

CHAPTER 5

YOUTHS' EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE VISITOR ENCOUNTER

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ABSTRACT

Preparation and participation in community events such as the *festa*, serve to convey meanings and expose values held by individuals as well as communities. This paper, through an exploratory pilot study, analyses the attitudes and perceptions of youth towards the *festa* as a medium of expressing cultural identity. However as the success of the *festa* and other religious events such as the Good Friday procession tend to be evaluated by the amount of tourists and visitors which attend, one must also be aware that 'commoditisation of culture in effect robs people of the very meanings by which they organise their lives' (Greenwood, 1989, p.179). Although one can argue that the authenticity of the occasion is diluted because of over-commercialisation, the study concludes that young people's membership in local *festa*-oriented organisations as well as the *festa* itself, showcase the cultural identity, heritage and creative spirit which is an expression of Maltese youth.

Keywords: *Youth, feast, cultural identity, authenticity commercialisation, community*

Introduction

One of the most significant facets of Maltese culture and heritage is the *festa*. Engagement in community events such as the village feast, serve to convey meanings and expose values held by individuals as well as communities.

The feast in Malta is considered to be an event or festival which is organised and presented by a community to celebrate a national or religious event. Traditionally, the Maltese have associated the feast or *festa* with periodic celebrations in honour of the parish Patron Saint: however it can also be associated with national events such as Independence Day and Freedom Day. The *festa*, along with other similar events such as Carnival, may be seen as an opportunity for reaffirming social order or identity (Morris and Morris, 2012, p. 95). The village or Patron Saint feast usually incorporates many different events and activities. Primarily feasts may be categorised according to the sacred or the profane however this will entail a certain amount of overlap. A better way how to classify feasts would be by creating a distinction between the aspect of the feast which is celebrated inside the Church or as it is known colloquially in Maltese as *il-festa ta' ġewwa* and the outdoor celebrations also known as *il-festa ta' barra*. In this chapter we will focus on the *festa ta' barra*.

According to Boissevain (2013) the village feast in the Maltese Islands is an expression of social and geographical identity and an event that the community looks forward to. He attested that the fame and prestige of the community rests on the success of the feast. Cassar (as cited by Farrugia, 2011, p. 54) suggested that the feast is the manifestation of a community's identity. It does this through the process of using its cultural capital to celebrate a special occasion which unites the community and which concurrently distinguishes it from others. During the National Seminar in 2011, entitled *Il-Festi: Kultura u Identità* (The Feasts: Culture and Identity) and various other discussion fora such as television and radio discussion programmes, one comes

across the lament that the village feast is no longer authentic, it is no longer the real thing or that the religious element is being lost or diluted. Part of the blame is sometimes attributed to young people and their changing values. This pilot study examines the attitudes and perceptions of young people towards the feast or a specific aspect of the feast. It also considers youths' perception of the feast as a nexus for their creative output and a manifestation of cultural identity both at the personal as well as at the community level. The concept of the feast as a product for tourist consumption is also explored.

Methodology

This paper, through ethnographic research, explores the attitudes and perceptions of youth towards the feast as a medium for expressing cultural identity. It takes as a premise the local perception that the success of the feast is evaluated by the number of attendees, including tourists who are encouraged by the marketing media to attend the different events organised by the different Maltese communities. The significance of the village feast as a product for tourist consumption is evident by brochures and the media which promote the feast as a cultural event.

The primary data was collected by the first year students (2014 intake) of the Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture at the University of Malta under the supervision of the author. Interviews and small scale surveys were carried out during the latter part of 2014. Around 400 surveys were returned and over 20 interviews were carried out with locals. These interviews were carried out with young people as well as with persons who are involved in organisations which support feasts such as Band Clubs, Local Councils and Firework Associations. The students themselves also participated in discussions about the feast and what it means to them and other young people. The study focuses specifically upon the village feast or feast of the Patron

Saint as well as feasts celebrated in towns and in the parishes of the Capital City, Valletta.

