently.

Furthermore, Matthew stated that during the week-long celebration of the village feast, he especially misses living in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, which shows the strong sense of belonging he feels to the locality.

It would be pertinent to ask: are community-based organisations welcoming towards new members? Althea, who is Maltese and moved to Ħal Qormi from another town, compared the sense of community in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan to her previous place of residence. She stated that Ħal Qormi seems to be more welcoming than her previous place of residence, stating that *"In every activity which is organised here you feel welcome. I can really see the strong sense of community which is present here"*.

While community-based organisations seem to be welcoming towards Maltese residents, it is imperative to question whether such organisations are open to the participation of non-Maltese residents. When presented with the idea, participants seemed to be open to welcoming non-Maltese residents as members of community-based organisations. However, some participants approached the idea with caution. For instance, when Robert, who is active in various community-based organisations, was asked about his opinions, he took some time to think and then stated that:

> This requires some thought and honestly, I've never really thought about it, but I don't see why their participation should not be accepted, because the general interest in volunteering has decreased a lot.

On the other hand, Glen seemed to be enthusiastic about the idea, stating that:

> It would be a beautiful thing; we could use the help. It would be great if there were many of them who wanted to participate, but that's the problem, they don't really involve themselves in the local community.

Similarly, Matthew reflected on the ways in which community-based organisations could possibly incentivise non-Maltese residents to be more involved within the local community.

On the other hand, Philip, who has an Arab background and moved to Ħal Qormi during the period in which he was transitioning from primary to secondary school, located himself just outside this tight-knit parish community and stated that participating in the local community was difficult for him due to several reasons. He stated:

> I mean living in Ħal Qormi, let alone being mixed and new to the town, it just is such a double negative. So yeah, basically, in secondary I found it quite hard to be able to make friends, because I didn't know anyone, because I was moving from primary to secondary. But apart from that a lot of people would be confused as to how I live in Ħal Qormi […] and then you know it's hard to even get into the community itself cause at school they would judge you, like let alone if you tried to actually you know, and it feels like if you just walk into it, it's like stepping into a Netflix show mid-season. You can't really do that so it's either you're going to

> have to really catch up to a lot of stuff that happened throughout the years or you just you know stay on your own. That's what I did. I just yeah, I'm just like I'll like vibe over here it's fine.

Furthermore, Philip also stated that, while he currently resides in Ħal Qormi, he feels a greater sense of belonging to his previous place of residence, as it is a place which he associates with a certain sense of nostalgia due to him growing up there.

The presence of non-Maltese residents can be observed during community celebrations which usually take place in the streets of Ħal Qormi. However, they usually take on the role of spectators who happened to come across the event rather than the role of active producers. This might be due to multiple reasons. Non-Maltese residents might want to stick to their own cultural practices and traditions, or they might not have the time to invest in immersing themselves within the local community. The language barrier might also pose a challenge, coupled with the possibility that non-Maltese residents who practise a different religion would not want to participate in religious activities within the community. This is particularly important since, in an age where mass attendance is decreasing, interviewees still viewed the parish as one of the main producers of community within the locality.

Amanda, a teacher in the local primary school, mentioned instances when non-Maltese parents would not want their children to participate in certain activities throughout the school day for religious reasons, namely the sign of the cross, the Christmas concert, as well as the religion lesson. She stated that:

> We receive these requests daily; 'because I don't want her to eat pork', I'm not going to force her to eat pork but then we would have a problem when it comes to the school Christmas party as the caterer would serve ham and cheese sandwiches. It's a problem because I cannot give them ham sandwiches. These types of problems are starting to arise.

This example shows that religious and cultural practices manifest themselves in highly nuanced ways. While these might initially appear trivial, they have a profound impact on the social and physical landscape of the locality. Through the example of ham sandwiches, Amanda might also be referring to cultural values as well as symbols of cultural continuity or discontinuity. Therefore, ham itself might not be the primary issue but rather such examples bring to the fore notions of a fear of loss of traditions or cultural practices, both strongly related to a personal as well as shared identity.

Another example would be shops which cater for ethnic food and grocery items for different nationalities. There are at least three of these shops in the area, all in the same street, down the road from the band club (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figures 1 and 2: *Pictures of one of the shops which sells ethnic food and grocery items. The photos were taken during the week of the village feast in 2024.*

Source: Author (2024)

Somewhere in the middle sit those non-Maltese residents who are also Catholic, attend mass at the parish church while keeping to themselves in particular areas of the church. The priest stated that:

> Their presence [non-Maltese residents] is there during moments of prayer in the church. In every mass which is celebrated you can always see one of them. Obviously, these are Christians, because we also have several of them who are Muslims or Hindus. But those who are Catholic are present, and it is a presence which is evident.

The priest also referred to catechism classes which were held in English for 9 children coming from non-Maltese families residing in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan. These children then received their first holy communion in the parish in 2024. In 2025, another 5 non-Maltese children received their first Holy Communion in the parish (see Figure 3).

The presence of non-Maltese people during mass is evident and was mentioned by various Maltese residents who were interviewed. For example, Ivan stated that:

