“U l-Kotra Qamet f’Daqqa”

A qualitative analysis of the visual signifiers of Maltese cultural identity

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Communications at the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences (MaKS).

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Abstract

This dissertation qualitatively analyses perception of the graphic identity of the Maltese, as communicated via visual signifier such as icons and symbols. It looks at how images conventionally associated with Malta and Maltese identity communicate that identity via sign vehicles such as colour, form, and placement, providing a deeper insight into well-established Maltese. A triadic methodology, comprising focus groups, in-depth interviews, and semiotic analysis is adopted to investigate this. It was found that the Maltese flag was perceived as the strongest representation of Maltese identity, along with the Maltese cross, the Valletta skyline, the eye of the Luzzu, and the Cisk logo. It was found that the main signifiers of Maltese cultural identity were the use of bright, warm colours and a cluttered general design, signifying the Maltese qualities of friendliness, loudness, warmth, passion, and over-the-top way of doing things. The research also indicated certain signifiers (such as the Maltese flag) are equally representative of cultural identity to both locals and foreigners, and others which convey Maltese identity solely to the Maltese.

Key words: Malta, Maltese identity, cultural identity, perception, meaning, semiotic analysis, icons, symbols, signifiers, graphic identity.

(10,836 words)
1. Introduction

The title of the work comes from the poem L-Għanja tar-Rebha, by Rużar Briffa, who wrote the poem to portray an instance where the Maltese stood up for who they were, for their identity. Understanding the images that communicate identity and how they are perceived is a significant part of identity itself. Images are vehicles for meaning, and are a vital part of the creation and communication of cultural identity especially. The purpose of this study is to investigate which are the visual signifiers conventionally associated with Maltese cultural identity, how exactly those signifiers are perceived, and what exactly is being perceived.

Butz (2009) postulates that the symbols of the nations do far more than merely signify the general concept of a ‘nation’, but also “condense the knowledge, values, history, and memories associated with one's nation”. He maintains that it is “clear that national symbols also hold the potential to represent the strong emotional attachments felt for one's nation”.

Given this, and the fact that Malta as a nation is becoming more widely recognised both virtually and physically, the value and relevance of this study is easily inferred. Valletta is currently undergoing changes in preparation for becoming a European Capital of Culture in 2018, and Malta as a whole is changing rapidly. To complement the new identity that is being born, we as a nation would do well to examine with care of the new signifiers we are constantly creating to build our own identity. The symbols which define us are constantly being recycled and used in new contexts, given new meaning, and as Saetersdal (1999) aptly put it:

As old people die, old ideas and symbolic meaning contents die with them. Young people will recreate and redefine old images to suit their needs in their own everyday reality. Hence,
the focus of the study was on the perceptions of a young generation of people, aged between 18 to 30 years old.

This study is based on Daniel Chandler’s method of semiotic analysis, as well as the Saussurean concepts of signifier and signified, with contributions from varied sources of history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, contributing to the overall richness of the data presented within this dissertation. Theories on identity, culture and semiotics are considered and put into context in the second chapter, the literature review.

In chapter three, a breakdown of the methodology implemented in this research is articulated, including focus groups and in-depth interviews. A semiotic analysis is presented in Chapter Four, the results of which are discussed along with the focus group and interview findings in Chapter Five. The final chapter lists the limitations and weaknesses of the study, and provides recommendations for future research.
2. Literature Review

Central to the inquiry of the visual signifiers that represent a particular country is a semiotic understanding of what makes a sign or signifier, what identity is and how it is constructed, as well as what makes up a Maltese identity. Hence, the literature review will be divided in the following sections:

1. Identity
2. Maltese Identity
3. Signs and signifiers

It is important to note that any emphasis found in direct quotes, such as the use of italics, are as quoted in the original work, unless otherwise indicated.

1.1. On Identity

According to The Lexicon Webster Dictionary (1979), the term ‘identity’ refers to:

The state or fact of being the same one; the state or fact of remaining the same one, as under varying conditions; the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another; the condition or character that distinguishes a person or a thing; individuality; sameness in nature or qualities; exact likeness.

However, identities tend to adjust according to different contexts. Persons can be seen as having more than one identity, or several aspects to the same identity, and each particular aspect or identity is more salient according to the context within which the person finds him or herself in. Ken Browne (2008) states that: “Individuals have multiple identities, asserting different identities in different circumstances.”

Philip Gleason, in his 1983 study on the semantic history of the term, put forward the argument that dictionary definitions do not adequately cover all senses of the word, writing that:
identity is a new term, as well as being an elusive and ubiquitous one. It came into use as a popular social-science term only in the 1950s… The original *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, published in the early 1930s, carries no entry at all for *identity*, and the entry headed ‘Identification’ deals with fingerprinting and other techniques of criminal investigation.

Gleason writes that identity can be seen as something which defines the ‘essence’ of something. In *Sign, Image, Symbol* (1966) Gyorgy Kepes cites two definitions relevant to this study, the first being: “National identity describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols” (Bloom 1990). This is relevant to the study as it assumes that the Maltese participants will identify with the images presented, the question is the degree of the identification. The second relevant definition is that:

Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses… Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself (Hall, 1989).

This notion of identity as being a dynamic process is a more recent hypothesis, and seems to support experience in life, such as how cultural symbols are reused and recycled over time to generate different meanings, and thus different identities.

In a paper tackling an ordinary language analysis of the word ‘identity’, J. D. Fearon (1999) gives a clear, comprehensive overview on the conception and history of the term, as well as arguing the pros and cons of the diverse range for this concept. He concludes with a definition that will serve as the one throughout this dissertation:
identity is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways and that (a) the person takes a special pride in; (b) the person takes no special pride in, but which so orient her behaviour that she would be at a loss about how to act and what to do without them; or (c) the person feels she could not change even if she wanted to.

1.2. Cultural and National Identity

If we begin, as we must, with the individual, we find that from the moment of his birth not only his behaviour but his very thought, his hopes, aspirations, the moral values which direct his action and justify and give meaning to his life in his own eyes and those of his fellows, are shaped by the body of custom of the group of which he becomes a member.


From the above quote, we can see that the definition of identity given in the previous section is applicable not only to personal identity, but also to a group identity. We are invariably shaped by the environment in which we live, and in turn, help to shape it. Group identity may be grouped into three specific kinds of group identity, those being national, ethnic and cultural identity. These have variations in meaning when describing group identity. National identity tends to be used within a political context, having a national identity means that one is eligible to certain rights within a country. To be considered as a citizen of a particular country means “to comply with that conceptualisation of identity in order to be recognized as political and juridical subjects” (Sökefeld, 2001).

Ethnic identity refers to:

a named social category of people based on perceptions of shared social experience or ancestry. Members of the ethnic group see themselves as sharing cultural traditions and history that distinguish them from other groups. Ethnic group identity has a strong
psychological or emotional component that divides the people of the world into opposing categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’. (Bailey, 2010).