Changes

Malta tends to project its cultural tourism product as a milieu of history, geography, culture, traditions and the warm hospitality of its people. 'Relationships between heritage, tourism and authenticity are *de rigeur* in contemporary cultural tourism analyses' (Smith & Robinson, 2006, p. 43). In the case of Malta this is especially relevant because of the growing concern that the feast, a symbol of Maltese community spirit is waning or changing. A number of elements fuel this national concern. The first indications that participation in, and enthusiasm for the village feast would decline, came with the publication of Boissevain's book "Saints and Fireworks" (1965) and his subsequent sixties publications³. The current research also indicates that some parishes are concerned about the lack of young active volunteers. One parish priest explained that whereas in the past youths volunteered a lot of their time to the feast or fund raising activities during the summer months, this has declined rapidly in the last decade or so. The main reason given for this trend is that students prefer to work and earn money. A leading member of another parish explained that in his town, where there are rival parishes, the youths' participation in the preparations leading up to the feast is declining. He indicated that the main reason for this is the upward mobility of its community due to improved educational attainment, which suggests that individuals from more affluent backgrounds are less likely to become involved in village *festas*. Furthermore, he indicated that the rival feast supporters were more numerous and dedicated a lot of their time and energy to their feast. He

³ This has since been detracted by Boissevain as he declared that "Parish festi have expanded in a most extravagant fashion" (2013, p. 263).

is convinced that the reason for this is that the rival parish is located in a poorer and less affluent part of the town and where a substantial amount of youths who live there are unemployed and can allocate more of their time to the preparation and participation in their feast. In the case where they are employed, they tend to work in trades and crafts which give them more transferable skills and knowledge so as to be able to contribute substantially to the success of the feast. The survey indicates that this may actually be the case in these particular rival parishes, however a larger study would be needed to confirm it.

The research also indicates that in areas in Malta which do not have a *festa ta' barra* such as Swieqi, the interest in feasts is very low. Some of the young people from this locality are not interested in feasts in general. The ones that indicated that they like to attend feasts visit the ones from neighbouring localities such as St. Julian's and Sliema. This may be due to geography however in a few cases the interest comes from the link through familial ties such as the grandparents who hail from a parish which also celebrates the feast of the patron saint.

The "Culture Participation Survey" compiled by the National Statistics Office (2012), reported that the attendance at local village feasts in the previous 12 months (April 2010 to March 2011) had stood at just over 200,000 persons. This is the equivalent of 57.4% of the target population surveyed of 349,684. 12.5% were in the 16-24 cohort and 34% in the 25-44 cohort. This is in sharp contrast to the 25,583 or 7.3% of the target population which actively participated in the local village feasts, which is equivalent to 1.8%, 2.5% and 3.0% of the 16-24, 25-44 and 45+ cohorts respectively.

Table 1
Attendance and Participation in Local Village Feasts

Age group	16-24		25-44		45+		Total		Total Target Population
	Number of participants	Percentage of age group	Number of participants	Percentage of age group	Number of participants	Percentage of age group	Number of participants	Percentage of age group	Number of participants
Persons who attended local village feasts in the 12 months preceding the survey, by age group	25,085	12.5	68,305	34	107,450	53.5	200,840	100	349,684
Persons who participated in local village feasts in the 12 months preceding the survey, by age group	6,199	24.2	8,768	34.3	10,616	41.5	25,583	100	349,684
Persons who participated as a percentage of total target group	6,199	1.77	8,768	2.51	10,616	3.04	25,583		349,684

Figure 1. Adapted from the "Culture and Participation Survey", by the National Statistics Office, Malta (2012)

The Feast as a Living Culture

Getz defines an event as an “occurrence at a given place and time; a special set of circumstances; a noteworthy occurrence” (2008, p.18). The *festa* is such an event and in the Maltese Islands, it is generally associated with the practice of celebrating the Parish Patron Saint. It could also be used to refer to other feasts such as the *Imnarja* and Easter. In recent years it is also being used for non-religious festivals such as *il-Festa tal-Frawli* (the Strawberry Festival).