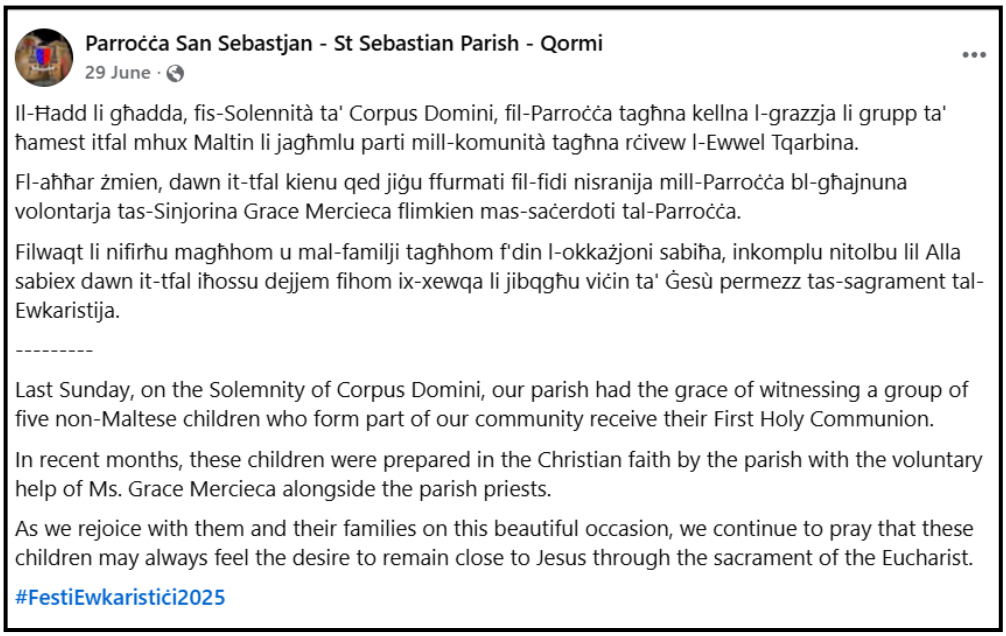
> In Malta in general, where there is this sentiment against migration, having the presence of non-Maltese people in places such as churches, local events and even in discussions and local groups, is a step in the right direction in my opinion.

Non-Maltese residents who attend mass and other religious celebrations that take place in the church are those who are most involved in the local community, and their presence and participation was viewed as something positive by residents.

As part of the celebrations of the village feast in July 2025 a mass in English followed by refreshments was organised for non-Maltese residents within the parish. The activity saw a healthy turn out of non-Maltese residents (see Figure 4). Indian Catholics regularly attend Sunday mass at the parish church, sit in groups on their own, participate in holy communion,

and then, at the end, reverently walk towards the statue of St Sebastian - an iconic symbol of community - to say their prayers before leaving church. This is a gesture imbued by social complexity and deep significance. It is a sign of, on the one hand keeping themselves to certain spaces with the church, emphasising difference, and at the same time showing a wish to belong to the parish community, sharing a religious identity with it, sharing sacred spaces and showing deference to one of the main symbols of the community.

Figure 3: *A post on the Facebook page of the parish congratulating 5 non-Maltese children who received their first Holy Communion within the Parish in June 2025.*



Parroċċa San Sebastjan - St Sebastian Parish - Qormi
29 June ·

Il-Ħadd li għadda, fis-Solennità ta' Corpus Domini, fil-Parroċċa tagħna kellna l-grazzja li grupp ta' ħamest itfal mhux Maltin li jagħmlu parti mill-komunità tagħna rċivew l-Ewwel Tqarbina.

Fl-aħħar żmien, dawn it-tfal kienu qed jiġu ffurmati fil-fidi nisranija mill-Parroċċa bl-għajnuna volontarja tas-Sinjorina Grace Mercieca flimkien mas-saċerdoti tal-Parroċċa.

Filwaqt li nifirħu magħhom u mal-familji tagħhom f'din l-okkażjoni sabiħa, inkomplu nitolbu lil Alla sabiex dawn it-tfal iħossu dejjem fihom ix-xewqa li jibqgħu viċin ta' Ġesù permezz tas-sagrament tal-Ewkaristija.

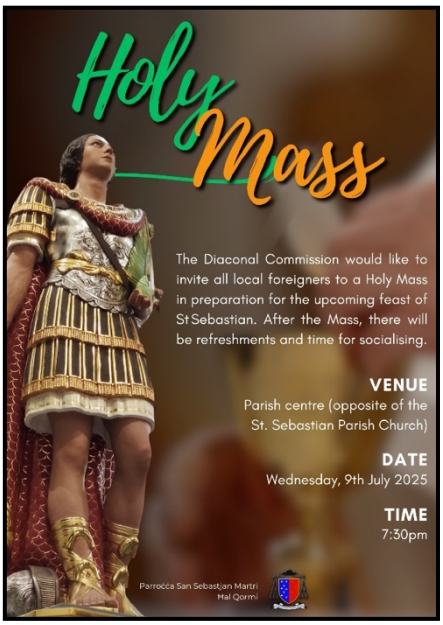
Last Sunday, on the Solemnity of Corpus Domini, our parish had the grace of witnessing a group of five non-Maltese children who form part of our community receive their First Holy Communion.

In recent months, these children were prepared in the Christian faith by the parish with the voluntary help of Ms. Grace Mercieca alongside the parish priests.

As we rejoice with them and their families on this beautiful occasion, we continue to pray that these children may always feel the desire to remain close to Jesus through the sacrament of the Eucharist.

#FestiEwkaristiċi2025

Figure 4: *A poster uploaded on the Facebook page of the parish advertising holy mass organised in English for non-Maltese residents within the parish as part of the celebrations leading up to the village feast in July 2025.*



It is very evident that the interplay between mobility and community within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan is closely linked to the notions of belonging and participation within the locality in a very nuanced and complex interplay of relating to the community, its spaces and places.

Conclusion

The above discussion addresses the intricate relationship between community and mobility and how these unfold within the context of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan. This is done by exploring four main themes, namely meanings of community within the locality, neighbourliness and transience, the diverse groups within Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, as well as the theme of participation and belonging. In light of the above discussion, Jeremy Boissevain's work becomes especially relevant to this research. This research addresses the same question that Boissevain was concerned with in 1977, namely the ways in which mobility might impact community in Maltese towns and villages. My research addresses very much the same question 50 years down the line, addressing the implications of mobility in a different context than Boissevain's key focus. The type of mobility that Boissevain encountered in the 1960s, when he was carrying out his research, was often the mobility of Maltese people between Maltese villages and towns, namely people moving out of the localities they were born in.