Ethnic identity and cultural identity are closer as concepts and are usually used interchangeably. However, ‘ethnic identity’, tends to refer to the race of the people when discussing identity (Nagel, 1994); hence a preference of the term ‘cultural identity’. In the paper ‘Cultural Identity and Tourism’, Hinch, McIntosh, and Ingram discuss how Maori culture in New Zealand has evolved its identity to accommodate the influx of increasing tourism. He describes how concepts and their significance can only be fully understood within their original frame of reference, as they are bound in a nexus of other concepts and meanings. “To take a concept out of its context of origin“, Sökefeld writes, “and to apply it elsewhere... is to insert it into other networks of concepts and meanings, that is, to alter its meaning.”

A significant contributor of works pertaining to the exploration of cultural identity is the sociologist and cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall; in his paper entitled ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’(1990), he maintains that there are at least two ways of looking at cultural identity. In the first position, he postulates that one may view cultural identity as a “collective 'one true self', a culture that is the same for all those who belong to that culture, namely, “the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning’”, cultural identity as a “collective 'one true self'”.

This view, according to Hall, is an idealistic term that does not take into account of the fact that identity changes, that it is is not something fixed and permanent, but rather, is a work in progress, a process that is continually being constructed, deconstructed, and transformed. Therefore he proposes a second position, whereby he argues that:
as well as the main points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities… Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

Hall assumes a more fluid conception of identity – as something that is constantly changing, a “positioning” within the “narratives of the past”, namely that identity only exists in one place at one point in time, it is ‘positioned’ with a context. Hall emphasises that any attempt into understanding what identity is must take into account its immediate geographical and historical location; this is why Hall prefers the term “positionalities” because all identities are framed within a socio-historical context, and the identity ceases to exist when removed from that context.

### 2.1. Maltese Identity

Malta has a rich and varied history, spanning back to c. 5,000 B.C, when the first human settlers came to Malta from Sicily (Berg, 1995). In ‘Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta’, Carmel Cassar writes about how the geographic location of the Maltese Islands in the middle of the Mediterranean allowed a culture to develop on the island due to “shipping from north to south [that] often by-passed the Maltese islands”, from as early as the Copper Age. He lists down several events which he feels are integral to Maltese identity, such as the Great Siege of 1565, postulating that:

“Geographically, Malta is sufficiently compact to have its own distinct identity. Yet it was only under the rule of the Order of St John that a Maltese culture came into being”. 
Along with the Great Siege, he cites the arrival of St. Paul and the spread of Catholicism as a significant event, as the clergy played an important role in the dissemination of culture. The Second World War, the Anglicisation of the Maltese and independence from the British as also noted as significant.

Cassar identifies three constituents that identify the Maltese ethos: language, religion, and “the emergence of a Maltese polity”. He backs up his claim by citing P. Sant Cassia, who “proposed three criteria traditionally utilized to identify the ethnic identity of a community. These are: language, ‘customs’ particularly religion, and ‘blood’ (descent)”. Cassar then discusses certain personalities who were instrumental in the formation of Maltese cultural identity, such as Dun Karm and Mikiel Anton Vassalli, who both held religion and language “to be the crux of Maltese identity”. If Cassar is right in identifying these events, hence a number of the signifiers representing Maltese identity today should refer to these events. The signifiers should also be recognised across the population, as:

National culture is not a folk-lore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover a people’s true nature. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon, 1963).

3.1. Signs and Signifiers

No problems are more complex or more fundamental to the concerns of man and civilization than those regarding signs. The sign is relevant to the whole extent of knowledge and of human life; it is a universal instrument in the world of human beings, like motion in the world of physical nature.

(Maritain, 1931)
The sign may be considered as something which is representative of something else, it stands for something other than itself. In the Saussurean tradition, the sign may be broken down into the signifier and the signified; the former being the vehicle by which the concept or meaning is communicated, the physical image, sound, etc., the latter being the mental construct or concept which is being inferred. A signifier must always be viewed within a context or system, as it has no meaning in isolation. Culture may be seen as

A larger signifying order – a complex system of signs which, when brought together, form predictable patterns of representation which can be used to exchange messages...

Culture is based on a collective understanding of the signifying order. Society can be seen as a collective of individuals, who are not necessarily from the same origins, which participate in the dominant signifying order. As many cultures can inhabit one society, there may be more than one signifying order at work“

(Danesi and Perron, 1999; as cited in Debono 2013).

If one views culture as a system of signification, then it stands to reason that the cultural cohort utilises a number of symbols and symbolic transactions to operate the performances of its established institution, currency for example. Culturally endorsed symbols structure relationships within the community and thus are told contributing to the maintenance of social order. National symbols infiltrate most aspects of modern society, and represent strong emotional attachments felt for one’s nation (Butz, 2009).

In a study on the symbols of cultural identity within Tanzania (1999), Saetersdal comments that as “culture is changing, symbols of cultural identity are given new meaning content, and used in a new context”, and although he writes about African sub-cultures, this also applies to Malta and Maltese culture. As technology and globalisation lead to
acculturation and the merging of different sociocultural groups, conventional identity is constantly being challenged and contested.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the main areas to be researched as well as reviewed key definitions and theories regarding culture, identity, the events that define Maltese identity, and visual signification, as well as looking at the interrelated aspects between these components. Considering this, it is evident that signs and signification play an important role in the process of cultural identity.
3. Methodology

This research investigates how young people perceive Maltese cultural identity via visual signifiers conventionally associated with Malta. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative method was implemented over a quantitative one; as

The subjective perception of the environment by the person examined is exactly what qualitative researchers are interested in… People develop over their lives a personal framework of beliefs and values with which they selectively and subjectively build meaning and significance in events. It is this framework… that the qualitative researcher is interested in learning about.”

(Jones, 1985; as cited in Heyink and Tymstra, 1993).

Research may be deemed as qualitative when it explores the nature of a subject or subjects, rather than determining the number of those subjects, when it is about seeing “what things ‘exist’ rather than to determine how many such things there are” (Walker, 1985).

The research utilised a triadic approach:

1. Focus groups
2. In-depth interviews
3. Semiotic analysis

3.1. Focus groups
According to Krueger, 1994:

A focus group interview is a carefully planned session designed to obtain several individuals’ perceptions of a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment… The discussion is relaxed, comfortable, and often enjoyable for
participants. Careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provides insights into how a product, service, or opportunity is perceived.

The advantages of focus groups include insights on group interaction and dynamics, an opportunity to observe how participants influence each other, and how they interact with different topics. Focus groups allow the interviewer to probe for clarification or extra information and have high face validity. Finally, they provide a rich source of information about perceptions and attitudes which, says Krueger, is difficult to obtain by other methods.

For the focus groups in this study, the independent variables of age and nationality were chosen. The range was limited to those aged from 18 to 30 years of ages (both inclusive) due to greater accessibility to participants. Two focus groups were conducted, the first with Maltese participants, the criteria for ‘Maltese’ being born and raised in Malta as well as owning a Maltese passport; and the second with non-Maltese participants. Nationalities in this group consisted of Russians, French, Italian and Bulgarian. All participants in the study were recruited by means of convenience sampling, either by a word-of-mouth call for applicants or through direct request via email.

