Online Booking of Collective Accommodation Establishments in Malta

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Abstract

Tourism plays a major role in the economy of many small islands and one way how these islands can remain competitive in this industry is through price competitiveness. Online bookings have increased in popularity with travel consumers, and such bookings can nowadays take place through various channels. This paper studies online bookings of collective accommodation establishments on the small island state of Malta by comparing the prices offered through three different channels. A number of hypotheses are tested using data collected from a representative sample and some implications that this study has for major stakeholders in the tourism industry in Malta are discussed.

Keywords: *statistics, tourism, online booking, collective accommodation establishment, Malta, price.*

1. Introduction

The use of the Internet for online shopping has been on the increase ever since the World Wide Web could offer a relatively safe environment for these transactions to take place online (Goode and Harris, 2007; Soopramanien and Robertson, 2007), although issues of trust (Koehn, 2003; Lim *et al*., 2006) and experience (Soopramanien, 2011) still play an important role in the online retail market. Users purchase all sorts of goods through the web (Keisidou *et al.*, 2011); one of the most popular categories being travel products (Park *et al.*, 2011) with the latest figures showing approximately 65% of adult Internet users in the U.S. buying or making a reservation for travel online (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011). Travel consumers make air-tickets reservations, accommodation bookings and car-rental reservations, purchase tickets for places of interest, for organised tours and for other attractions, and book entire travel packages. Given that travel products are experience goods and hence their quality cannot be assessed before they are consumed (Peterson *et al.*, 1997), the level of insecurity in purchasing these intangible products is often higher than for other products (Chiang and Dholakia, 2003; Swarbroke and Horner, 2007). Thus, many travel consumers get involved in a search for detailed information before actually purchasing the product in order to reduce insecurity and enhance the quality of the purchase outcome (Jun *et al.*, 2007).

The need for websites to provide detailed, updated and interesting information in a well-organised and attractive manner has long been researched, acknowledged, and acted upon (for example, Supphellen and Nysveen, 2001; Bentley, 2005; Panagopoulos *et al.*, 2011). Travel websites have taken the role of an essential source of travel information and are today more than ever serving as an important channel for the promotion of travel tourism (Pitt *et al.*, 2007). Since the late 1990s, destination marketing organisations have understood the importance of travel-related websites in their effort to promote positive images of their respective destination (So and Morrison, 2003) and have used the Internet as one of their main communication channels (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2006). Websites provide a quick way of sharing information, allow communication to take place in unrestricted time, do not suffer from geographical or other coverage constraints, and come at relatively low cost (Kim *et al.,* 2004; Rayman-Bacchus and Molina, 2001). An added benefit that cannot be overlooked or underestimated is the possibility that websites have of using different approaches to target different segments of the society (Lau *et al*., 2001), and thus attract tourists having different profiles, interests and characteristics. In their study on the effect that travel websites have on potential tourists' images of a destination, Jeong

et al. (2012, p.23) concluded that 'the travel website significantly affected the majority of cognitive destination image components and overall destination image.'

The positive relationship existing between online searching and online purchasing has been demonstrated for various product categories (Farag *et al.*, 2007). In particular, Jensen (2012) evidenced this positive correlation between searching for travel-related information and online purchasing of travel products, although this is not very strong. The main reasons that Jensen gives for this not-so-strong relationship revolve mainly around the consumer's perceived risk to purchase travel products online, the reduced possibility for the consumer to obtain personnel advice with respect to personalised travel products, and the positive experience consumers generally come across in a travel agency. He also concludes that 'frequent and experienced travellers are the most likely to search and purchase their travel products online [and] thus, by not using this new channel, conventional travel agents will lose an important share of their market' (Jensen, 2012, p.67). Many studies highlight the ever increasing popularity of the Internet in travel and tourism (Bonn *et al.*, 1999; Buhalis and Licata, 2002; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). Tourism suppliers, including airlines and accommodation establishments among others, are very aware of this trend and of the consequence of losing their traditional in-store customers. They updated the services they offer in order to benefit from the opportunities provided by the Internet and 'developed eCommerce applications by allowing users to access directly their reservation systems' (Buhalis and Licata, 2002, p.208). To complement these applications provided by a number of suppliers, a number of booking engines (or online travel aggregators) providing the opportunity to their users to search, compare and book flights offered by different airlines and accommodation in different hotels have mushroomed on the Web especially in recent years. Among other benefits, such as the possibility of obtaining information about the service desired and view other consumers' reviews of the services they received, these websites offer the travel consumer the possibility to compare the prices of different suppliers, both within the same website and across different websites.