While domestic mobility between Maltese towns and villages still occurs, the social reality in contemporary Malta is now characterised not by emigration, as was the case in Boissevain's Malta, but by immigration, both from EU and non-EU countries, in addition to other forms of different domestic mobilities which include people passing through the localities in transit as well as people who stop in localities to shop. Such domestic mobilities are facilitated by the use of cars and the sprawling of shopping centres, including in the locality under study. Due to this, Boissevain's question of how mobility interacts with community in Maltese localities remains extremely pertinent, albeit in a strikingly different context. In light of Boissevain's work, this research argues that community and mobility do not cancel each other out. Rather, community can and does accommodate mobility, if not actually thrive on it, navigating challenges in ever changing ways.

My research indicates that multiple facets of the term community emerged as residents attempted to locate the notion of community in their everyday lived experiences. This attests to the multiplicity of contested meanings of the term, as highlighted by Shaw (2008). These multiple facets of the term community point towards a rendering of community which can accommodate mobility, with local Maltese residents opening up, albeit sometimes cautiously, to the idea of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community. Rather than an essentialised notion of community, this paper shows that a model of community which can accommodate mobility and belonging is more suitable, a model in which community can exist within the same social context as mobility. This relates to Thompson's (2000) rendering of community as something which is fluid and capable of adapting to change as its "boundaries shift and blur around the edges all the time" (p. 68).

This study indicates that the parish of Saint Sebastian, as well as the community-based organisations which work in tandem with the parish, are a locus of community production within the locality, thus the parish emerged as a key producer of community within the locality.

The parish of Saint Sebastian and its community-based organisations may be themselves the result of mobility. Indeed, the parish of St Sebastian is itself a relatively recent phenomenon resulting from an expanding old parish community that could not contain the sprawling of the residential area, in terms of social and economic networks as well as in terms of belonging and identity. The fact that many non-Maltese as well as non-Qriema are residing in the locality today, makes the nuanced relationship between mobility and community (with its notions of belonging and identity) even more pertinent and relevant.

Lastly, the notion that people ask what mobility is doing to their locality does not necessarily make people xenophobic. Rather residents of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan seemed to be trying to navigate the complexities of different mobilities within their locality. One of the ways in which such complexities presented themselves was in relation to the possibility of non-Maltese residents participating in community-based organisations that oversee the organisation of the annual village feast. Interviewees all seemed to be open to the idea of non-Maltese residents becoming members of such community-based organisations, albeit to differing extents. Nevertheless, residents also tended to question whether people who do not share the same religious symbolic infrastructure that foregrounds the celebrations of the village feast can ever make place in this way.

This, however, needs to be taken in the context of rising participation in village *festa* activities and a decrease in participation in church celebrations, not just in Ħal Qormi but across Malta and Gozo. The sentiments expressed by interviewees were mainly concerned with navigating the complexities of the social reality of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan, aiming to preserve those qualities which make Ħal Qormi feel like home while also being open to the participation of non-Maltese residents within the local community, ensuring the preservation of some sort of feeling of community that is resilient and sustainable.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Mark Anthony Falzon who was my tutor for his invaluable insight and guidance throughout the process of writing the dissertation. I would also like to thank the participants of this study for their willingness to share their experiences with me. Their input was fundamental for my research to take shape.

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Research Article

‘Should I stay or should I go?’: Young people’s perspectives on moving abroad

Elaine Sciberras

Correspondence: elaine.sciberras.21@um.edu.mt

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore Maltese young people’s perceptions of moving abroad. While young adulthood is often associated with a desire to take on new ventures, it is also a life stage characterised by significant decision-making, including considerations of migration. Local survey data by Ernst & Young (EY) in 2022 found that over 70% of young individuals would rather reside or work abroad. However, sociological theories related to migration highlight that the decision of moving abroad is highly complex due to the multiple factors that must be taken into consideration before departure. This article draws on in-depth interviews and a focus group with young Maltese people who have moved abroad and those who wish to move abroad in the future, in order to understand their thought process in relation to the question: “Should I stay or should I go?”. The findings revealed that even though issues such as traffic and overpopulation are factors which motivate young people to move abroad, other factors such as family commitments and the close-knit communities tend to hold young individuals from moving abroad. The study also highlighted that moving abroad is rarely a spontaneous decision; rather, it involves prolonged reflection and long-term planning. This points to a clear distinction between the discourse of departure and actual migration. In other words, expressing a desire to move abroad does not necessarily translate into eventual departure.

Keywords: international migration; migration aspirations; young people; Malta

Introduction

Local statistical data highlights that a large percentage of young people want to live abroad. This suggests that Malta, despite being a sunny island with a rich historical and cultural heritage that attracts millions of tourists a year, does not seem to fully satisfy many young people’s aspirations for the future.

A survey published in 2022 by the company Ernst & Young (EY) claims that “72% of Gen-Z and 77% of Millennials prefer to work or live elsewhere rather than in Malta” (EY Malta, 2022, p. 2). The survey defines Gen-Z as individuals “aged from 16-25 and Millennials as those aged from 26-39” (EY Malta, 2022, p. 2). This survey revealed that employment opportunities and the need to explore new experiences are some of the motivating factors which lead young people to consider moving abroad. Furthermore, both generations also reported that

environmental concerns, traffic, and overdevelopment are amongst the concerning issues that Malta has to consider and prioritise. In contrast, respondents then identified the best characteristics that Malta offers as an island. These mostly included the climate, the healthcare system, the beaches, amongst others.

Further to this data, a study conducted by the United Nations in 2024 revealed that Maltese individuals under thirty years of age rank amongst the unhappiest individuals in the world, by placing 40th place amongst 143 countries (Borg, 2024). The study examined happiness levels on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the unhappiest and 10 being the happiest. Malta scored 6.45 points out of 10, whilst Scandinavian countries such as Sweden obtained a total score of 7.3 points, which suggests that individuals under thirty years of age are happier in these countries. Therefore, this decrease amongst young Maltese individuals could potentially indicate that low happiness levels could be one of the motivating factors which leads young people to consider moving abroad.