The elements which make-up the *festa*, part of the Maltese culture, are transformed into a product which is consumed by visitors, both local as well as foreign. However whereas what is traditionally called a product is usually consumed in a different place from where it was produced, in the case of the *festa*, a number of elements are produced and consumed simultaneously. This particular product is called an experience good and the consumer participates in its production, in effect becoming a prosumer. The act of wearing the *festa* t-shirt, playing music, dancing and waving about during the procession, and other behaviours all contribute to the *festa* rivalry. This will affect not just the participants experience but also that of others.

The Disney Corporation and other key experience producers have long understood “the need to ‘enchant’ these basic settings in order to entice the consumer” (Richards & Wilson, 2007, p. 28). This trend is being replicated by more experienced producers with the results that prosumerism, especially within the hospitality and tourism industry provides for a critical mass of creative production (Richards & Wilson, 2007). Prosumer activity is not limited to the production process but extends to the production and distribution of information about the product (Minkyung, Jang, Lee & Brayley as cited by Benckendorff, Moscardo & Pendergast, 2010, p. 95). The implications of this trend on the traditional *festa* is of an ongoing synergistic co-creation process which leads an innovative creative focus or landscape.

The Feast as a Tourist Attraction

The Malta Tourism Authority's⁴ marketing website Visit Malta⁵ promotes an event calendar featuring an eclectic blend of local and international entertainment, exhibitions, festivals and feasts. It recommends visiting the village feasts, carnival and Holy Week celebrations for an authentic Maltese experience. The parish feast turns the town or village core into a heightened physical attraction through the addition of artificially engineered enhancements such as the street decorations, lights, music and pageantry. In many parts of the Islands, the smaller village core essentially contains the parish church with an open space in front of it and a commercial area. Larger villages and towns could have more than one parish with its own supporting band club. They may also sustain a fireworks factory and various other community clubs and associations. Many of these clubs have a youths' section. Informants explained how youths are recruited from an early age as they are the ones that provide not just the physical manpower but are also the experts when it comes to using information technology, social media, and fundraising and social events such as the *festa* street parties, barbeques and musical events.

A typical feast period may take place on the eve and on the feast day itself or may even extend by a week or more in some cases. The area adjacent to the Church and the surrounding area are decorated usually by the younger members of the community. In what are considered to be the older towns and villages, these decorations (m. *armar*) are very lavish and include hand painted festoons, statues as well as bandstands. In the newer parishes such as Swieqi and Ibragg the exterior decorations are muted and usually extend up to the Church parvis and in the neighboring area.

4 <http://www.visitmalta.com/en/about-us>

5 <http://www.visitmalta.com/en/events>

‘Entertainment and cultural festivals and events can play a role in creating sustainable economically viable communities through attraction of tourists’ (Smith & Forest, 2006, p.136). The tangible benefits include income injection at the local level through consumption by visiting tourists, and income injection at the national level through the tour operators which offer tours to the feasts. Intangible benefits include the maintenance of cultural and heritage which in turn stimulate a community spirit and appreciation of patrimony. Through presumption, the tourist is not just a passive onlooker, but should be part of the experience.

Travel for a purpose such as that of experiencing the culture of the people of the visited destination has become popular. Malta is aware of this trend and the Tourism Policy document for the present period (2012-2016) remarks on the fact that the cultural heritage sector presents a strong marketing opportunity that could serve to attract more cultural tourists to Malta (p. 24). It proposes the promotion of “village feasts and traditional feasts such as St Paul’s Shipwreck and Easter Week in Malta and Gozo (p.25) so as to attract these ‘cultural tourists’”.

