

# Analysis of the Attitudes of Gozitan Worker Commuters Regarding Travel Time and Transport Options between Gozo and Malta

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## Introduction

The main objective of this article is to investigate inter-island commuting behaviour and travel time in island states. It is specifically aimed at Gozitan commuters who travel regularly between Gozo and Malta. By understanding the present state of affairs and examining the administration of the existing transport modes one can perceive some practicable propositions to improve the commute between the island of Gozo and Malta and connectivity between the two islands.

Commuting, though essential, has a cost in terms of time and money, and to determine the best mode of travel various factors have to be considered including the purpose and distance of the trip, perceived comfort, customer care, service quality, travel time and safety.

Travel time studies are crucial for transport geographers, particularly on island archipelagos. Small islands like Gozo have to rely on outside connections for their industrial supplies, employment opportunities and other necessities.

The main areas that will be addressed in this article are about the current travel characteristics of Gozitan commuters, the current travel times experienced by commuters and their attitudes about the current ferry service that operates between the islands. It finally takes into consideration the attitudes of Gozitan commuters towards the value of time and a potential infrastructure upgrade such as the proposed underwater tunnel and the implementation of a fast ferry service between Gozo and Malta. The latter has been recently introduced.

## Background

Gozo is a small island which has a population of around 31,000 inhabitants with an area of only 67 square kilometres. Gozo is linked to Malta by a scheduled ferry (Borg, 2017) and a fast ferry service. Malta has many sheltered harbours, whilst Gozo has only one such harbour, namely Mġarr located in the south-east of the island. This harbour was man-made to unite the islands in the 1970s (Conrad et al., 2011).

Gozitans who commute to Malta for work totalled 3,400 during 2019.<sup>1</sup> It is calculated that approximately one in five employed persons who live in Gozo commute to Malta for their employment (NSO - Regional Statistics Malta, 2023). There was an increase of 27.1% in the number of passengers that traversed between the harbours of Mġarr and Ċirkewwa between the years of 2021 and 2022 (Table 1).

There are two available transport modes that connect the islands of Gozo and Malta. A ferry service that links Mġarr Harbour in Gozo to Ċirkewwa in the North of the island of Malta and a fast ferry service which connects the island from Mġarr Harbour in Gozo to Valletta in Malta. The main mode used between these two is the slow ferry service which also carries vehicles apart from passengers. There are currently four ferries in this service, which offer a crossing every half an hour (in peak hours). They are named M.V. Ta' Pinu (commissioned in 2000), M.V. Gaudos (2001), M.V. Malita (2002) and a latest new addition which is named the M.V. Nikolaus (2019). The Gozo Channel started operating the services under a monopoly (and public service obligations) in 1979

<sup>1</sup> 2019 was the year when the survey mentioned in this study was conducted.

	Day of the week	January - March		Change	Percentage Change
		2021	2022	2021/2022	2021/2022
<b><i>Trips</i></b>	Monday	2,164	2,475	311	14.4
	Tuesday	2,115	2,447	332	15.7
	Wednesday	2,130	2,456	326	15.3
	Thursday	2,143	2,471	328	15.3
	Friday	2,337	2,542	205	8.8
	Saturday	2,075	2,451	376	18.1
	Sunday	2,250	2,450	200	8.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15,214</b>	<b>17,292</b>	<b>2,078</b>	<b>13.7</b>
<b><i>Vehicles</i></b>	Monday	129,371	142,547	13,176	10.2
	Tuesday	116,025	129,733	13,708	11.8
	Wednesday	116,397	133,506	17,109	14.7
	Thursday	111,602	129,258	17,656	15.8
	Friday	111,271	128,231	16,960	15.2
	Saturday	112,358	133,136	20,778	118.5
	Sunday	157,990	175,449	17,459	11.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>855,014</b>	<b>971,860</b>	<b>116,846</b>	<b>13.7</b>
<b><i>Passengers</i></b>	Monday	293,654	361,456	67,802	23.1
	Tuesday	264,116	326,922	62,806	23.8
	Wednesday	271,502	347,078	75,576	27.8
	Thursday	254,218	341,238	87,020	34.2
	Friday	262,820	340,444	77,624	29.5
	Saturday	286,491	381,530	95,039	33.2
	Sunday	406,100	493,062	86,962	21.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,038,901</b>	<b>2,591,730</b>	<b>552,829</b>	<b>27.1</b>

Table 1: Sea transport between Malta and Gozo by day of the week.