Both focus groups were held in Room 106 at the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences at the University of Malta campus on the 14th of March, 2014, and lasted for approximately one hour. The process of the focus groups were as follows: a pilot study was conducted via Facebook, where people were asked which images came to mind when thinking about Malta. Twenty of these images were then selected to form part of a question sheet which was then handed out and filled in during both focus groups. These visual signifiers were chosen across a varying number of cultural aspects, such as those of historical significance, those of religious significance, and also commercial and linguistic significance.
The filling in of the question sheet as well as a consent form (see Appendix B and C) formed the first part of each focus group. Each participant was asked to answer individually and refrain from discussion with others. Question number 4 involved a table with code numbers which referred to the specific images chosen, which were then shown one by one on a laptop to the participants. Each participant then rated each image on a scale of 0 to 10 on how much they perceived the image to represent Malta and Maltese culture. This was followed by a discussion based on the question sheet; first asking the participants what they associated with Maltese culture, and then focusing specifically on the twenty selected images. Participants were asked to refrain from going back to change their answers. Following the full transcription of the focus groups’ recordings, a semiotic analysis was then conducted. Results from the focus group will be discussed in Chapter 5.

3.2. In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are used to collect background information or to seek the expert knowledge of a specialist or qualified individual. Semi-structured interviews use a guide structured by specific questions and topics that must be covered. According to Bradley and Harrell, 2009, semi-structured interviews are “often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided.”

The interviews were held with the purpose of searching for insights into the process of communicating identity via signifiers, as well as to deepen understanding of identity itself. Three specialists were interviewed: Mr. Karl Bondin, the Brand Development Executive at Airmalta; Dr. Jean-Paul Baldacchino an anthropologist, psychoanalyst and Senior Lecturer at University of Malta; Dr. Vince Briffa, Head of Department of Digital Arts, a multimedia artist, curator, and lecturer at University of Malta.
3.3. Semiotic Analysis

On the focus group question sheet, participants were asked to name the top five signifiers which they perceived to most accurately reflect Maltese identity. A semiotic analysis was then applied to these five images in an attempt to comprehend “how meaning is generated and conveyed” (Berger, 2005). The analysis involved listing the signifiers present within the texts as well as what was signified by those signifiers, describing connoted meaning (what is associated with the signifier) and denoted meaning (the standard meaning of the signifier), and looking at the paradigmatic (elements that can substitute each other in a given context) and syntagmatic (the structural relationship between a number of elements) relationships of the texts. A table encapsulating the semiotic analysis may be found in the appendix. The semiotic analysis may be found in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, the results of which are presented together with the focus groups and interview findings in the chapter ‘Discussion of Findings’.
4. Semiotic Analysis

The following chapter consists of an analysis of the signifiers and signifieds contained within five of the images presented within the focus groups. These five texts selected for analysis were the top visual signifiers chosen by the focus group participants as their ‘top five images that most represent Malta and Maltese culture’ via question six in the focus group question sheet. The texts are as following:

1. Maltese flag
2. Valletta skyline
3. Maltese Cross
4. Eye of the Luzzu
5. Cisk logo

The Cisk logo was tied in ratings with the map of the Islands and the eye of the Luzzu; yet the map was eliminated in favour of the latter two options, as these evoked more discussion and emotion during the focus groups. Each signifier will be analysed separately, first briefly describing some historical background, and then by analysing it on a semiotic level. Representations of these texts are included in this chapter, and are not virtually unique, but copies of the original sources.
4.1 The Maltese Flag

According to folklore, the Maltese flag was torn off from Count Roger I’s flag in 1090 in recognition of the bravery of the Maltese who fought by his side against the Arabs. Another possible source of the flag’s colours is that of the flag of the Knights Hospitallers, which consists of a white cross on a red background. The emblem of the George cross in the upper left-hand corner of the flag was awarded to the nation by King George VI in 1942 for the bravery from by the locals during the Second World War.

This text is a symbol, having a conventional and learned association to Maltese national identity. It has both simple and complex elements; the colour scheme being fairly simple yet the George cross being a text within itself and hence more complex. The signs within the text include the colours of red (in the fly) and white (in the hoist), divided equally along a vertical axis. A cross, outlined in red, can be seen to bear the words ‘for gallantry’ in the upper left-hand corner, also depicting a man on a horse with its front legs raised over the head of a creature.
The denoted meaning signified by these signs, taken as a semiotic whole, is the idea of Malta as a political nation, Malta as a country. Connoted meaning of the colours includes the idea of contrast, possibly a binary opposition, between the whiteness of one part of the flag (purity, virginity, cleanliness, holiness, sacredness) next to the versus the adjacent bright red (sinfulness, passion, emotional temperament, danger, lust, warmth, fire, love, blood), supposing a people possessing two opposing natures. The denoted meaning of the George cross is that of the bravery and honour shown by the Maltese during WWII whilst implying British influence on the national identity. In itself it is also an image referring to a Christian religious nature (both the main shape of the sign as a cross as well as the image of St. George slaying the dragon depicted within it). This denotes an imposition of British culture on Maltese culture. In fact, many Maltese have mixed feelings about the George cross, and in 2013 a campaign was launched to remove or replace the symbol.

As regards syntagmatic positioning, the placement of the general features of the flag generally does not change, such as the depiction of the flag within a heart that signifies Malta during the Eurovision (Figure 2). From a paradigmatic perspective, the colours are also clear signifiers of the national identity, as changing the colours leads to changing its significance. If the red colour was moved to the hoist and changed to yellow, the flag changes meaning, signifying not the Maltese national identity but the flag representing the Archbishop of Malta. Different versions of the flag in the past showed that the colours of red and white were for a long time used as part of Malta’s national colours, along with blue, which was removed not long after Malta ceased to be part of British territory (figures 3 and 4). Today, the red and white colours along with the George cross still feature in Maltese governmental flags, such as that of the Presidential Flag of Malta (Figure 5).
Figure 2. Eurovision Song Contest logo with Maltese Flag depiction. Retrieved from http://wiwibloggs.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/ESCMalta.png

Figure 3. Colonial flag of Malta (c.1813-1875). Retrieved from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/22/19th_Century_Flag_of_Malta.svg

Figure 4. Colonial flag of Malta (1875-1898). Retrieved from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/Flag_of_Malta_%281875-1898%29.svg
Valletta is the capital of the Maltese islands and a UNESCO world heritage site, noted for its baroque architecture and rich history. Its skyline today consists of a number of historic buildings whose shape clearly identifies it as belonging to Valletta. The buildings which seem to be the main signifiers of the skyline are: the Basilica of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Pro-Cathedral of St. Paul, and the St. Andrew bastions, part of the fortifications instigated by Jean Parisot de la Vallette.
This text may be identified as an icon as it is a photograph of the actual physical landscape of the island. It is a complex text and not so easily reproduced. Signifiers within this text include the colours of mainly warm beiges and light blue; the unique form of the landscape, including the rounded outline of the Basilica, adjacent to the pointed spire of the Pro-Cathedral, and the smooth rectangular lines of the St. Andrew’s bastions.

Denoted meaning points to Valletta the capital city, underlining the beauty of the scene in this particular photo. Connoted meaning points to warmth and a rich culture and history. The Baroque architecture of many of the buildings that form the skyline points to Maltese identity, as this type of architecture is frequently seen throughout the island, as well as the colour of the globigerina limestone, which is also characteristically Maltese.

