



AUDIENCES' EXPERIENCES OF THE VALLETTA 2018 BRAND

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ABSTRACT

Longitudinal in nature, this project investigates how audiences engage with cultural brands by taking a processual view. The study relies on initial exploratory qualitative efforts (focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews) and ensuing real-time experience tracking (RET) data collection. The use of RET is an innovative aspect in studying cultural brands, moving away from the exclusive focus on influences that impact on audience engagement (as in past studies) to the actual process of engagement that involves multiple touchpoints of the Valletta 2018 brand.

Individuals experience and engage with Valletta 2018 brand in two ways – by experiencing direct communications transmitted by the Foundation and by experiencing or engaging in indirect communications like word of mouth or social media exchanges. Tracking experiences across different touchpoints requires a participant observation approach, which suffers from various inadequacies like limited number of participants as well as participants' social desirability bias. RET mitigates these challenges and helps researchers capture data about experiences across multiple individuals without violating individuals' privacy.

Prior RET studies relied on SMS and online diary approaches. Because of the unconnected character of these approaches, past RET studies suffer from lack of qualitative reflections that participants contribute. This study aims to mitigate this weakness by adopting a smartphone app that offers participants the same functionalities of SMS and online diary approaches. A total of three waves of data capture, each involving 400 participants engaged for a total period of two separate weeks are planned throughout the period 2016 through 2018.

INTRODUCTION

The studies how audiences engage with the different forms of communication that the Valletta 2018 communications programme is transmitting. Longitudinal in nature, this project relies on an innovative data gathering approach involving real-time experience tracking, and aims to determine the effects each type of communications transmitted by Valletta 2018 purport on the different audiences as reflected in individuals' attitudes and behaviour.

This project connects with two other research initiatives related to cultural participation that are also part of the Valletta 2018 evaluation and monitoring research. The first is an ethnographic study that investigates the factors impacting on audience participation in the Foundation's Cultural Programme. This study relies on a qualitative approach to capture data through structured interviews, focus group discussions and some direct observation. The second research initiative relies on a mixed method approach to explore the views about cultural participation and the associated motivations from different actor perspectives (audiences, producers and creators).

This study builds on the quantitative initiatives the Valletta 2018 Evaluation and Monitoring Steering Committee is undertaking in the form of semestral CATI surveys (Valletta Participation Survey) to investigate how audiences engage with the Valletta 2018 brand involves:

- exploring the touchpoints that feature in individuals' engagement with the Valletta 2018 brand
- determine the sequences of encounters that individuals experience in their engagement with the Valletta 2018 brand, and
- assess the effects that such encounters produce on individuals experiencing the Valletta 2018 brand.

METHODOLOGY

This study is exploratory and retroductive in nature, aiming to discover regularities and patterns of behaviours as well as the underlying mechanisms. Because of its qualitative nature, the study is not linked with any relevant research indicators.

However, this study looks at the process of engagement rather than exclusively at the influences or outcomes of audience engagement with cultural events within the Valletta 2018 Programme. It is this process that lies at the basis of audience (behavioural) segmentation that can help producers or creators better plan initiatives that target specific audience segments more effectively in future initiatives – both locally and overseas. Moreover, this study is intended to help the Evaluation and Monitoring committee assess the success of the Valletta 2018 communications strategy.

This study focuses on the individuals' experiences of the cultural brand as the unit of analysis, with analysis levelled to the audience individuals and their experiences, differing from the other (above mentioned) cultural participation research projects that focus on either the producers/creators' views or the participants' post-hoc perceptions about experienced events.

Individuals experience and engage with the Valletta 2018 brand in two key ways:

By experiencing communications transmitted directly by the Valletta 2018 Foundation or by engaging/experiencing indirect communications like word of mouth and social media exchanges. Audiences (and stakeholders) experience a holistic engagement with a cultural brand across multiple points of contact (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009), touchpoints (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007) or discrete encounters (Meyer & Schwager, 2007) as audiences (and stakeholders) progress in their journey with the brand (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008).

At the core of this study is a premise where brands (particularly cultural ones) are dynamic, continuous social processes (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). Individual customers (audiences), production actors (performers, producers, creators) as well as other stakeholders constitute a network of resources (rather than dyadic relationships²) who co-create brand value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Brand value emerges from stakeholders' experiences³ with the brand and as a result of sustained negotiations and symbolic interpretations of brand-related information. Brand value also emerges from personal narratives based on personal or impersonal experiences with brands (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand value is located in the minds of audiences and stakeholders (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007) who form brand communities – or specialized non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). These relationships are also at the core of brand resonance – or a strong brand's the most important building block (Keller, 2001).

Audiences' engagement with cultural brands exhibits community-like qualities as understood in sociology, and address identity-, meaning- and status-related concerns for all network participants above. There are 12 value-creating practices in brand communities, organised in four thematic categories (after Schau et al., 2009). Of these, community engagement, impression management and social networking are most relevant to cultural brands.