Despite the increase in popularity of these booking engines, few researchers have examined the difference between the prices offered by the various booking engines and the difference in the prices offered by these engines and the supplier's own reservation system. A study by Clemons *et al.* (2002) found that ticket prices may vary by as much as 18% across booking engines. Chatterjee and Yawei (2010, p.578) state that 'consumers are more likely to complete purchases at online travel aggregators than at travel service provider websites', but they do not examine the reason behind this behaviour. One possible reason could be the provision of a cheaper price by the booking engine, although supporting evidence for this claim is very limited. Any difference in prices being offered online would, most probably, depend on the destination being considered by the travel consumer, especially in the case of accommodation prices. The analysis of this phenomenon and of the implications related to it has both academic and practical relevance. The aim of this study is to make an initial step in verifying or rejecting the claim made above, by examining this phenomenon in accommodation prices in the case of a small island state whose economy heavily depends on the tourism industry, namely Malta. Future research could take into consideration other destinations with a possible final objective being that of identifying whether a direct or indirect online source for booking accommodation establishments is cheaper in the respective destination. If booking engines are found to be cheaper than the direct source, then this would be one reason why the number of booking engines has increased on the web. However, in the eventuality of booking engines being more expensive than the direct source, other factors (such as the possibility to book flight, accommodation and car-rental together) would need to be examined to justify the survival of these booking engines.

It is a well-documented fact that tourism has become one of the main sources (if not the main source) of employment and income in the economies of many small islands (for further discussions on this area, the reader can refer to McElroy and Hamma, 2010; Shakeela, 2011), and that the fluctuations in tourism demand can lead to significant impacts on these economies. Sinclair *et al.* (2005) examined, compared and contrasted the impact of tourism on three small island states, namely Cyprus, Malta and Mauritius. They found that an increase in tourism demand led to an increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), welfare and employment, and that the expansion of tourism demand impacted greatly on a number of sectors of the economy, particularly on the accommodation sector. It is widely accepted that an essential component for a country or a destination to remain competitive in the tourism industry is price competitiveness, because 'in their destination choice decision, tourists consider the price (cost of living) at the destination relative to the costs of living at the origin and substitute destinations' (Forsyth and Dwyer, 2009, p.78).

In the next sections the authors give a brief background to the island of Malta with special emphasis on the tourism industry, and present a brief comparative overview of tourism in Malta vis-à-vis some of its main competitors in the Mediterranean Sea. A number of hypotheses related to the online prices charged by collective accommodation establishments in Malta are then suggested. The methodology adopted for this study is discussed and the data collected is presented for testing the hypotheses made. Finally, the conclusions and implications of this study are reviewed by

keeping in mind some limitations, and possible directions for further research are proposed.

2. Background Information

The small island state of Malta is situated in the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea, south of Sicily (Italy) and north of Libya. The impact that tourism has on the Maltese economy is undoubtedly very significant and of major importance. It has rapidly flourished from a negligible economic activity to today's large phenomenon (Blake *et al*., 2003a,b,c). For the past decade, the tourism industry has directly and indirectly contributed to a total of between 25% and 35% of Malta's GDP (Blake *et al*., 2003b; Ernst & Young, 2010; HAMS, 2010). A number of businesses in the service sector, such as restaurants, transport, retail and accommodation establishments, are substantially supported by the tourism sector (MHRA, 2009). The earnings from tourism in 2009 amounted to €639.8 million, equivalent to 13.9% of the total of exports of goods and services for the same year, and this increased to €813.9 million (or 15.0% of the total exports of goods and services) in 2010 (Economic Policy Department, 2010, 2011). The total number of tourists visiting Malta in 2011 amounted to just under 1.4 million (NSO, 2012).