Malta markets the *festa* extensively. Travel guides suggest that ‘tourists are always welcome at the feast-day celebrations with their processions, religious services, music, fireworks, food and general jollity’ (Rix, 2010, p. 33). There is a concern that promoting the *festa* as a tourist production changes the nature of the event as ‘commoditisation of culture in effect robs people of the very meanings by which they organise their lives’ (Greenwood, 1989, p.179). However our respondents do not feel that the feast has become a commodity. Some commented that it is not a product which is sold by the community for financial gain although they are aware that tour operators make substantial profits from selling *festa* tours.

Authenticity and Youth Cultural Identity

Culture can be defined in infinite ways however there is an aspect of culture which is relevant to this discussion: that of culture as a form of expression. This is rooted in social interaction and the set of values which are inherent within a society. As members of society or a community they share their experiences through artistic production such as literature and art as well as through rituals such as celebrations. They are in fact creating and re-creating (in the sense of perpetuating traditions, customs and values) culture which is consumed by the other members of society. These productions and manifestations contribute to the group's identity and may also serve to give the community a sense of belonging and locality. Apostolopoulos, Leivadi and Yiannakis (1996) discussed this perspective and debate the impact of tourism on values and beliefs due to the different theoretical positions about the role of culture in social development (Apostolopoulos, et al., 1996, p. 150)

One of the debates which has focused around the cultural paradigm in tourism has been the concern for authenticity. This has stemmed from the discussion about what types of culture are offered to the tourist for their consumption. This is a simplistic approach as there is a dynamic involved in the production and consumption of the product offer. One must also consider the contributors and agents who are involved in this process, together with the recognition that there are different perspectives at different levels of the experience. Different groups in society will construct their own interpretation and meaning of the feast experience as the process does not happen in a vacuum.

The experience is dependent upon the individual's own interpretation of the context. Specifically, according to Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (PCT), the individual acts as 'scientist-psychologist' (Warren, 2012, p. 5) that attempts to derive meaning and interprets the world through one's own construct or inner-outlook. This world-view is determined by

the individual's own experience or even other's world views (Kelly, 1955 as cited by Warren, 2012). Furthermore 'a person's processes are psychologically channelised by the ways in which he or she anticipates events' (Kelly, 1955 as cited by Warren, 2012, p. 5). Therefore the young people may build a construct of the world as they perceive it so as to anticipate their experience of the feast.

One of the earliest formulations of the authenticity debate was formulated by Boorstin (1961) who discussed the significance of the "contrived attractions". This pseudo-event increases the rift between the tourists and the locals. He was concerned that the contrived image of the pseudo-event would become the criteria on which the tourist based his choice of destination, which would in fact be an illusion. MacCannell (1989), a post-modernist, argued that the motivation for tourists is the quest for authenticity rather than contrived events and images. "More and more are seeking holidays that meet their desire for learning, nostalgia, authenticity, heritage, make believe, tranquility, freedom from environmental pollution, physical action and a closer look at the 'other'" (Boissevain, 2013, p. 234).

Although there is a general consensus that tourists go in search of authentic experiences (Krippendorf, 1987; MacCannell, 1989) hyper-reality has become an important feature of the tourist product and is also an important feature of heritage sites (Selby, 2004, p. 106). "Eco takes us on a 'journey into hyperreality' in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing, and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake" (Eco, 1986, p. 7, as cited by Bruner 1994, p. 145). Of course, this journey into hyper-reality is not limited to America, but has spread across the world especially now that we are living in the digital age and where many objects can be reproduced with relative ease. The main problem for places such as Malta is highlighted in Ritzer and Liska's (1997) observations that this hyper-reality produces a form of inflation as 'everyday places of

consumption in the States such as restaurants and shopping malls also recreate Mediterranean villages, Mexican saloons and the Taj Mahal' (p. 59). They suggested that this leads to the places represented to create even more contrived environments to attract tourists. Bruner's (1984; 1994) position is that all culture is continually invented and reinvented and he argued against using dichotomies such as original/copy and authentic/inauthentic.