In addition, several social media platforms such as Times of Malta and Newsbook report that a concerning number of young Maltese individuals aspire to live abroad: “Why do millennials want to leave Malta?” (Galea Debono, 2021); “Vast majority of youths would rather live outside Malta” (Balzan, 2022). Such headlines suggest that the process of moving abroad is framed as a major issue and that a considerable amount of young people want to desperately leave Malta due to feelings of dissatisfaction.

An article published by the Malta Independent in May 2025 claims that an average of 19 young individuals are departing Malta every day (The Malta Independent, 2025). Furthermore, the current Maltese Government expresses concern that young Maltese individuals are leaving Malta from a relatively young age. However, such statistics were criticised due to the misleading and misinterpretation of figures, which portray unwanted concern about the situation that Malta is currently facing. In fact, statistics from the National Statistics Office (NSO) suggest that although there are young Maltese individuals who are leaving the country, in recent years, the return rate outweighs the departure rate. Therefore, this means that there are more Maltese returning to Malta compared to those leaving. This claim is also supported by another article published by the Times of Malta in 2025 (Borg, 2025). Yet, this was not always the trend because data suggests that the highest amount of young Maltese individuals (between the ages of 15 and 29 years) departing the country stood at 1,219 in 2013, followed by 828 individuals in 2012. In contrast, the return rate of young Maltese individuals outnumbered the departure rate in 2022 (n = 461) and 2023 (n = 572). Figures 1 and 2 below showcase the rates of return and departure amongst young Maltese individuals.

An interesting remark that Borg (2025) made was that even though individuals experience such negative feelings and aspire to move abroad, few actually depart from the country which in turn, indicates that there is this noticeable gap between wanting leave and actually leaving (Zammit, 2025). Therefore, the official verdict according to the Times of Malta article is that more people are retuning to Malta rather than leaving, which suggests that even though media platforms are portraying departure as a major concern, actual statistics dictate otherwise.

Furthermore, the local Government proposed measures into help addressing and tackling the issue with departure, such as a grant for families who have children continuing their

education beyond their mandatory school age and a housing grant in order to encourage young individuals to purchase their first property. These will help to reduce emigration rates amongst young Maltese individuals and safeguard the island's future, by reducing the risk of brain drain. In addition, the Prime Minister of Malta also introduced a labour migration policy in August 2025, to monitor the type of foreign workers that are coming to Malta and entering the labour market. Therefore, this comes to show how this issue is not only being politicised, but the media is also portraying misleading messages regarding departure amongst young Maltese individuals. Although it is a matter that must be addressed, the media tends to overemphasise such an issue as an alarming concern.

Figure 1: *NSO statistics indicating the rates of departure and return to Malta for young Maltese individuals aged 15-29 years between 2012 and 2023 (Borg, 2025)*

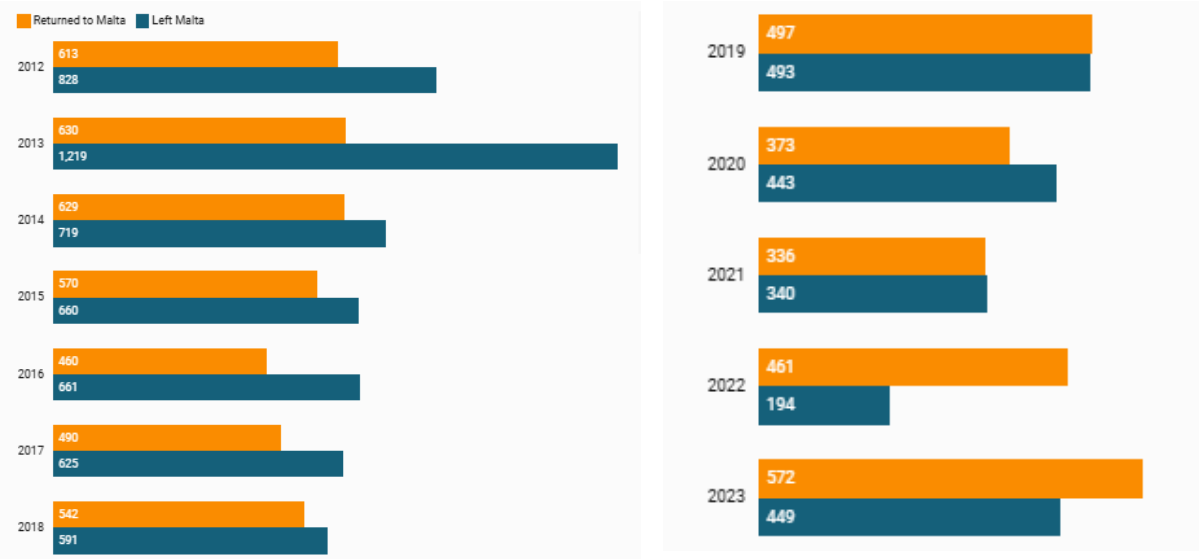
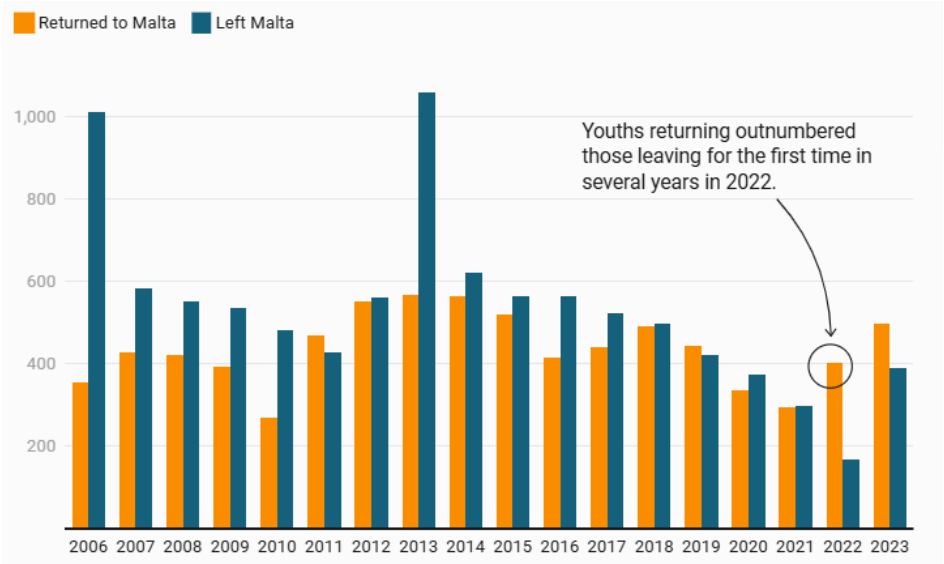