The Maltese Islands have been for a long time marketed for the sunny weather, the picturesque beaches and their rich history. However, during the past few years 'Malta has found it difficult to compete with other Mediterranean countries as a summer sun, sand and sea resort' (Blake *et al.*, 2003b, p.11). Malta's competitors in the Mediterranean include mature destinations, such as Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, and Spain, and other emerging destinations, such as Croatia and Slovenia (MTAC, 2006). The majority of tourists visiting these countries come from within the European Union (EU), and an analysis of the three main individual countries of origin shows that Germany and UK contribute to a large share of the number of visitors of these competitive destinations. Table 1 shows the number of arrivals of non-residents in collective tourist accommodation establishments in the mentioned competitive destinations in 2010 (Eurostat, 2012).

Table 1. Number of arrivals of non-residents in collective accommodation establishments in 2010.

Destination		Total	EU 27	Main sources		
				1st source	2nd source	3rd source
Croatia	Amount	6,652,832	5,524,930	Germany 1,127,011	Slovenia 792,317	Italy 779,661
	Percent (%)	100	83.0	16.9	11.9	11.7
Cyprus	Amount	1,814,328	1,361,817	UK 711,837	Russia 202,889	Germany 161,709
	Percent (%)	100	75.1	39.2	11.2	8.9
France	Amount	36,729,444	26,377,311	UK 6,584,999	Netherlands 4,364,457	Germany 4,207,072
	Percent (%)	100	71.8	17.9	11.9	11.5
Greece	Amount	9,196,924	6,446,043	Germany 1,217,220	UK 1,115,688	France 777,158
	Percent (%)	100	70.1	13.2	12.1	8.5
Italy	Amount	43,794,338	27,544,336	Germany 9,302,743	US 4,235,520	France 3,449,866
	Percent (%)	100	62.9	21.2	9.7	7.9
Malta	Amount	1,107,228	970,852	UK 334,470	Italy 186,245	Germany 109,345
	Percent (%)	100	87.7	30.2	16.8	9.9
Slovenia	Amount	1,767,481	1,269,061	Italy 399,224	Austria 194,392	Germany 179,725
	Percent (%)	100	71.8	22.6	11.0	10.2
Spain	Amount	43,182,769	33,562,839	UK 9,028,271	Germany 7,662,337	France 4,754,050
	Percent (%)	100	77.7	20.9	17.7	11.0

Source: Eurostat

A country's performance in tourism cannot be measured by looking only at the number of tourists visiting the country vis-à-vis its competitors, but the amount of money these tourists are injecting into the country's economy should also be taken into consideration. Table 2 compares the tourist arrivals and tourism receipts in 2008 and 2009 of the eight competitive destinations previously mentioned (UNWTO, 2011). It is worth noting that Malta had the lowest number of arrivals and the smallest amount of receipts in both years, it has also undergone one of the greatest percentage decreases in tourist arrivals, but then it suffered the smallest decrease in the percentage amount of receipts. In fact, it is the only country that features a positive change in the expenditure per capita out of the eight competitive destinations. The reasons behind this need to be studied further, but it might well be that Malta is attracting higher spending tourists as a result of the promotion of a number of markets in different countries. In fact, in 2006, the Ministry for Tourism and Culture in the Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands (MTAC, 2006) decided to embark in a project with the aim of diversifying Malta's tourism portfolio by promoting a number of niche markets that revolve around culture, language learning and education, sports, MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions), and other growth markets (including cruising, medical holidays and wedding holidays).