Youths and the *Festa*

Popular discourse projects the village feast as a diorama of Maltese culture: with its rituals, food, music, fireworks, street and façade decorations and behavior. However there is also the criticism that the Feast is dying out or is 'not what it used to be' or '*spicċat*' (finished). Some interviewees commented that it is becoming a secular event or a pagan celebration. One may agree that the traditional form of celebrating the *festa* has changed, but this does not mean that it is in a state of decline or that it is not authentic. What we are seeing is a substantial input from young people with a creative input which is resulting in a differentiated product. Our research indicates that the *festa* is a channel for creating an event which is also relevant and is imbued with meaning for the youths and modern society in Malta today. The images of the *festa* are no longer of sober-looking persons following the statue of the Patron Saint or of families standing on the sides of the Church parvis or on the edge of the pavements listening attentively to the village bands. Today's images are no longer static and soundless, but are usually produced, in many cases by young people themselves, on video with sound of synchronised colourful firework displays or animated processions and concerts. They are uploaded onto the internet and shared through social media. The prosumer experience is now extended virtually to beyond the village core to all parts of the globe, as comments and "likes" are posted by

all. The buzz which is generated in the days leading up to the *festa* and on the day itself, is extended throughout the year as one can access websites and social media to re-live the *festa* experience. The exchange of ideas, feedback and comments through all forms of digital media can be extensively used for marketing both at the local level as well as for tourism. It is also a unique platform for the *festa* to become a creative cluster which can develop a range of experiences made up of both tangible and intangible culture and heritage which can be enjoyed by locals as well as tourists.

The implication is that the event is becoming enhanced, both from a creative aspect as well as from a temporal aspect in that the enjoyment of its outputs is now extended beyond its traditional lifespan. As an experience, it has also deepened as the 'backstage' such as firework production, design and manufacture of street decorations, (which were only accessible to club members) has now become accessible, albeit, to a limited extent to the general public as videos, TV and radio programmes and other media. These convey not just what actually happens but also gives explanations and detailed information from behind the scenes. In the tourism and heritage industry we call this 'interpretation'.

Professional "interpretation" "distils the essence" and "communicates what is significant about places, people or events" (Colquhoun, 2005, p. iii-viii). "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" (Tilden, 1977, p. 38). This means that visitors as well as members of the community will have a better experience of the event, and therefore a better sense of ownership and custodianship.

Feasts also provide young people with the opportunity to socialise which in essence is concerned with the youth development of a sense of self. Subsequently the socialisation process is also responsible for the forging of one's sense of

identity - whether this is the identity of a Maltese, a young adult or a fanatic of a particular patron Saint. Socialising encompasses both the interaction between family members as well as friends and so feasts provide the opportunity for individuals to reaffirm their identities as well as re-establish their connections with their extended social networks. Other significant motives for visiting feasts are nostalgia and childhood memories. Food, including alcohol consumption and fireworks are considered to be the highlights of the feast.

In the survey distributed around the Swieqi and Madliena area, it is interesting to note that the majority of respondents did not mind that their locality did not have a feast as they considered the St. Julian's feast as sufficient. Some also visited other locations as a means to rekindle nostalgic ties and also highlighted the anticipation of food that usually accompanies feasts. Surprisingly many respondents from this area specifically identified doughnuts as being the highlight of the event, and in some cases specifying the doughnut stand in question. One person commented that most certainly, Twanny's famous doughnuts, the religious aspect to it and the fireworks – which have won many international competitions foster a national sense of pride.

The response to fireworks was also noted throughout the Maltese islands. In one survey of 363 responses, fifty percent replied that fireworks were one of the main highlights of the feast, however about one third of the respondents also complained about the fireworks. This was mainly due to the incessant noise produced by the fireworks. Some respondents suggested that there should be specific timings when fireworks, especially petards could be let off, whilst some complained about the road closures.

Furthermore, the research identified the *xalata*⁶ as an important component of the feast. Youths enjoyed this celebration especially because it conveyed a sense of community. They enjoyed the fact that the day was spent with the rest of the parishioners, and people that would have moved out from their childhood hometown and moved somewhere else. One participant, who lives in a parish which does not have a *festa ta' barra*, explained that he enjoys going to the feast and the *xalata* of his wife's family as they come from a town which celebrates the *festa* in a traditional way. The *xalata* offers a form of ownership and custodianship that provides the opportunity for the feast-goers to find a sense of community as they engage in the *festa* experience.