¹A touchpoint is an episode where an individual (part of an audience) has a direct or indirect contact with a (cultural) brand (after Baxendale et al., 2015).

²After Ballantyne and Aitken (2007); Ind and Bjerke (2007); Jones (2005); McAlexander et al. (2002) and Muñiz Jr. and Schau (2005)

³Or the subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the brand after Lemke et al. (2011).

Brand resonance involves relationships that are described in four dimensions (Keller, 2001). On top of loyalty and attachment, community and engagement dimensions are most relevant to cultural brands as is Valletta 2018. The community dimension relates to that broader meaning to audiences who identify themselves with a brand community and sense affiliation (if not kinship) with other individuals associated with the brand (such as fellow audience members experiencing the brand, performers, producers and creators among others). Active engagement, by contrast, is where audiences assert loyalty to a brand. Within this dimension, audiences invest time, energy, money and other resources into the cultural brand beyond those explained during the purchase or consumption of cultural events (after Keller, 2001).

This rationale suggests five important considerations that the methodology employed needs to entertain. First, rather than considering the Valletta 2018 as a static property, this study looks at the process through which audiences engage with the Valletta 2018 brand. Second, this process involves a network of actors (audiences, performers, producers and creators) using operant and operand resources⁴. Third, audiences engaged in this process experience multiple touch points. Fourth, a variety of individuals are involved in audience and performer/provider spheres. Fifth, individuals experience cultural brands in a collective consumption context, highlighting the multitude of touchpoints that audiences encounter in their participation in cultural events and associated co-creation of value (after Kelleher et al., 2015).

In response to these five considerations, the study's methodology acknowledges that audiences engage with Valletta 2018 brand through a multitude of encounters that range from direct instances (like advertising or actual participation in an event) to other indirect experiences (like word of mouth or third party contributions on social media). These encounters impact on individuals' attitudes towards Valletta 2018 brand.

Traditional survey methods can capture and measure such impacts but rely on individuals' memories of encounters with the Valletta 2018 brand after that such events occur. Memories fade rapidly and are often biased by whether or not a participation actually happened (Bryman, 2012; Malhotra & Birks, 2007; McGivern, 2013). A richer account about the total effect of the different encounters an individual makes with a brand can be constructed through ethnographic approaches that require observers participating in the experiences with observed individuals. Ethnographic methods are limited as individual observers can only shadow a limited number of individuals for a restricted period of time (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; van Maanen, 2011). Moreover, individuals' behaviours tend to change as a result of individuals' own social desirability – or the unconscious desire to “please” the observer (Adler & Adler, 1987; Bryman, 2012; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Patton, 1980; Paulhus, 1991).

An alternative approach involves engaging research participants to interact with the researcher using the participants' own mobile phone. Data is collected in real time (hence the term “real-time experience tracking” or RET) (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Macdonald, Wilson, & Konus, 2012) and mitigates the challenges of traditional ethnography in two ways. First, whereas a researcher/observer cannot easily track audiences 24 hours daily, participants' mobile phones can. Second, unlike human observers, participants' mobile phones do not influence participants' perceptions on encounters and experiences.

A process view to audiences' brand engagement is drawn from four essential steps, where research participants:

⁴Audiences use knowledge and skills (operant resources) to engage with cultural brands and transform physical or experience (operand resources) into meaning, experiential benefits and value.

1. Fill out an online questionnaire about their awareness, knowledge, perception and experience of Valletta 2018 events;
2. Send in four-character messages whenever they encounter Valletta 2018 by way of noting Valletta 2018 communications or participating in events or experiencing (other direct or indirect ways) the brand;
3. Fill in an online diary in which they corroborate on their on their encounters with Valletta 2018
4. Complete an online questionnaire (modified version of (1) above) to assess any change in attitudes and views about Valletta 2018.

Established RET methods rely on two types of data collection channels: text (SMS) messaging and online (involving pre-RET and post-RET surveys as well as an online diary) (Macdonald et al., 2012). In these studies, participant contributions through online diary are not obligatory and result in poorly capturing participants' reflections about their experience with brands. The method employed for researching the Valletta 2018 brand moves from utilising traditional mobile phones to using participants' smart phones that are in widespread use among Maltese (and foreign) consumers. The use of smartphones enables observers to use a purposively developed app that captures the relevant data in steps (2) and (3) above in one stage.

Administering this study involves two key phases of field work. The first, envisaged to happen around February or March 2016, involves the piloting of the RET, intended to uncover any methodological issues that would need to be addressed prior to the conduct of a main study. The second, envisaged to happen around May or June 2016, involves the administration of RET for a period of eight weeks, involving around 100 participants per week. Participants would be required to contribute to the study by participating for two separate weeks across the entire eight week period, translating in a total sample size of n=400. This RET fieldwork wave would be repeated during 2017 and 2018 intended to gather data during the expected busier periods around May 2017 and September 2018.