Figure 2: *NSO statistics indicating the rates of departure and return to Malta for young Maltese individuals aged 20-29 year between 2006 and 2023. (Borg, 2025)*



Young adulthood

Young adulthood is generally characterised as "a period of experimentation and exploration" (Nelson & Luster, 2015, p. 9). In addition, Arnett (2000) came up with the term of 'emerging adulthood', which refers to "those aged 18 to 25 years, who are neither adolescents nor adults. Emerging adulthood is characterised by individual variability, semi-autonomy, identity exploration, and changing worldviews" (Higley, 2019, p. 8). Although there is no universal definition of such a term, Arnett suggests this particular age range since it is a period whereby young individuals start to think about their future and plan ahead. Yet, Arnett also suggests that the norm in modern society is that young individuals are choosing to explore new horizons rather than abiding to past societal norms and expectations, due to better access to travel as well as increased opportunities abroad, which serve as incentives leading young individuals to look into new options besides their home country or country of residence. Therefore, this suggests that the period of adulthood is being prolonged due to these societal changes.

Migration and mobility

Migration is not an emerging concept, because people have been nomadic since human existence. Like other parts of the world, Malta experienced a continuous history of migration through different colonisers across the centuries which contributed to demographic changes within the population. In fact, a report published by King (1979) traces a timeline of Maltese migration rates throughout both world wars. According to the report, Malta had "the highest population density and the highest rate of post-war emigration of any country in Europe" (p. 4). Statistics from the report claim that 57.6% of Maltese immigrants left for Australia, 22% left to the United Kingdom, and 13% left for Canada between 1946 to 1976. This proves that mobility is an intrinsic part of the Maltese history and amongst Maltese individuals themselves. In addition, this also shows that migration can also be interpreted as a social process because it impacts the individual on a micro level and societies on a macro level. Therefore, migration and societies are intertwined.

A prominent theory of migration is Everett Lee's (1966) push and pull theory, which suggests that there are diverse factors which could either discourage (push factors) or encourage (pull factors) individuals to depart and settle elsewhere. Examples of push factors can include lack of employment, whereas examples of pull factors can include better employment opportunities. Therefore, these points serve as pros and cons that one needs to take into consideration before moving into another country. However, this model has been criticised by De Haas (2010) due to the overemphasis on the macro, structural level, as he argues that both "have a fundamentally limited concept of agency" (De Haas, 2010, p. 18).

The aspirations-capabilities model, proposed by Jørgen Carling (2014) counters this criticism. Opposed to Lee's (1966) model, this model adopts a micro approach as the focus is placed on human agency rather than structure. De Haas (2021) defines agency as "the limited – but real – ability of human beings (or social groups) to make independent choices" (De Haas, 2021, p. 14). The premise is that aspirations, agency, and capabilities guide one's desire to move, as these depend on the individual's preferences, commitments, and future plans, which

affect one's decision to make the move. In addition, one's decision to migrate occurs within a continuum, as there are individuals who choose to not migrate, individuals who wish to migrate, yet they are unable to do so, others who are still in doubt, and others who want to depart out of the country. Therefore, this comes to show that mobility and migration are entirely voluntary because "when people develop a wish to leave, the outcome depends on their capacity to convert their wish into a reality, given context-specific obstacles and opportunities" (Carling & Schewel, 2017, p. 12).

The significance of place

Place attachment, defined as "a bond between people and their environment" (Stedman, 2002, p. 5), is important in the decision-making process. This includes one's social attachment to the local community and also individual attachment in relation to one's "embodied memories" (Rishbeth & Powell, 2013, p. 5). An additional aspect is residential satisfaction, which ties in with one's happiness levels towards their home country. According to Brown and Moore (1970) as well as Speare (1974), individuals who start to experience dissatisfaction with their homeland (or residential space), would start to consider departure (Adams, 2015). This is highly relevant to the Maltese context, given the survey results presented above highlighting that more than 70% of individuals would rather settle elsewhere than in Malta (EY Malta, 2022).

Discourse of departure vs actual departure

Literature on migration and mobility behaviour support the idea that there is this "discrepancy between mobility intentions and moving behaviour" (Lu, 1999, p. 2). As mentioned, migration is in itself a decision-making process which involves a variety of stages that one needs to think of before actual departure, partly because there is a difference between considering departure and actually leaving the country. According to Lu (1999), "young people seem also more likely to follow up on their moving intentions and actually realize them" and it is worth addressing this gap between one's desire to migrate and one's actual decision to move (Lu, 1999, p. 12). This mirrors Borg's (2025) argument about the difference between considering moving (i.e. one's aspiration to move) versus actually moving abroad.

