



5

THE VALLETTA BRAND

AUDIENCES' EXPERIENCES OF THE VALLETTA 2018 BRAND

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Objectives

The study offers insight into how audiences engage with the different forms of communication and events forming part of the Valletta 2018 programme. Longitudinal in nature, this project determines the effects that each type of communication purports on different audiences, as reflected in individuals' attitudes and behaviours.

Methodology

In acknowledging that audiences engage with brands through a multitude of encounters that range from direct instances¹ to other indirect experiences², the study adopted a mixed methods approach, which involved real-time experience tracking (RET) (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Macdonald, Wilson, & Konus, 2012), as well as focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews about the audiences' perceptions on encounters and experiences with the Valletta 2018 brand.

The use of a smartphone app that offered an improved participant engagement with RET approaches, was key to this methodology. This app was developed by

¹ Such as advertising or actual event participation.

² These involve word of mouth from friends or acquaintances, or third-party social media contributions (as would be acquaintances posting on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, among others).

a subcontracted developer and it helped the gathering of data concerning the participants' personality characteristics (to ease individuals' clustering) as well as brand experience (by relating to sensory, affective, and intellectual dimensions that are relevant to Valletta 2018 as an experienced brand).

Results

A total of 787 participants used the new app in 2018 to report on their experiences with a diversity of events forming part of the culmination of the Valletta 2018 programme of events. These participants reported a total of 829 encounters. Of these participants, 415 were female. 388 had received up to secondary school education, while another 149 had obtained a university degree. 239 participants lived in the Northern Harbour region, while another 139 lived in the Western Region. 374 participants were married, while another 291 were single. Overall, participants had an average age of 43 years (median age of 42).

By following the methodology of Asendorpf, Borkenau, Ostendorf, & Van Aken (2001) and Rammstedt, Riemann, Angleitner, & Borkenau (2004), participants were categorised into three groups, according to their personality characteristics. Indeed, 758 participants could be grouped into three personality types: *resilient* ($n = 51$), *undercontrolled* ($n=294$), and *overcontrolled* ($n=413$). The other participants could not be categorised because their responses lied well outside the $z = \pm 3$ range.

This study compared dimensions of brand experience (after Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009) among participants before and during the administration of the Valletta 2018 programme of cultural events. It finds that there are no significant differences in the experienced sensory/affective and intellectual dimensions of brand experience across the participants' engagement with our study (usually one week). However, when these dimensions were compared with earlier waves of RET data (collated in 2016 and 2017 before the implementation of the Valletta 2018 cultural programme), this study found a significantly reduced response towards Valletta 2018's impression on and its appeal to the participants' senses, a reduced strength of emotions, an increase in thinking about Valletta 2018, and reduced curiosity. These observations suggest awareness about the Valletta 2018 ECoC programme grew saturated over the first months of 2018, as audiences experienced culminating communications that contrasted against earlier communications in 2016 and 2017. Awareness saturation may lead to increased intellectual engagement as well as eased sensory/affective perceptions among audiences who became more familiar with the Valletta 2018 brand/phenomenon.

In 2018, most encounters reported were related to Valletta Pageant of the Seas (312 encounters), the Malta Fashion Awards (91 encounters), and Earth Garden Festival (80 encounters). Encounters in 2018 most often involved television viewership

(31.8% of encounters) followed by participation in events (19.7% of encounters), and internet browsing (19.4% of encounters). Among all the events, the Valletta Green Festival, il-Festa il-Kbira, and the Malta Robotics Olympiad were the most important events referred to by the participants during the time of the study.

RET reflections indicate 19 dimensions in which participants can co-create value when experiencing the Valletta 2018 cultural events, while other individuals are involved in the co-creation network. Of these, the more dominating themes in the participants' reflections were related to anticipation (or the awaiting of experiences to feel or undergo), standard of experience (or elements of quality characterising the experience), and access (or aspects of access to participants from a logistical, temporal, linguistic, or economic perspective affecting their experience).

Way forward

The project fieldwork is considered to be complete, and the emerging results offer new insight into how audiences engage with cultural brands like Valletta 2018 ECoC from a processual, longitudinal perspective. This characteristic of the study is considered to be a key contribution that further helped ECoC administrations as well as the practitioners in cultural branding, to align branding strategies that yield optimised audience engagement outcomes.

During 2019, the team involved in this study is intent on disseminating the emerging contributions in academic and public fora. An extended abstract was submitted for competitive evaluation, leading up to a presentation at the 15th International Conference on Arts & Cultural Management, due in June 2019 in Venice (Italy). A further academic journal paper intended to be submitted for publication in a targeted marketing or cultural marketing journal, is in the pipeline.