Source: Data taken from National Statistics Office, Regional Statistics Malta, 2023, calculated by writer.

(Gozo Channel, 2020). On the other hand, the fast ferry service was launched on 1st June 2021. This service is a venture on the road to more effective mobility. There are two operators contributing which are the Gozo Fast Ferry Ltd and the Virtu Ferries Gozo Service (Transport Malta, 2023). These two companies lately have joined together to become the Gozo Highspeed.

The theory of a fixed link supposedly reduces the time impediment along short sea channels. (Knowles, 2006). However, documentation from Europe and the US from the 1930s and 1950s indicates that fixed links could raise traffic by

between 40% and 210% (Knowles, 2006). Mott Macdonald (2012) investigated the tunnel link potentials between the islands of Malta and Gozo, who concluded that a tunnel between the islands was attainable. An additional study regarding the proposed tunnel was conducted by Dr Cordina (Cordina, 2015) for the Gozo Business Chamber and Transport Malta. This report suggests that there is the necessity for a tunnel to reduce the downsides of the so-called double insularity. The verdict of this report suggests that from an economic viewpoint, the tunnel generates economic benefits for Gozo.

## Method Used to Obtain the Results

In order to assess the attitudes of Gozitan commuters regarding travel between the islands, primary data was collected by means of an online survey, using a questionnaire administered in 2019. The target population for this research were the Gozitans who commute every day to Malta to their place of work. As indicated by the National Statistics Office report of 2019, there were 3,400 Gozitan commuters who crossed from Gozo to Malta. Questionnaires were distributed amongst potential respondents until 340 replies were reached (approximately a 10% sample of Gozitan such commuters) by email and telephone calls. A URL link was created for the online questionnaires through Google forms, which was then made available to participants. This link was shared on social media platforms and groups that concerned specifically the Gozitan commuters.

In addition to the online survey, two semi-structured interviews were also administered as a means to gather primary data, with Mr Joe Cordina, Chairperson of the Gozo Channel, and Mr John Borg, Permanent Secretary within the Ministry for Gozo, as respondents.

Secondary data was also collected from different sources, such as, journals, research papers and reports, together with data from the National Statistics Office.

## The Results

From the statistical investigations that were conducted, it resulted that a large number of the survey respondents, work in localities such as Imsida (25.4%), Birkirkara (13.4%) and Valletta (8.6%). This result mirrors accurately the Census of Population and Housing 2011. NSO (2016) portrayed, that the highest percentage of Gozo and Comino residents who work in Malta were employed in the Northern Harbour and Southern Harbour regions. Imsida and Birkirkara fall under the Northern Harbour whilst Valletta falls under the Southern Harbour region.

The majority of the sample population who participated in this study, commuted very frequently

to work (5 days a week - 61.4%), while a small percentage of the sample population commuted 3-4 days a week (17.4%). This remarkably shows us that these commuters undergo an average of 4hrs commuting every day, which can be calculated to around 20 hours each week.

The survey participants in this research, were also questioned regarding their normal mode of transport on land from home to the final destination. The results show that the most prevalent transport mode was the private car both for their journey to work and back home.

These Gozitan commuters can be categorised as extreme commuters (Vincent-Geslin & Ravalet, 2016).<sup>2</sup> They spend a lot of time travelling in order to reach their place of work. The journey from home to work takes them, on average, between 1 hr 15 mins to 1hr 30 mins (29.9%), 1hr 30 mins to 1hr 45 mins (28.7%) and over 1hr 45 mins (23.3%). Their journey back home averaged between 1hr 30 mins to 1hr 45 mins (30.1%), over 1hr 45 mins (28.1%) and 1hr 15 mins to 1hr 30 mins (25.8%) (Table 2).

When using an appropriate statistical test regarding differences between males and females in this regard, it was found that there is a relationship between gender and the average travel time of the commuters, revealing that females have longer commuting time than their male counterparts.

Analysing the attitudes of the Gozitan commuters with respect to the current ferry system was the next step in the research. A Lickert scale was used for this purpose, where the respondents were asked to choose one of five options relating to the quality of eight attributes namely poor, below average, average, above average and excellent. The question related to eight aspects of ferry service as shown in Figure 1. The majority selected the 'Average' score for all the characteristics (Availability of service – 53.7%, Information – 39.1% Travel Time – 43.4%, Customer Care – 43.1%, Comfort and cleanliness 46.0%. Security – 39.7% and Ferry cost – 42.3%), apart from the characteristic Accessibility which had the 'Above average' score (44%) as its highest rating.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent-Geslin & Ravalet label extreme commuting as people who need to commute more than 2hrs, minimum three times per week.