Small island states and migration

Since Malta is classified as a small island state (Baldacchino, 2020), there are multiple characteristics which impact how individuals living on a small state view the concept of migration due to multiple factors. These include limited island space, high population density, distance, and isolation. Since islands tend to be limited in space, frustration can arise because individuals could feel "imprisoned in their own country" (De Haas, 2014, p. 24). High population density is an additional issue to consider, partly because as the population increases, the demand for resources increases as well (Connel & Conway, 2000). Therefore, this could impose further pressure on the island's resources. In addition, distance and isolation are also two major factors to consider, as individuals could consider migration due to isolation (i.e. the island's geographical position), yet distance might serve as a hurdle which could discourage individuals from moving (Baldacchino, 2020). However, McLuhan and Powers (1992)

challenge the idea of distance and isolation, as they argue that the world is becoming a 'global village' due to better and faster communication, regardless of the distance involved (as cited in Baldacchino, 2020, p. 2).

This article builds on the existing local quantitative data presented above, by offering in-depth qualitative insights into a) the factors which influence young people's decisions to remain or leave Malta; b) whether living on an island could encourage or discourage mobility; and c) the challenges that young people might encounter when consider moving abroad. This study therefore offers an opportunity to study the field through a qualitative lens. When considered alongside local statistics and media portrayals, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of why young people wish to leave Malta and live abroad.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach, which focused on analysing people's perceptions on the chosen topic of study. As quantitative data has already been published, this research adopts a sociological, qualitative perspective, drawing on participants' interpretations rather than numerical analysis. A total of 13 participants participated in the study. Furthermore, this study was conducted in full conformity with the guidelines provided by the University of Malta's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) (Ref: ARTS-2023-00377), and data has been pseudonymised to protect participants' identities.

Sampling and recruitment

A set of eligibility criteria were established by the researcher, in order to obtain a more specific sample of participants. For instance, nationality was considered as a major factor, particularly because participants from both groups had to be Maltese. Another important factor was age. An age bracket between eighteen to thirty years of age was established which covers both Gen Z and Millennials. In addition, participants recruited for the study had to be Maltese individuals who were residing abroad and Maltese individuals living in Malta who were reading a course at the University of Malta on a full-time basis during the time of study. The total sample of participants amounted to 13 in total, including two males and 11 females. Participants were mainly recruited through social media platforms and personal networks, through purposive and snowball sampling.

Data collection and analysis

In-depth interviews and focus groups have been used to collect data. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom with Maltese individuals who lived abroad during the time of study, with the aim to evaluate their decision-making process which led them to depart Malta and settle elsewhere. All participants were residing in European countries during the time of study. Therefore, the main purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gather an individual perspective by observing participants' thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on this particular topic. On the other hand, the focus group was conducted with seven Maltese participants who lived in Malta and were reading a course at the University of Malta during the time of study. The majority of participants had mixed opinions on the concept of moving

abroad. The aim of the focus group was to evaluate the multiple viewpoints that participants express about being a young Maltese individual living in Malta in contemporary society, as well as to interview participants as a group by allowing room for discussion, dialogue, and conversation. The focus group was conducted within the premises of the University of Malta.

Data was analysed using Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis technique, through the use of coding by engaging with the data, formulating keywords, and developing themes which capture patterns. The interviews and focus group were transcribed manually and colour coded, depending on the proposed themes and sub-themes which emerged from the findings.

Findings

Mobility as a process

Participants' accounts highlight that mobility is regarded as a process which involves multiple stages to consider prior, during and after making the move:

> It is a process […] so obviously before we moved it was kind of a challenge on its own, running through numbers […] you start an interview […] apply for jobs […] and then trying to co-ordinate logistically when you are going to leave and where you're going to say when you get there. (Samantha, lives overseas, interviews)

Aside from the moving process, participants also stated that it is necessary to consider other factors, such as employment, place of residence, cost of living, saving up for the process, alongside others. Therefore, mobility is a lengthy process which involves thinking and consideration:

> So, when we started thinking [...] you have to apply for jobs, you have to go interviews [...] trying to see what to do with our apartment [...] there was a lot of research, debating [...] talking to our families, and it was a very big decision to make. (Mary, lives overseas, interviews)

This shows how mobility factors impact one's decision to move abroad, because although individuals may wish to depart from the country, they have to take into account both their aspirations as well as their capabilities in order to make sure that they are equipped to make the move. This was proposed in Carling and Schewel's (2017) model, whereby both agency as well as structure have to be considered.

Main motives of moving abroad

Both interview and focus group participants mentioned the various motivating factors which led them or will lead them to consider moving abroad. Job opportunities and high salaries ranked amongst the most popular motivating factors, as participants argued that employment opportunities are limited in Malta. However, this varies according to the sector that one is looking at, as certain domains tend to offer more opportunities than others, one of which is the gaming industry. As Samantha reflected, her decision to move overseas " *was mainly driven by work opportunities […] the plan was mainly to work for an industry that isn't currently available in Malta and try to branch out to more industries".* In addition, participants

such as Mary and Maria argued that most of the jobs abroad offer higher salaries when compared to Malta. This is because when comparing Malta's cost of living to the salaries in Malta, the cost of living tends to be higher than the salary earned. Maria explained: "*I am pretty sure that Malta's salaries are not high enough to support the cost of living […] comparing salaries in Malta to those abroad, the salaries here are much lower than abroad".* (lives in Malta, focus group).

The need for independence was frequently cited by participants, partly because Malta became chaotic, crowded and noisier over the years. Therefore, they resorted for places which have more quiet areas, greener landscapes, and less stressful environments. However, others remarked that the issue of traffic was present in their countries of residence as well.

> So, I think ultimately it was moving abroad to find a better life in general […] and for me Malta might have not provided that […] and I think the only option to do that was to move abroad. (Max, lives overseas, interviews)

Participants who still reside in Malta also reported that they would search for better job opportunities, higher salaries and a different environment to live in. However, they also mentioned that they would take into consideration housing prices, since it is rather expensive to live in Malta.

> I would consider employment obviously, the cost of living, the price to buy a house, the modes of transport available to travel, inflation rates, and the weather as well. (Aaliyah, lives in Malta, focus group)

Therefore, such perspectives link to Lee's (1966) push-pull model which suggests that as people consider departure, they take into consideration both the positive and negative factors which serve as pivotal guidelines in choosing their country of residence.