From a syntagmatic point of view, the angle of which the skyline is viewed differs in different representations, however the norm tends to the view from Sliema, with the Basilica usually in the centre of the representation or slightly on the left of the Pro-Cathedral. On a paradigmatic level, the Mdina skyline could also have featured; both have gained in popularity as representative icons of Maltese identity, Valletta due to the late hype regarding the European Capital of Culture for 2018; Mdina as on of the locations in the series Game of Thrones. However, from the focus groups conducted, a sense of pride was expressed by the Maltese participants towards their capital which may not necessarily occurred with the Mdina skyline.
4.3 The Maltese Cross

![The Maltese Cross](image)

*Figure 6. The Maltese Cross.*

First used by the Maritime Republic of Amalfi during the Medieval Ages, the original cross was white on a black background, and was later adopted by the Knights of St. John in 1565, shortly after the Great Siege. The eight points of the cross are said to stand for the eight Langues of the Knights, as well as their eight vows of truth, faith, repentance, humility, justice, sincerity, love, mercy and endurance of persecution. The colours of the cross were changed later on in the 18th century to white on red, and remains till today as the colours most associated with the cross.

This signifier is simple and easily reproduced. The cross is formed from four arrowheads joined together at the tip, and usually depicted as white on a red background, red on a white background, or black on a white background.

Connoted meaning usually signifies anything that has to do with Malta; in fact it is often incorporated into other texts attempting to represent Malta, either included as a whole cross, for instance the logos of Airmalta, Malta Tourism Authorities, and Sptar Mater Dei. Other logos use only part of the cross, such as the TVM logo. Graphic designer Clint Tabone wrote on his blog that “Judging by Maltese logos, adding an eight-pointed cross has become an easy solution in an effort to show that the organisation is Maltese.” (The Eight Pointed
Cross Epidemic, 2011). Denoted meaning: the colours of black and white are binary opposites, the form is sharp with a jagged edge, the idea of the cross suggests religion, but the fact that it is made from arrowheads, which are used in battle, suggests a religion based on warfare. It brings to mind the Great Siege, and the Knights of St. John, battle of good over evil, Christianity versus Islam.

From a paradigmatic perspective, occasionally different colours are used (instead of black or red) as it is mainly the shape which is the signifier. The usage of the symbol across different contexts is frequent, ranging from logo use to being depicted on local currency and souvenir jewellery. The Maltese cross seems to be central to Maltese identity, more so than other crosses (say the George cross or the Catholic cross) regardless of the fact that it is not uniquely Maltese. This may suggest that the core of Maltese identity lies in other cultures.

4.4 The Eye of the Luzzu

*Figure 7. Photograph of the Luzzu eye on the boat. Retrieved from http://images.huffingtonpost.com/2011-02-07-DSC_0693web.jpg*

“Small fishing boats, bright greens and blues, sport on their prow black slitted eyes
of Osiris to ward off jinns;

and yet they give their craft the names

of saints. They're faithful Christian souls

who won't defy the pagan gods."

(Brian Cox, 2007)

This above extract, taken from the short poem ‘St. Paul’s Bay, Malta’, tells something both of this text’s history as well as the culture behind it. The Eye of the Luzzu is a pagan tradition stemming from Phoenician times, and is also known as the Eye of Horus/Osiris. The Eye along with the bright colours of the luzzu has become synonymous with Maltese culture, it was in fact previously depicted on Maltese currency during the 1900s.

This text is an icon, the main signifiers being the bright colours (yellow, blue, black, white, red, and green), the curved vertical ridges that may be seen in the photo (the physical shape of the boat), with the focus on a ceramic almond shape painted white, topped with a thick black line with carved indents to simulate hair (signifying an eye).

The colours alone denote the luzzu boat; gaudy, child-like colours, connoting fun, festivity, immaturity, evoking the feeling of ‘Il-Karnival’ (the carnival). The denoted meaning of the Eye of Osiris is that it is meant to ward off evil spirits whilst at sea to ensure that the fisherman bring in a good catch. Other connotations include this as a pagan tradition, something for tourists, outdated and irrelevant to the Maltese today. The luzzu itself connotes a more ‘traditional’ way of life, of fish freshly caught in the early morning by men facing the elements, rather than the image of a modern sea trawler dragging a net across the ocean floor.

On a syntagmatic level, if the eye itself were placed not on a colourful luzzu but on a pyramid, the meaning would change and it would cease to be a signifier of Maltese identity.
Therefore it only has meaning when taken in the context of the luzzu (like the George cross no meaning for Maltese identity if viewed without the context of the flag). On a paradigmatic level, if the luzzu was painted black instead of bright colours, it would fail to convey a sense of Maltese identity, as it is the colours in combination with the eye that are the identifiers of the luzzu, and thus Maltese culture.

4.5 The Cisk Logo

![Cisk Logo](http://www.playcraftwerbeartikel.ch/wp-content/uploads/images/clients/thumbs/thumbs_cisk-lager.jpg)


Although the beer itself was first brewed in 1928, the story of Cisk goes far back as 1840, where a successful banker by the name of Giuseppe Scicluna inaugurated Malta’s first privately-owned bank. Scicluna was the first on the island to utilise cheques instead of money, and the nickname “iċ-Ċisk” (‘the cheque’) was carried down his family line until the Marquis John Scicluna eventually opened the Malta Export Brewery and gave the family name to the beer. Later on, the company merged with Simonds Farsons later on in the mid-1900s. This text at first glance does not appear to contain any immediate iconography (apart
from the Maltese cross) which is conventionally associated with Malta. There also was a lack of information available (both online and in print) as to the origins of this logo, apart from a mention that it originated from the original façade of the Malta Export Brewery. However when contacted, the company replied that the emblem of the white horse was taken from the Scicluna family emblem.

The original Cisk logo may be read as a symbol, as the association of this image to the beer is a learned one. It is quite complex, as within it we see a number of signs: the colours of yellow, red, white, black and gold, the icon of the white horse, the large bold capitalised letters of ‘CISK’, the small Maltese cross, the banner on which the product name is placed, the emblem on which the horse is placed.

All these signs taken together form the graphic identity of Cisk, the signified being the product itself. However, an association to Cisk is made merely from the red letters spelling it out, particularly if placed on an ochre yellow background. Several elements, taken on their own, would not signify Cisk, for instance, the white horse. If the audience was not aware that Cisk is a Maltese product, it is highly unlikely that they would have inferred it from the logo (if it were not from the small Maltese cross).

The denoted meaning of the logo is the beer, possibly also associations of the Farsons beer festival, as well as the other versions of the beer (such as the low-carb version). Connotations include associations of Maltese feasts, a Mediterranean climate, implied by the warm colours (inviting one to take a nice cold beer on a hot summer’s day), which also recall the colours of the luzzu and the brightness of the carnival. The horse connotes religion, (symbol originates from the Book of Revelations where Christ appears on a white horse) as well as a sense of heritage, as it originates from the Scicluna family emblem.
The entire text, when taken as a whole brings to mind other Maltese logos, particularly the Airmalta and MTA logo as it is not only colourful, but has a cluttered, baroque appearance. Associations of royalty and power, are also conveyed by the yellow colour (associated with gold and wealth), the banner (associated with victory), and the emblem of the horse (an animal associated with power) on a gold background, with the words ‘Est. 1928’ written as if to create a sense of lineage.