The smartphone app is currently under development. Just Some Coding Ltd were contracted late in October 2015 following a search for an adequate supplier with experience in development of similar types of smartphone applications. Initial proofs of the app have already passed initial evaluations and a final delivery of the app for piloting is expected in January 2016.

From a methodological perspective, there are five key limitations that may impact on the study's validity and reliability. First, participants may report experiences well after the encounter happening, if at all. This is one key problem manifest in indirect methods of data collection (such as self-completion surveys) and can only be mitigated by having data compared with objective data sources such as transaction data (e.g. receipts for ticket purchases) or GIS data captured by the participants' smart phone. The capture of GIS data remains a valid opportunity and can be captured only if research participants consent. An additional approach involves the use of online diary data. Online diary data helps validate the encounters reported by participants on a case-by-case basis. The use of an app that integrates both encounter data and participant reflections offers an augmented possibility for this route of data validation.

⁵ In 2014, 42% of mobile phone users made use of a smartphone – up from 37% in 2013. A prevailing majority of smartphone users are younger than 34 years, with proportions of smartphone users (over total mobile phone users) declining with ages older than 35. These proportions are expected to increase drastically during 2015 and 2016. Source: Malta Communications Authority, 2014.

Second, as with survey methods, researchers' questions (as an intervention) may influence participants' attitudes towards a brand. Because this project is about a multitude of cultural events and associated experiences that fall within one "umbrella" brand, the impact of researchers' intervention is minimised as participants are sensitized to experiences associated with cultural activities rather than specifically towards Valletta 2018 brand.

Third, there is a possibility that specific types of encounters remain only sparsely represented. Earlier studies report such a problem even when large numbers of participants are engaged in RET studies. Mitigating this challenge in this study involves the administration of more than one wave of participation (for each of the participants recruited in this study) following the suggestions of Baxendale et al., (2015) and Macdonald et al. (2012). Asking participants to keep engaged with RET for longer periods than one week is deemed ineffective as earlier experience (as well as published studies) suggest high participant dropout rates in longitudinal investigations like panel surveys (McGivern, 2013).

Fourth, RET participants may fail to report all encounters with the Valletta 2018 brand for various reasons. Participants may not be sensitised enough to respond to any brand stimulus/encounter (direct or indirect), may be responding to additional work or social pressures (which may take over participants' intention to remain engaged with the research study) or may find responding to repeated brand encounters as boring and disengaging. This study aims to alleviate the effect of these challenges by administering incentives that help individuals remain committed to their participation in the study. Such incentives are to involve free (or sponsored) access to various events within the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme.

Fifth, RET needs to relate to a realistically comprehensive range of touchpoint types that participants encounter during their engagement with Valletta 2018 brand. These touchpoints must include both direct encounters (such as event participation, conversations with ticketing representatives, event/brand websites and so on) as well as indirect encounters like contact with other audience members, learning about Valletta 2018 in the news, or interactions with Valletta 2018/event organisers, performers or other stakeholders outside events. All of these encounters influence audiences and their engagement with Valletta 2018. A comprehensive list of touchpoint types can only be constructed if these touchpoint types are explored qualitatively with Valletta 2018 stakeholders as well as targeted audiences. This requirement is addressed through the conduct of qualitative efforts involving focus group discussions with audience representatives as well as face-to-face interviews with representatives of the Valletta 2018 evaluation and monitoring research committee. Because of the multitude and variable nature of events and touchpoints, this qualitative work is planned to be initiated just before the launch of the RET field work intent on ensuring the relevance of RET instrumentation at the time of administration.

WAY FORWARD

During 2016, the project is foreseen to unfold drastically as qualitative focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews are scheduled to be held during the first quarter of the year. Ensuing efforts will involve the piloting of the smartphone app (also during the first quarter of the year) as well as a main wave of field data collection happening during the second quarter of the year. Depending on the findings established in 2016, additional waves of field work are planned for 2017 and 2018, with a final set of findings emerging from an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data planned to be published in 2018 and 2019.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study within this theme employs an innovative approach that looks at cultural brands and audience engagement from a processual viewpoint, relying on the development and administration of longitudinal methodology. In turn, this methodology relies on the employment of a custom built smartphone app that is envisaged to capture data from participants who encounter different touchpoints that constitute the totality of a brand experience.

The results of this study can be viewed in tandem with other analytics of engagement with Valletta 2018, such as visits to the website and engagement with social media channels (see table below), to gain a comprehensive outlook on the relationship between the Valletta 2018 brand and its target audiences. This data will be expanded in the coming years as channels of physical and digital engagement continue to develop.

The table below gives an indication of the current levels of user engagement with the Valletta 2018 social and print media. The table indicates that engagement with Valletta 2018 digital channels is fairly strong and coverage in local media is broad. This analysis will be continued throughout the upcoming years and into 2018 and will be expanded to include social media channels.

Sessions	82,169
Users	60,034
New visitors	76.5%
Facebook likes	9,802
Print media coverage in local newspapers (number of articles)	274