		Frequency	Percent
Avg. daily travel time (home-work)	45-60 minutes	7	2.0
	1 hour - 1hr 15 minutes	56	16.0
	1hr 15 minutes - 1hr 30 minutes	105	30.0
	1hr 30 minutes - 1hr 45 minutes	101	28.9
	Over 1hr 45 minutes	81	23.1
	Total	350	100.0
Avg. daily travel time (work-home)	45 - 60 minutes	4	1.1
	1 hour - 1 hr 15 minutes	52	14.9
	1hr 15 minutes - 1hr 30 minutes	90	25.7
	1hr 30 minutes - 1 hr 45 minutes	106	30.3
	Over 1hr 45 minutes	98	28.0
	Total	350	100.0

Table 2: Percentages and frequencies of the travel time for the sample of commuters (home to work and work to home).

This result was furthermore enhanced with a Friedman test. The results showed that the best service quality criterion was ‘information’. This was followed by accessibility, ferry cost, security, availability of service, comfort and cleanliness, travel time and customer care. Customer care was considered as being of a low quality.

There emerged a difference between regular (3 or more days of commuting) and less regular commutes. Regular commuters indicated ‘comfort and cleanliness’ and ‘security’ as their best service quality indicator, whilst less regular commuters indicated that ‘availability of service’ and ‘information’ as their best service quality indicator. Customer care was ranked poorly by both types of commuters. (Figure 1).

With regards to the attitudes of the commuters towards the proposed tunnel between Malta and Gozo, the majority of respondents opposed this fixed link (63.7%). The most prevalent reason was that Gozo would lose its character and its identity. The results from the questionnaire also indicated that the value of time for Gozitan commuters was

important. The reason why commuters were in favour of potential infrastructure upgrade revolved around the value of time. The most popular attitude for those who were in favour of the tunnel was that they expected a quicker connectivity and so the accessibility to Malta would improve (26.6%). Conversely, the results showed that the commuters’ attitude in relation to the then proposed fast ferry was a positive one. The majority of the participants were in favour of this service (65.7%) with most of these respondents being those Gozitan commuters who worked in or near Valletta.

With reference to the fixed link possibility, according to the views expressed during the semi-structured interviews with two persons, travel time, when the proposed tunnel is completed, would only be lessened slightly, mostly because it would save the commuters the ferry waiting time. However, the likely resulting road traffic congestion to and from the tunnel entrance would increase travel time on land.

It also emerged from these interviews that the studies and reports relating to the tunnel between