On a syntagmatic level, it seems that placement of the text’s elements do not really seem to affect the overall identity of the logo. It seems to be more the case that each element works on its own, irrelevant to the placing of the others, and the conventional combination of elements is the current Cisk logo. On a paradigmatic level, if certain signs within this text were replaced, such as the dog instead of the horse, most likely the product would still be identified, although a different quality from the brand identity would be portrayed (perhaps the loyalty associated with dogs). If a signifier more central to the text’s identity were to be changed (example the bright yellow colour) it would signify Maltese identity to a far lesser extent - such as in the case of the packaging of the low-carb Cisk Excel - Farsons kept the yellow banner as a background behind the letters ‘Cisk’ in order to maintain the product identity. The rest of the package is silver, and although still connoted with wealth, this colour tends to give the idea of second-best; that the original Cisk is the ‘winner’ and thus best-tasting beer, whilst Cisk Excel is a ‘second-rate’ beer. In comparison with other consumable Maltese products, Twistees and Kinnie also got an enthusiastic response from the Maltese focus group.

The Most Representative Signifier of Maltese Identity

The Maltese flag was most mentioned across both groups as being the top signifier of Maltese identity, and the red and white colours can be seen to influence other logos.
Semiotically, flags conventionally ‘stand for’ a nation, and are generally used to represent this nation as a political body. Hence, flags tends to be exhibited on the media (particularly news media) more frequently than other culturally associated (but less politically associated) signifiers. The results of the focus groups, interviews and the semiotic analysis will be discussed in the following chapter.
5. Discussion of Findings

This chapter will articulate the results of the research, and will be discussed as follows:

1. Summary of main points of focus groups
2. Summary of main points of interviews
3. Discussion

1.1. Non-Maltese Focus Group Summary
The general view of the non-local focus group participants seemed to be that the Maltese are typically Mediterranean people, and even though the culture mostly borrows from others, there is still a sense of Maltese identity. The following quotes describe their perception of the Maltese people:

- “good nature, their slowness”
- the “happiness of the people… they find a way of enjoying their lives”
- “they know how to live their life”

General comments included that “Malta is like a mix of culture, Mediterranean, English, Arabic”, and that this could be seen from several of the images presented, for example, the eye of the luzzu which was perceived to be Egyptian, the British origins of the Times of Malta logo, etc. However, it was also noted that certain visual signifiers are “Maltese by assimilation”, with one participant saying that:

“the Maltese culture is for me a mixture, even if there is some other influence, its Maltese actually; you cannot just [say that] because there is some other influence it’s not Maltese, it is actually, because culture is moving”. 
Opinions of the texts varied, with fireworks being mentioned along with festas and the old buses as part of Malta, and certain oppositional readings of the texts, such as the goddess of fertility being perceived as “very Maltese, lots of pastry, laziness and sleeping”.

Another participant commented on the Airmalta logo that “it’s bright and colourful and mixed up as an airline, so pretty much Maltese”, a negotiated reading. The Melita logo was read oppositionally, with the colours not being perceived as particularly Maltese, yet nonetheless a signifier of Maltese identity due to the negative emotion associated with their customer service, and was amongst the least representative signifier of Maltese identity.

Perceptions of the texts to which semiotic analysis was applied are as follows:

The Maltese flag was one of the highest-rated texts by the participants, who also noted that although the George cross wasn’t essentially Maltese, the flag would be too similar to other flags and hence would not be Maltese without it, one participant commenting that “Malta has suffered alot for it so it should be part of the Maltese”.

The Valletta skyline was mentioned frequently as one of the most representative images, and was rated an average of 9.7 on a scale of 10 for ‘Malteseness’. The Grand Harbour was also mentioned in one of the question sheets as being of significance, and during the discussion, the beauty of the scene was seen as quite representative of the beauty of the island.

The Maltese cross was one of the highest rated images as well as being mentioned as one of the most representative images of Maltese identity. Comments ranged from the fact that some would have rated higher if it was red (rather than black) and that it was a very old symbol which was associated with the Knights of St. John.

The Eye of the luzzu was viewed to be specific to Gozo by one participant as she had noticed many souvenirs with this signifier carved in shell. Another participant viewed it more
as Egyptian, whereas another commented on the discrepancy between the Catholic nature of
the Maltese and the pagan origins of this text. YK commented that “it’s kind of phased out, I
don’t see any modern boats with this symbol really, just the luzzu one” whilst MC said that
“it is one of the visuals you see in the tourist book… so that when I came to Malta, I was
really looking for that on the boats, its communicated a lot visually”. A participant noted that
the eye was something particular to photograph due to the “combination of colours” and felt
that the eye would have been far less Maltese had the image not depicted it as placed on the
colourful luzzu.

The Cisk logo was met with a very positive response, with comments like “Cisk is
Malta”, “you see it everywhere in Malta” with a participant noting that “the colours are very
Maltese… Even the yellow and orange, you take Kinnie as well, so all the colour schemes
throughout the Maltese brands they're very kind of Maltese”.

1.2. Maltese Focus Group Summary

The opinion of this group was somewhat similar to that of the non-Maltese group
when it came to the general perception of the Maltese and Maltese cultural identity. When
asked what Malta and ‘Malteseness’ was for them, the comments were:

“the way people discuss things... you can learn the language… but you can't learn the
mannerisms. I think that is something essential to being Maltese.”

As regards gesticulation, another participant commented that it wasn’t “just the body
language; but the language itself and what we make with other languages. We integrate them
into Maltese”. Although the group generally agreed that there are different kinds of
‘Maltese’, and that Maltese culture does heavily reply on others, one participant voiced the
opinion that:
“you can be a person who is somewhat international, a person who goes abroad for business, a musician who travels for a distance, but… you’re still gonna go out smell like the timpana on a Sunday for instance, or you’re gonna go down to that bar next to the church - you're still gonna be Maltese at the end of the day.”

During the discussion, the topic of racism came up, paralleling with the non-Maltese group, with comments like: “The Maltese identity has a lot of beautiful qualities - but it has a lot of detrimental qualities as well… You are going to find people like your typical Maltese racist”. The focus group participants however did not view themselves as racist, although they viewed themselves as Maltese. Additional perceptions on Maltese identity were:

- “this pop culture, I think that’s part of Maltese, but not Maltese as such, for example happy hour on Sundays, or English breakfast”
- “the Maltese social mind isn’t aesthetically oriented”
- “the need to help people… and to feed them”
- “being Maltese is part of my identity, then there's also being European”

Perceptions of the images included similar comments to the non-Maltese group, for instance regarding the Sleeping Lady as very representative of Maltese identity, as one participant commented: “for me that represents the Maltese character to the fullest... a fat woman having a siesta”; as well as the Melita logo being synonymous with the negative Maltese quality of bad service.

Other visual signifiers representative of Maltese culture which the participants suggested were the local globigerina limestone, the prehistoric spirals, an old farmer with a straw hat, the Triton fountain, a wayside chapel, and a Maltese gallerija.
Perceptions of the top five signifiers: the Maltese flag was rated as 10 on 10 as representative of Maltese identity, and the fact that the George cross is not Maltese, yet still features on the flag, did not deter any of the participants from perceiving it as Maltese, with one participant commenting that she wouldn’t rate flag as highly without the cross, as it would have been inaccurate.