This motivation to engage in this experience may be attributed to Ryan and Deci's (2000) 'Self-determination Theory'. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that individuals have three psychological needs or universal necessities. These are the need for *competence* for individuals to manage their environment in an effective manner, *relatedness* for individuals to identify with the environment around them by interacting with the individuals forming part of that context and *autonomy* for the individual to be in control of his own self (Deci and Vansteenkiste, 2004; Ryan, 1993).

Therefore individuals seek opportunities in order to fulfill these needs and avoid situations that limit their opportunities to access these needs. These needs act as the mechanism that encourages positive activity, positive development and

6 A *xalata* is the Maltese word for picnic, however when used in the context of the *festa* it conveys a sense of merrymaking. A *xalata* could consist of a day at the beach, however when there is a strong *Xalata* culture it would have included noisy carcading through rival towns or passing in front of rival *kazin* (clubs) with horn blowing or loud music and chanting. This is no longer possible as it is illegal, although it does happen occasionally. The day-long picnic could include a beach barbeque followed by a party. These are usually organised by youths and attended by all age groups.

psychological well-being (Vansteenkiste, Neimiec & Soenens, 2010). Therefore the context, in which the individual is, plays a fundamental role in supporting the acquisition of intrinsic goals associated with increased satisfaction and well-being. The young people may not be as involved in the village *festa* today as these events do not fulfill their psychological needs and do not increase their sense of satisfaction. Furthermore, young people are no longer engaging in the preparation and execution of the *festa* as they may be unable to relate to the environment that the feast offers and subsequent interaction with others who form part of the *festa* context.

On the other hand, youths may attempt to engage in the *festa* experience by altering their experience of the feast by consuming alcohol or drug use so as to fulfill these psychological needs. A large proportion of young people interviewed said that what they enjoyed the most in feasts was the drinking of alcohol. So for example, the process of engaging in the consumption of alcohol, as reported by some of the interviewees, serves to enable the youths to increase their sense of relatedness and enhance the experience that the *festa* offers. Moreover, some youths may also choose to consume illegal drugs as a means to enhance the *festa* experience, which is a practice that is now becoming increasingly more popular (Ameen, 2009). This in itself confirms the manner in which the meaning attributed the Maltese *festa* is changing.

Conclusion

The objective of this micro-study was to explore youths' perceptions about the *festa*. Just over eighty percent thought of it in a positively, whilst others either did not like it at all or had ambivalent feelings towards it. About a third of those who like the *festa*, contributed in some way or another in its organisation. A few, who are involved in firework production and synchronised design, not only dedicated all their free time to the feast but

also contributed financially. For them, fireworks take over their life. For some others *il-maħżen tal-armar* (m. *feast decorations' warehouse*) or the band club becomes their second home.

There is no doubt that the *festa* in Malta is an authentic event, based on tradition and to a lesser extent on the religious fervor which used to dominate past celebrations of the *festa*. The feast has mutated and changed, and in some way, this is why it has survived. As seen from our interpretation of the Ryan and Deci's (2000) 'Self-determination Theory', it is not just a case of the *festa* needing the youths but also of young people needing the *festa*. Of course young people could find similar events to attend such as the Isle of MTV, however this and similar events do not offer the space and opportunities that the traditional *festa* does. The *festa* allows for creativity and innovation, socialisation and creation of cultural and social capital. Some clubs and organisations have recognised this and have created synergies with young people within their community. The church, voluntary organisations, local councils and other entities may wish to follow suit. If Malta wants to retain and attract more tourists, then community-based tourism has to be part of the national strategy. This type of tourism enhances the sense of community, improves local businesses, and above all conserves the local resources (Key & Pillai, 2006).

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