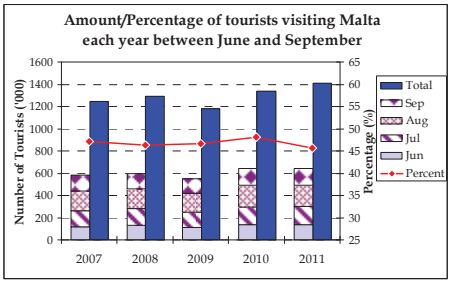
Table 2. Tourist arrivals and tourism receipts in 2008 and 2009

	International tourist arrivals ('000)			International tourism receipts (million US$)			Expenditure per capita (US$)		
	2008	2009	% change	2008	2009	% change	2008	2009	% change
Croatia	9,415	9,335	-0.8	10,971	8,898	-18.9	1,165.3	953.2	-18.2
Cyprus	2,404	2,141	-10.9	2,737	2,162	-21.0	1,138.5	1,009.8	-11.3
France	79,218	76,824	-3.0	56,573	49,398	-12.7	714.1	643.0	-10.0
Greece	15,939	14,915	-6.4	17,114	14,506	-15.2	1,073.7	972.6	-9.4
Italy	42,734	43,239	1.2	45,727	40,249	-12.0	1,070.0	930.8	-13.0
Malta	1,291	1,182	-8.4	950	881	-7.3	735.9	745.3	1.3
Slovenia	1,940	1,803	-7.1	2,820	2,511	-11.0	1,453.6	1,392.7	-4.2
Spain	57,192	52,178	-8.8	61,628	53,177	-13.7	1,077.6	1,019.1	-5.4

Source: UNWTO

One of the main problems faced by the tourism industry in Malta remains that of seasonality in tourists' arrivals. As illustrated in Figure 1, between 45% and 50% of the tourists visiting Malta each year over the past five years have done so in the Summer months, namely between June and September (both months inclusive).

Figure 1. Number of Tourists visiting Malta between 2007 and 2011.



Source: NSO News Releases

The need for Malta to remain competitive in the tourism industry can thus never be overemphasised. It is of utmost importance that the tourists visiting the Maltese Islands receive value for the money they pay, and that Malta remains price competitive 'particularly in terms of the destination's relative price with our [Malta's] source markets and with our [Malta's] direct competitors' (MTAC, 2006, p.63).

The World Economic Forum has been since the early 2007 assessing the travel and tourism (T&T) industry through the compilation of the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). This Index measures a number of

variables pertaining to aspects that were identified as having a pivotal role in improving tourism competitiveness (Blanke and Chiesa, 2009). These variables, grouped into fourteen pillars, together measure the regulatory framework, the business environment and infrastructure, and the human, cultural and natural resources. The tenth pillar is 'Price competitiveness in the T&T industry', reflecting the importance of the association between the attractiveness of some countries and their price competitiveness. The factors taken into consideration in this pillar are ticket taxes and airport charges, the national purchasing power parity prices, fuel price levels, and the hotel price index (Forsyth and Dwyer, 2009).

Blanke *et al.* (2009) argue that the TTCI takes into consideration the important factors underlying the T&T industry and substantiate their argument by showing that in 2007 there was a high positive correlation between the TTCI and the tourist arrivals and between the TTCI and the annual income generated from tourism. The island of Malta ranked in the twenty-ninth position (out of a total of 133 countries) in the 2009 TTCI, but its performance in Pillar 10 was put in the 122nd position. When compared to the twenty-seven countries within the European Union, Malta ranked in the nineteenth position, with its rank in Pillar 10 given in the twentieth place. The overall scores and ranking of the eight competitive destinations referred to previously are presented in Table 3, together with the respective scores and ranking in Pillar 10. It is noted that while the only two countries that are positioned behind Malta in the overall ranking are the emerging destinations of Croatia and Slovenia, these two countries rank better than Malta in what regards price competitiveness (Pillar 10).

Table 3. TTCI 2009.

	Overall		Pillar 10	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
Croatia	4.54	34	4.13	103
Cyprus	4.92	21	4.42	82
France	5.34	4	2.86	132
Greece	4.91	24	3.91	114
Italy	4.78	28	3.25	130
Malta	4.77	29	3.59	122
Slovenia	4.53	35	4.22	94
Spain	5.29	6	4.2	96

Source: World Economic Forum

Hence, it is evident that Malta drastically lacks in one of the main factors that influence destination choice – price competitiveness. Tourism demand is, in fact, relatively responsive to price factors (Crouch, 1994; Lim, 2006), and even more so when it comes to the direct competition between destinations that offer a similar tourist product (De Mello *et al.*, 2002). In fact, Lim (2006) showed that an increase in the price of a destination boosts the number of visitors to substitute destinations.