The Valletta skyline was rated highly by all Maltese participants except one, who commented that there was a particular angle to the view that stood for all of Valletta; thus he rated it less. However, another participant commented that: “for me, it’s more the delight of the golden shine of the bastions – that’s what Maltese is”.

The Maltese cross was known be all to have its origins in foreign roots, however one participant expressed his opinion that: “it’s taken on a new kind of meaning”. A number of participants said that if the cross had been red they probably would have rated it higher, whilst EA said that for him it was the shape that mattered.

The Eye of the Luzzu was perceived as part of an “old-fashioned” and outdated Maltese identity, more “traditional” rather than being relevant to the Maltese today, one comment being “I see it more in a romantic way rather than personally for me representing Maltese and Maltese identity”, even though it was overall still rated highly, with the exception on one participant who gave it a 4 on 10.

The Cisk Logo was met again with an enthusiastic response. Rated on average 9.5/10 for representative of Maltese identity, comments ensued such as “we love our food and drink”, “we are so proud of it”, and “automatic” positive reactions upon seeing it offered on a foreign menu. One participant commented that:
“I have some friends who live abroad, and it’s incredible how excited they are when they find some Maltese product in a supermarket. They immediately put it on Facebook or they tweet about it”.

Specific signs within the texts were also noted, such as the use of warm colours, which was associated to a Mediterranean lifestyle, and the colours of red and white (associated with the flag); the use of thick organic lines, such as in the MTA logo, was also noted as being very Maltese.

2.1. Interview with Dr. Jean-Paul Baldacchino

Dr. Baldacchino is an anthropologist, psychoanalyst and researcher lecturing at the University of Malta. His areas of specialisation include the anthropology of religion, the typography of emotions, symbolism, religion, psychoanalysis, and culture.

He speaks about identity as being a process rather than a fixed concept, and that different categories of identities exist, such as gender identity, ethnic identity, national identity, etc. Upon discussing visual signifiers of culture and whether they participate in the process of identification, he noted that:

People use symbols as markers of identity, which is, markers of difference. You can have no identity unless you have difference - the two go with each other. Symbols are one of the primary means by which these differences are asserted and displayed.

He elaborated that certain cultural images have a strong emotional charge, particularly key symbols such those tied with religion or politics, that evoke people to certain actions: “whether you're burning a cross or burning a flag... these are all very powerful actions that evoke strong, passionate feelings from people.”

Dr. Baldacchino explained at length the notion of identity, and said that identities are always “made, contested, and redefined”. He commented about a new discourse on identity
which is that of Maltese as Europeans, commenting that “prior to... Malta's plans as part of the European Union, in popular speech people would have not thought of themselves as Europeans”.

Baldacchino explains that states invest a lot in fostering a sense of national identity, as states depend on the people’s sense of nationalism as it ascertains “loyalty and commitment with political projects”. This is done by creating a nationalist mythology, a sanitised version of history, and a standardised language, to create a feeling of shared identity. He mentions these as “processes by which the state engenders and ensures loyalty through identification”. These processes form the common set of symbols fostering a sense of common identity:

“If a new political state comes into being the first thing it does is creates its own flag. A new symbol through which people can identify and associate with. Because people are fundamentally symbolic animals.”

Meaning-making is fundamentally a symbolic operation, and all images are tools used to construct meaning. According to Dr. Baldacchino, to create a sense of common identity, one must first create a set of common symbols. He comments that “politics is all about the use and manipulation of symbols, and some operate at a very conscious level - and some at a very unconscious level”. He views the concept of national identity, however, as an artificial construct, and that essentially “there is no such thing as a Maltese identity”. Instead he postulates an intersecting set of rival identities, where: “rather than defining themselves as Maltese, people define themselves according to a patron saint, a local town, a parish, or a political party; it is a much more tribal identity… made up of very simple binary oppositions”.

He points out that the hallmark of a tribal identity is that it is inherited and reproduced generation after generation, and gives the example of voting in Malta, that people
tend to vote what their parents before them voted. He also pointed out that normally, national identity is associated with the common good, such as public spaces being viewed with a sense of commonality; that these spaces belong to everyone. Instead, he perceives that the Maltese are territorial, that ‘what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours’, there is a strict line between private and public sectors – showing a lack of unity and sense of common identity.

Baldacchino adds that in the interest of establishing both a Maltese and a European common identity, we have completely discarded the Arabic heritage of Malta in the interest of appearing European rather than Arabic, commenting that the “Arab period is completely unstudied, and remains underemphasised and ignored”.

Baldacchino attributed value only to the signifier of the Maltese Flag, as it stands for the nation and the state, without which there would be no concept of a Maltese identity. The majority of symbols he considers to be “of salience only presented to outsiders”. He comments particularly on the eye of the luzzu as an example of turning identity into a commodity.

He finally commented that he feels Maltese to the extent that he can understand and speak the language, that the territory of the Maltese islands is familiar to him, and that he has a Maltese passport.

2.2. Interview with Mr. Karl Bondin

Karl Bondin is the Brand Development Executive at Airmalta, and he spoke to me about the relatively recent rebranding of Airmalta, which focused on creating a sense of ‘the national airline’, which in turn promoted national identity. This was done by creating a campaign attempting to identify the particular characteristics about Malta and using these characteristics to communicate the cultural experience of the islands.
“The main colours of the plane, the red, yellow, green, blue and orange, were derived from the luzzu. Designs were also taken from the ceiling of the Mosta dome, as well as the traditional bizzilla, and the prehistoric spiral designs found on the temples.”

Bondin felt that the colourful plane was highly significant to the Maltese cultural identity, as he feels that “colours represent us a lot… Malta’s full of colours”.

Although Airmalta’s new design radically differs from the previous one, a sense of continuity was kept though the Maltese cross, as it was not only maintained but increased in size. It is interesting to note that this symbol was never questioned. Bondin commented that: “it’s our symbol, something recognisable by everyone who knows Malta”. When asked what about it conveyed Maltese identity, he replied that its historic origins are of utmost significance, that “if the Knights of St. John didn’t win the battle against the Turks, our history would be totally different than it is. We wouldn't have our Maltese identity.”

When asked to describe the Maltese, he mentioned the warmth of the people and their loudness, “the way that we speak and the way we have fun”, elaborating that:

I love…looking at people talking and using their hands, and getting into the argument with a lot of passion… in this part we are Maltese. We have our low sides li ngergru [that we complain]… and we always feel that the other person or entity is doing something totally wrong; but it’s the way we are. I don’t see any harm in it, it shows you pride, in my opinion, it shows pride in Malta and what's Maltese.

He also spoke at length (and with a great degree of passion and gesticulation) about how ‘colourful’ the people are:

We are very colourful! The old buses, the tberfila painting on them… we use our hands when we speak, and we're loud, and we have an opinion about everything and we are very passionate about Malta… and whatever is Maltese!
Upon examining the twenty images presented during the focus groups, he noted Cisk, Kinnie and especially Twistees as being very personal to him: “Twistees is a fun snack that we Maltese have consumed when we were kids so it brings a bit of memories of our childhood”. He mentioned the Melita logo as the one he felt as least representative of the cultural identity

2.3. Interview with Dr. Vince Briffa

Dr. Vince Briffa specialises in fine art and has much experience in the advertising industry. He lectures at the University of Malta and is Head of the Department of Digital Arts.