Temporality versus permanency

When interview participants were asked whether they would rather stay in their current country of residence or return back to Malta, there were quite a few contrasting views. While the majority stated that they would rather continue to live abroad, others argued that they might return back to Malta to raise a family and to permanently settle down.

In fact, both Ella and John agreed that they would rather continue to live abroad for two different reasons:

> […] all of the reasons that we had left, had worked out [...] (Ella, lives overseas, interviews)

> […] the liberty of living by yourself is priceless in my opinion […] (John, lives overseas, interviews)

On the contrary, Samantha added that:

> I would want my children to have the same upbringing I did, in the sense that I was close with my instant family members […] But at the same time, it poses the dilemma that I wouldn't want my children to grow up in the environment that Malta has right now. (Samantha, lives overseas, interviews)

Furthermore, focus group participants argued that at present, they would rather remain in Malta, yet if they were to move abroad, they would choose to stay living abroad.

> If I were to move, I think it would be really difficult to start a new lifestyle abroad and moving […] I don't think I would come back. (Aaliyah, lives in Malta, focus group)

As noted, there was no mutual agreement amongst the participants, partly because there was not a definite opinion on whether participants would rather remain abroad on a temporary basis or else continue to live abroad permanently. Therefore, it is evidently clear that participants themselves were experiencing this dilemma on whether or not they should stay or they should go.

Challenges of moving abroad

Although moving abroad involves several motives that encourage people to migrate, it also comes with challenges and downsides. One of these is the cost involved in the process, including expenses such as housing, rent, transportation, and other daily living costs, which can make relocating more difficult. John, who has moved overseas, argued: *"I think that is the most challenging, financially to kind of get enough to make the move, because there are a lot of costs [...]"*. (John, lives overseas, interviews)

In addition, participants also pointed out the changes that the process of moving entails. One of the major transitions which participants highlighted was the change of living with their parents to living independently in another country, which although it has its benefits, it also carries its challenges such as adjusting to the country's system, customs, and culture.

> I think the biggest challenge is getting accustomed to different things here. So, you are suddenly living with your parents and then you are living alone. (Max, lives overseas, interviews)

Furthermore, participants also remarked that leaving their family, close relatives, and peers behind was considered as a major hardship, because they tend to miss them as well as other important occasions. In fact, both Mary and Samantha agreed on this point.

> [...] leaving family behind is one of the most things which most people struggle with and holds them back from moving. (Mary, lives overseas, interviews)

> You'll go, you'll be completely alone. Like, you leave your social circle completely, which isn't an easy decision to take. (Samantha, lives overseas, interviews)

Therefore, expenses, transitioning to a different lifestyle, and leaving close relatives behind were identified as major challenges, alongside higher employment competition were identified as major hurdles for young people who are living abroad.

Island life

The data reveals that living on a small island like Malta can have both its advantages and disadvantages. A key advantage according to participants is that small island states do not

involve long distances to travel, as it does not take long to arrive from one location to another. Yet, focus group participants remarked that due to the increase of vehicles on Maltese roads, it has become quite a challenge to travel.

> I think the fact that we live in such a small island, and we have an increasing population, it has become more difficult to arrive from one place to another due to traffic, which is crazy. (Amy, lives in Malta, focus group)

Another factor which participants mentioned was that they miss the sea, weather, and the Maltese cuisine, such as Kinne and pastizzi which are considered as local specialities.

> Erm the food, the beach […] I missed the beach when it was summer here. (Samantha, lives overseas, interviews)

> [...] the biggest issue would be the food because I miss some foods [...] like erm Kinnie or pastizzi [...] (John, lives overseas, interviews)

Furthermore, focus group participants provided similar views, as they also mentioned the sea, the weather, and the Maltese language as well.

On the other hand, participants mentioned that some of the weak points of living on island included issues of overdevelopment, the environment, and property prices. This is due to the increase of cranes, building Outside Development Zone (ODZ) areas and increase in construction which create issues related to space and land area.

> There is no urban planning in Malta […] so if you would improve that, it would ease traffic and put more uniformity on the construction that is going on. (John, lives overseas, interviews)

Ella agreed with John, stating; "*yes the environment definitely needs more love, and improvement for sure"*. (Ella, lives overseas, interviews)

An additional concern related to island life was property prices since they increased throughout the years. In fact, both John and Aaliyah provided similar views on such matter:

> And housing, that's another thing, so housing prices in Malta I think are ridiculous compared to the average salary that you get paid so, that was another factor ….]. (John, lives overseas, interviews)

> It became very expensive to buy a place. And speaking from my experience, the fact that I am 20, and I have plans to buy a place, I cannot afford it now. (Aaliyah, lives in Malta, focus group)

The Maltese culture: Families and close relatives at the core

One of the main findings of the study was that Maltese families are very close-knit, because it is fairly common that individuals depart from the parental home at approximately thirty years old or until they get married (Arena, 2022). Therefore, participants remarked that such a phenomenon could serve as a factor which might discourage individuals to move abroad, whilst other expressed the desire of independence and wanted to not only leave their parental home (i.e. the close-knit Maltese family) but also the country. In fact, both interview and focus group

participants had mixed opinions, because whilst some enjoyed the benefits of relying on their close family relatives and neighbours, others stated the opposite.

> It's nice to live in an island where the community is very connected. (Samantha, lives overseas, interviews)

> As an island, we are a very close-knit community [...] I think that is the main factor which would discourage me to move abroad. Because I am used to having my relatives living close to me, in the same locality basically. (Claire, lives in Malta, focus group)

However, both Aaliyah and Ella provided contrasting views:

> Although I agree with you, one can say the opposite [...] because nowadays, if you share something on social media [...] people who know you, would know what you are doing. (Aaliyah, lives in Malta, focus group)

> So, in Malta, kind of, like, we were stuck with our families, when here we finally feel like adults and we have our own space, it's nice and free. (Ella, lives overseas, interviews)

Although participants reported that social media keeps them in touch with their family, they also stated that feelings of homesickness still remain present due to distance. Furthermore, participants stated that prior to departing into a foreign country, they did consider the place of residence, so as not to be far from their families and would be easier to visit them. Focus group participants also mentioned that if they were to move, they would also miss their parents, close relatives, and friends.