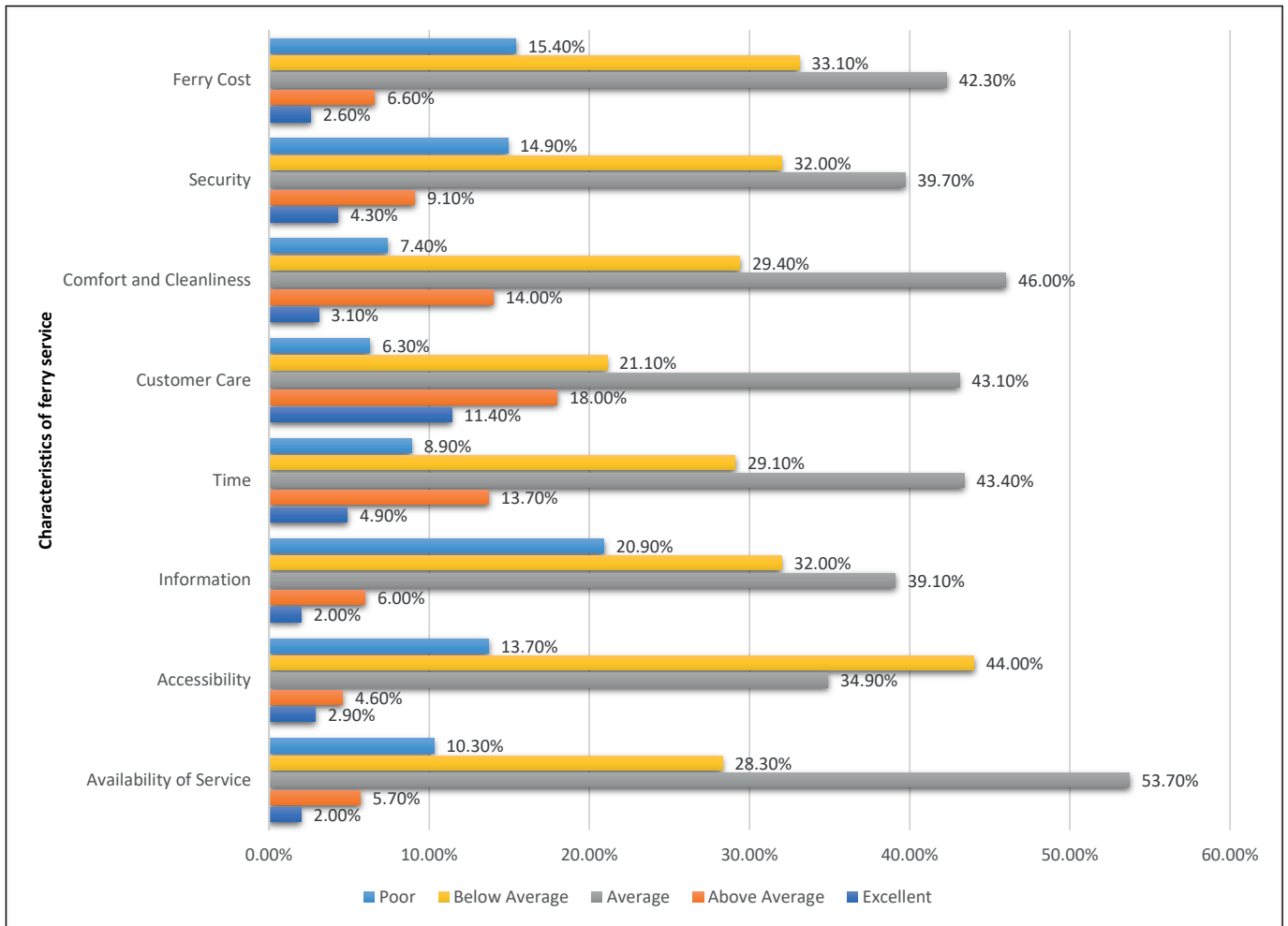


Figure 1: Values and percentages of characteristics of ferry by the sample commuters.

Malta and Gozo were not made public, leading to limited knowledge about their pros and cons among the affected commuters.

Regarding the current ferry system, the main points that emerged from the interviews were that time waiting for the ferry was one of the disadvantages. On the other hand, its advantages were that it ran on lower costs. Moreover, with the improved frequency of trips brought about by the introduction of a fourth ferry, the service was catering well for the everyday passengers. This was manifested on the fact that queues have diminished considerably after the introduction of the fourth ferry. On the other hand, according to the interview results, the proposed fast ferry would not be sustainable in the long run.

### Conclusion and Implications

A number of implications can be derived from this study. The finding that cars were the predominant

means of transport to from and to harbours and from and to the final destination, suggests that public transport needs to be improved to render it more popular amongst the commuters.

As stated, the introduction of a fast ferry, which was proposed at the time when the survey was carried out, was considered favourably by the majority of respondents. Two fast ferries have since then been operating, although at the time of writing this article, the system needs to be rendered more reliable.

It emerged from the responses to the survey that the ‘customer care’ and ‘travel time’ characteristics were considered to be of low quality in the services provided by Gozo Channel. With regard to customer care, the company needs to improve this service, possibly by upgrading communication with users, possibly including a live chat, and by responding and acting quickly when complaints are made by commuters.

Regarding the characteristic of 'travel time', it emerged that during holiday seasons and long weekends, commuters who travel for work experience long delays. The implication of this is therefore more frequent trips during these times would lessen the time spent waiting on quays by these worker commuters.

As a final consideration relates to tele-working. During the COVID-19 pandemic many commuters travelling to work from Gozo to Malta have experienced the benefits of tele-working which reduced the need for travel. Tele-working could reduce time wasting and discomfort to commuters in the case of bad weather. Some operations can also be routinely carried out without the need for travel using tele-working schemes. The pandemic was the appropriate opportunity to show that tele-working can really be implemented and can minimise the pressures of extreme commuting. In this way, instead of using the time to travel, it can be exchanged into time spent working from home (Ministry for Gozo, 2020).

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