Regarding identity Dr. Briffa expressed the conviction that Maltese culture is comprised from many cultures, Norman, Phoenician, Arabic, British, Italian – it is a melange of different identities:

I do not believe there is such a thing as a 'Maltese' person, or a 'Maltese identity’, a Maltese identity is cosmopolitan - and I think we should be proud of that, we should be proud of being able to cope with so many different languages and types of people.

However he notes certain traits associated with being Maltese, such as friendliness, being comfortable around different cultures, pride in the Maltese nation, the idea of a “baroque” nation, characterised not only by our architecture, but also by our way of being, the loudness, the brightness of colours, the over-the-top way of doing things.

On the visual signifiers of culture he notes that certain icons, such as the temples, are part of Maltese heritage but not necessarily relevant to our culture:

The 8 pointed cross or the luzzu are part of our tradition - I mean they are part of our tradition but I can’t see their relevance in contemporary sensibility - they're used ad nauseum in design, and they’re used badly many times so they can't translate well,
and I think that an icon which can't translate shouldn't be used… it has to stand its own ground.

He cites Kinnie, Twistees, and Cisk as highly relevant to him personally, but not particularly because they are signifiers of culture, but because he has personal memories strongly associated to them.

Twistees and Kinnie are two of the icons which I think are really Maltese; more than the 8 pointed cross funnily enough. I used to give my students a rebranding of the Twistees packet and there was very big resistance from students.

He comments that as regards the upcoming V18, that there is “a danger of too much democracy in it”. He fears that local art and culture will become driven by the general public, and that Malta will end up with a populist culture: “Art should reflect its time, but not be directed by it, because that stops being art and it becomes politics.”

3.1. Discussion

This section discusses the results of the focus groups, the interviews and the semiotic analysis to examine the visual signifiers that most represent Maltese cultural identity, and what aspects of that cultural identity are they communicating.

From the discussions and question sheet replies during the focus groups, it seems that the most popular images with both groups were: the Maltese flag, the Maltese cross, the Valletta skyline, the Cisk logo, the eye of the luzzu, the shape of the Maltese islands, and the Kinnie logo. Both groups found the Melita logo, the Catholic cross, the image of St. Paul’s shipwreck, and the Three Hills logo to be least representative of Maltese identity. The greatest discrepancies between the groups were the image of the Sleeping Lady, the Twistees logo, the Gh, the George cross, and the Three Hills logo, which were all rated far higher by the Maltese (see appendix). The Airmalta logo and the shape of the Maltese islands were also
considered as more Maltese by the foreign group. This indicated that there are visual signifiers of Maltese identity meant for the Maltese and those communicating an identity for tourists.

There were generally mixed opinions on the idea of a Maltese cultural identity, ranging from the opinion that one does not exist to the opinion that it does exist but it is made up of other cultures. From the results of this study, one may conclude that there is definitely seems to be some kind of common feeling ‘li jiena Maltija jew Malti’ (that I am Maltese) because the vast majority of Maltese participants in this research (including the interviewees) reported a number of qualities in themselves which are qualities which signify a Maltese cultural identity Maltese, such as: helpfulness, friendliness, warmth, pride in the Maltese nation, loud, a frequent complainer, passionate, and the habit of gesticulating during conversation. In fact, during the focus groups several things were noted:

- The fact that the Maltese session took twice as much time to conduct as the non-Maltese session

- The fact that Maltese participants did indeed gesticulate more than the non-Maltese participants, and they not only spoke more loudly, but spoke over each other - they were asked to refrain from doing this (as it would provide issues later with transcription) around four times

- The fact that the discussion was several times steered off course into other topics, which gave the entire session a feeling of clutter and chaos

All these factors supported the participants’ perception of themselves as Maltese. It must be noted that the common feeling that was indeed identified remains a possible representative only of a well-educated, well-travelled section of the population, as all participants with the
exception of one had undergone (or were undergoing) a University education. On that same note, Saetersdal (1999) noted that:

“even though individual group members have very different everyday experiences, political interests, and positions… it does not seem that such differences undermine the common notion of ethnicity”

He also noted that the symbolic meaning attributed to certain images varies according to the context, and that people from the same culture area react differently to the same symbols according to their sociocultural position and the depth of their education and cultural understanding.

Most signifiers within texts attempting to convey Maltese identity make use of warm colours, such as yellow, orange, red, and brown, as well as using an icon or symbol conventionally associated with Malta, such as the eye of the luzzu. The qualities of Maltese identity which tend to be portrayed by these signifiers are: friendliness, helpfulness, openness, rich cultural heritage, tradition, Mediterranean culture, as well as associations to the sun, sea, and the colour of the local stone. Bright colours are often used, possibly to convey the ‘loudness’ of the people, as well as a passionate temperament. The overdone feel of the texts and cliché use of images, such as the Maltese Cross, points to the “baroque” culture which Dr. Briffa pointed out, this over-the-top, exaggerated way of doing things.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Saetersdal (1999) said that “Young people will recreate and redefine old images to suit their needs in their own everyday reality”. This was clearly seen with the image of the Sleeping Lady; both groups commented that this image signified a Maltese identity, not as a conventional association to Malta’s rich history – but an overweight person relaxing and taking it easy – thus a signifier of the Maltese stereotype today.
6. Conclusion

This final chapter is divided as follows:

1. Limitations of the Study

2. Recommendations for future research

3. Concluding note

1.1. Limitations of the study

The method of using focus groups, however rich and varied the results may be, limits the study as they can never be fully representative of the wider population. Also the fact that only twenty images were presented during the focus group (this was due to time constraints) meant that a number of images were excluded that potentially could have been more relevant to the study. During the focus group itself, the small laptop screen prohibited the accurate perception of the images to the participants causing them to misidentify certain signifiers. Finally, one must note that semiotic analysis is highly subjective to the researcher’s knowledge, cultural background, and general experience; each researcher decodes the same data differently.

6.2. Recommendations for future research

This study focused on the perception of youth of the signifiers of Maltese cultural identity. Future research could conduct a diachronic study and study the perceptions of people from different generations, as well as from different regions of Malta, and compare the results. Alternatively, one could also conduct a quantitative analysis using a larger number of images, and apply a statistical analysis to the participants’ ratings.

6.3. Concluding Note

According to the research conducted within this study, it may be concluded that the following images: the flag, the Maltese cross, the Valletta skyline, the Eye of the Luzzu and
the Cisk logo are the most representative signifiers of Maltese cultural identity across both locals and foreigners. These signifiers conveyed a number of qualities about the Maltese people, such as friendliness, passion, and a relaxed attitude. It was noted, however, that the majority of these have become somewhat cliché, used often and badly, in logo design. This, along with the reconstruction of major parts the island, calls too for a reconstruction of our nation’s symbols. The old buses with the *tberfil* are gone, *Bieb il-Belt* is also gone, and a number of current symbols in usage are irrelevant to contemporary Maltese community. It’s time to redefine our symbols, and by doing so, redefining ourselves, and like in the poem from which this dissertation title comes, we can stand up and communicate to the rest of the world what it means to be Maltese.
References


Appendix A:

Information Sheet
Dear Participant,

Many thanks for participating in this focus group as part of my research for my dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor’s of Communications (Hons). The focus group will take approximately an hour, not exceeding 90 minutes of your time. The session will be recorded as a transcription is necessary, however your name will be withheld and only your initials used during the research. The results of this focus group will not be used outside the context of the dissertation.