> It is a process. In the beginning it's ok if you are away from your friends and from your family because everything is new, you're exploring […] but then once you settle in, that's where the homesickness starts to kick in and from my experience, it was eased by, you know visiting Malta. (Samantha, lives overseas, interviews)

> I think that the feeling of homesickness would impact me a lot. (Aaliyah, lives in Malta, focus group)

Therefore, this comes to show that even though the need for independence was present, participants still took their families and close relatives into consideration which emphasises the importance of families within the Maltese culture.

Place

The significance of place played an important role in the findings of this study, particularly because Malta was referred to as the 'home' which participants grew in. In addition, prior to departure, participants stated that they considered the place in which they were moving in, and this was based on several factors which were mentioned in the previous sections. As Mary highlighted: "*I think it's not just leaving, I think its finding that place to go to"* (Mary, lives overseas, interviews).

Furthermore, interview participants also pointed out that although they moved abroad in order to explore new opportunities beyond the horizons, they also argued that the perfect place

does not exist because every place has its own issues, concerns, and weak points to work on. Therefore, when considering a place to move and settle into, one must take into account that perfection does not exist.

> I feel like, everywhere you go in life, it can be in any part of the globe, everyone has a job, everyone has to deal with some kind of traffic […] It's not just Malta, this problem is everywhere […] the perfect country doesn't exist. (Janett, lives overseas, interviews).

Discourse of departure versus actual departure

Throughout the interviews and focus group, participants were asked to discuss the difference between discourse of departure and actual departure. Max and Janett, who both live overseas, agreed that it does not mean that if an individual expresses a desire to depart from their current country of residence, it does not mean that they will move immediately, and this is due to multiple reasons. Max remarked: *"I think people say it more than they do it […] And I think that they use it as a coping mechanism, just to vent out their frustration"*. Similarly, Janett added: "*I don't think that people will leave […] and I don't think that leaving the country will solve any problem"*.

Therefore, this comes to show that whilst individuals tend to perceive the idea of living abroad as a problem-solving mechanism, such participants debunk the myth that living abroad will solve one's problems, because there is a difference between expressing a desire (or thought) to leave and actually moving. Focus group participants also had similar views on such matter, as they also agreed that even though young individuals might express their frustration about leaving Malta, they might not leave immediately.

Discussion

From the findings gathered, participants view moving abroad as a lengthy process that involves long term planning for the future, yet it also poses this dilemma to take the leap. Furthermore, the findings also suggest that whilst there are multiple motives which lead individuals to move abroad (such as traffic issues and concerns of overdevelopment), other factors (such as becoming accustomed to a new lifestyle and leaving the home country which one grew up in) might lead individuals to re-evaluate their decision of moving abroad or remain in Malta. These findings align with the EY 2022 survey, which suggests that issues such as traffic, overdevelopment, and construction were framed as the top concerns for Malta in 2022.

Therefore, the decision to moving abroad goes beyond one's desire (or wish) to leave but stretches itself as a process of re-thinking and considering one's capabilities to actually make the move. This aligns with Carling's (2014) aspiration-capabilities model, whereby individuals are placed on different wavelengths, as some want to excessively depart from the country, others who are still considering the process, and others who would rather remain in their current country of residence, thereby highlighting that not all individuals who aspire to leave the country, actually end up leaving. This was evident in both the interviews and focus group, as participants remarked that there is a difference between expressing a desire to leave and

actually making the move, partly because one does not solely consider structure but also takes into account their agency (whether they are capable of moving or not). Therefore, this comes to show that as previously mentioned, several media platforms frame the issue of young people aspiring to move abroad as a major concern, when in fact, there is a gap between expressing the desire to leave and actually taking the leap to settle elsewhere. This goes in line with Lu's (1999) theory in describing the gap between one's desire to move abroad and one's behaviour of actually making the move (Lu, 1999).

Furthermore, even though the perception of moving abroad tends to be portrayed as a silver bullet, it also carries a baggage of challenges as well, since perfection is impossible to achieve. As discussed in the findings, whilst the motives of moving abroad included the desire of seeking independence, the search for employment opportunities, and a better environment, the top listed challenges included taking into account the expenses involved, the process of settling in, living far away from family and traffic, which was perceived as an issue that remained persistent not only in Malta but also in other countries abroad.

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations identified was that the focus group sample could have been more varied, rather than limited to university students. This decision was motivated by practical reasons in planning the focus group and recruiting participants to agree on a particular date and location. Inviting participants from different educational institutions would have allowed me to analyse the relationship between participants' educational backgrounds and their opinions on whether they would move abroad or remain in Malta. Therefore, my findings from the data collection may not necessarily represent the views of most young people, whose aspirations and capabilities might differ.

Conclusion

The study provided an in-depth sociological analysis in exploring the motivating factors which could lead individuals to consider departure or choose to stay. In addition, it is worth remarking that since the study described the local context, several concerns were flagged. Policy makers must address such concerns and implement other alternatives in order to avoid the risk of brain drain. Such measures which should be considered include the reduction of overdevelopment, consider long term planning, incentives to reduce car dependency, control of inflation rates, safeguarding the environment, and increasing green areas, which if addressed, could improve young people's wellbeing and quality of life and ensure a better future for Malta. In conclusion, it was crucial to observe how although the concept of moving abroad involves a lengthy process of planning and actually moving, it is worth remarking that it is shaped through people's aspirations, capabilities, and structures, as all are considered as influential factors that filter in one's decision to stay or go.

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