The aim of the focus group is to explore the perception of both Maltese and non-Maltese individuals of images and symbols conventionally associated with Malta and Maltese culture. The focus group will consist of first a question sheet to be filled in individually and then a group discussion. Please feel free to ask any further questions, should you be in need of clarification.

Images will be shown in a powerpoint presentation during the session, none of the images are violent or graphically disturbing, however, should you feel uncomfortable at any point during the session and feel the need to leave, you are free to do so without consequence.

Thank you once again for your time and contribution.

Natasha Singh
Mobile: +35679980830
Email: natashathea@gmail.com

Supervisor: Malcolm Bonello

Supervisor’s signature: ___________________________
Appendix B:

Research Consent Forms
Research Consent Form (Focus Groups)
A study on how Maltese cultural identity is perceived via visual signifiers

Researcher: Natasha Singh

Researcher’s Signature: ____________________

Supervisor: Malcolm Bonello

Supervisor’s Signature: _____________________

Please read each of the following points and make sure that you understand them; if in need of clarification or explanation, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher.

I give my consent to, and understanding of, the following:

- I understand that this research is being undertaken by Natasha Singh for her dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Bachelor’s of Communications (Hons).
- My participation in a focus group consisting of both a written question sheet and a verbal discussion
- I agree that the session will be recorded and used for research purposes only
- Transcripts of the discussion will be kept and made available to other researchers
- Names will not be recorded in the transcript
- Should the researched be required to refer to my identity, initials will be used
- I can leave at any point in the session
- Everyone will be given an equal opportunity to state opinions as well as ask questions
- The topic of the focus group is the perception of Maltese cultural identity via the visual image.

Name of research participant: ______________________________________________________

Signature: __________________________________

Date: _____________________
Research Consent Form (In-depth Interviews)
A study on how Maltese cultural identity is perceived via visual signifiers

Researcher: Natasha Singh

Researcher’s Signature: ____________________

Supervisor: Malcolm Bonello

Supervisor’s Signature: ____________________

Please read each of the following points and make sure that you understand them; if in need of clarification or explanation, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher.

I give my consent to, and understanding of, the following:

- I understand that this research is being undertaken by Natasha Singh for her dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Bachelor’s of Communications (Hons).
- I agree to be interviewed and that the session will be recorded; to be used for research purposes only
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this interview at any time, should I feel the need to do so.

Name of interviewee:_________________________________________

Signature:_________________________________

Date:_______________________

Email:______________________

Contact Number:_________________________
Appendix C:

Question Sheets from Focus Groups
Question Sheet (Maltese Group)

Please fill in the following form on your own. A group discussion will be held afterwards. All questions are obligatory. Should you need clarification please ask your researcher.

Kindly do not turn the pages of this document unless asked to by the researcher as this may distort the findings of this study.

Your participation is much appreciated.

General Information

Name:_________________
Age:_______________
Gender:___________
Nationality:_______________________
Current country of residence:_________________________
Occupation (if student, please list your area of study):____________________________________
Highest level of education currently held:________________________________________________
Research Questions

1.) What first comes to mind when you think of Malta?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2.) Write 5 words that you feel describe Maltese identity best.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3.) As a Maltese person, do you feel that being Maltese is part of your personal identity? If so, can you explain what you can identify with in Maltese culture? Feel free to add any comments.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
4. On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not at all representative and 10 being very representative; please rate the following images and symbols on how well you perceive them to be representative of Malta’s culture and identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image Number</th>
<th>Rating on Scale from 0 till 10 (0 = not ‘Maltese’, 10 = very ‘Maltese’)</th>
<th>Comments (not obligatory)</th>
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</thead>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.) Are there any images that you do not recognise or cannot identify? If yes, please name them.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5.) Kindly list the top 5 images that you feel most identifies Malta and Maltese culture.
________________________________________________________________________

6.) Kindly list the image that you least identify with Malta.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

7.) Were there any images that you would have included? Please name them.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

8.) Please feel free to write any additional comments.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your participation!
Question Sheet (Non-Maltese Group)

Please fill in the following form on your own. A group discussion will be held afterwards. All questions are obligatory. Should you need clarification please ask your researcher.

Kindly do not turn the pages of this document unless asked to by the researcher as this may distort the findings of this study.

Your participation is much appreciated.

General Information

Name:________________
Age:_______________
Gender:___________
Nationality:________________________
Current country of residence:________________________
Occupation (if student, please list your area of study):________________________
Highest level of education currently held:________________________
Reasons for currently being in Malta:________________________
Approximate total time spent in Malta (in years/months/weeks):________________________
Research Questions

1.) What first comes to mind when you think of Malta?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2.) Write 5 words that you feel describe Maltese identity best.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3.) What impression did you have of Malta before you first came here? Has that opinion changed? If yes, how so?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

PLEASE TURN OVER
4.) The researcher will now show you a series of images. On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not at all representative and 10 being very representative; please rate the following images and symbols on how well you perceive them to be representative of Malta’s culture and identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image Number</th>
<th>Rating on Scale from 0 till 10 (0 = not ‘Maltese’, 10 = very ‘Maltese’)</th>
<th>Comments (not obligatory)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
5.) Are there any images that you do not recognise or cannot identify? If yes, please name them.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

6.) Kindly list the top 5 images that you feel most identifies Malta and Maltese culture.

________________________________________________________________________

7.) Kindly list the image that you least identify with Malta.

________________________________________________________________________

8.) Were there any images that you would have included? Please name them.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

9.) Please feel free to write any additional comments.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your participation!
Appendix D:

Reference Sheet of Images
Image Referral Sheet

1. [Image of a cross]

2. [Image of a flag]

3. [Image of a symbol]

4. [Image of a boat]

5. [Image of a sculpture]

6. [Image of a map]
7. [Image 112x651 to 388x720]

8. [Image 113x125 to 181x163]

9. [Image 106x187 to 166x247]

10. [Image 101x581 to 139x635]

11. [Image 101x449 to 193x569]

12. [Image 106x370 to 225x437]

13. [Image 106x262 to 170x336]

14. Gh
Appendix E:

Table of Mean Ratings of Images in Question Sheet
Table of Average Ratings Per Image: How representative is the image of Maltese identity on a scale of 1 to 10?

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Mean of rating as rated by non-Maltese:
9.3

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Mean of rating as rated by Maltese:
9.2

Mean of total ratings:
9.1

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Mean of rating as rated by non-Maltese:
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Mean of rating as rated by Maltese:
9.3

Mean of total ratings:
8.5

For a more detailed analysis, refer to the table above.
Appendix F:

Images Ranked in Top 5 in Question Sheet
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Appendix G:

*Transcript of Recordings*
(see CD attached)