The (controversial) introduction of low cost airlines operating from and to Malta in Autumn 2006 made the Maltese Islands more accessible to tourists, and it is believed to have had a significant impact on the number of tourists visiting Malta. In fact, in 2007 Malta had the highest increase in incoming tourism – up by 10.6% over 2006 (NSO, 2008). However, a research conducted by Graham and Dennis (2010) concluded that passengers availing of low cost airlines do not show any higher interest in Malta's history and culture. This further supports the arguments made earlier that holiday costs play a major role in the buying behaviour of tourists and their choice of holiday destinations. Overpricing and exaggerated profit margins harm the tourism industry, even more so in times of depression when price is king. Ryan Air boss, Michael O'Leary, forecasted that the European crisis will boost demand for low-cost travel (BBC, 2011). Given that nowadays low-cost airlines operate to a wide range of destinations, a way how Malta could improve price competitiveness is through enhanced competitive prices in one of the main single sources of expenditure for tourists, namely accommodation, especially keeping in mind that, according to the Euromonitor's 2011 Annual Study (Euromonitor International, 2012), the average global consumer is a bargain hunter.

3. Research Hypotheses

As already mentioned above, the main aim of this study is to research the prices being offered by accommodation

establishments in Malta. In particular, the prices of accommodation establishments were collected directly from the establishment and from two different booking engines, when available. Many travellers express their belief that booking directly from the accommodation establishment would guarantee a cheaper price than booking through a third-party (for example, Reynolds, 2008; Cronian, 2009). While some people have had first-hand experience of this and others simply go by hearsay, the implications of these beliefs should not be overlooked. In accordance with these beliefs, it is thus being hypothesised that the direct price offered by the establishment's website is cheaper than the price quoted by the booking engines. This is tested here in the case of Maltese collective accommodations establishments.

> ***Hypothesis 1:*** *The price of rooms booked directly from a collective accommodation establishment in Malta is cheaper than the price of rooms for a Maltese accommodation establishment booked through a booking engine.*

The prices offered by two different booking engines were also compared to test the following.

> ***Hypothesis 2:*** *There is no evidence of a difference in the price of rooms for Maltese accommodation establishments booked through different booking engines.*

Andersson (2010) argues that a hotel customer pays for a bundle of attributes, which include the star-rating, the amenities included with the room, and the location and accessibility characteristics of the hotel. As establishments in the same star-rating classification must offer the same minimum set of facilities and services, it is safe to assume that establishments within the same star-rating classification offer comparable amenities included with the room. Although a positive relationship between star-rating classification and price might seem obvious to many, the downturn in economy has had important consequences on these grounds. Travellers are trading down from four- and five-star hotels either on their own initiative or, in the case of business travellers, as per company policies aimed at tightening travel expenditure. To remain competitive, Sharkey (2009) describes how luxury hotels had to start offering bargain prices or discounted rates, while at the same time being mindful not to reposition themselves into a different segment. In this climate where people are more rate-conscious, it would be interesting to examine whether the suspected positive relationship between star-rating and price still holds. It is thus hypothesised that

> ***Hypothesis 3:*** *There is a positive relation between the star-rating of the accommodation establishment in Malta and the direct price quoted by the establishment.*

A number of attributes are of importance when travellers consider the price they are ready to pay for a room. For instance, Zhang *et al.* (2011) mention cleanliness, service and the quality of the hotel in general as important factors that affect the price, arguing that prospective customers get to know about these characteristics prior to choosing the hotel for their stay mainly through customers' reviews on travel advice websites. Different studies show that customers' expectations and dissatisfaction differ according to the star category of the accommodation establishments they book (for example, Dolnicar, 2002), and generally customers are more easily disappointed when staying at five-star hotels because 'guests staying in five star hotels […] expect good service, a good location, pleasant atmosphere, large rooms, comfort in general' (*ibid.*, p.32). Consequently, this influences the rating customers report on travel advice websites. It is, in fact, hypothesised here that there is a significant negative relationship between the price of a room in a five-star establishment and the rating the establishment is given by customers on one of these travel advice websites, namely www.tripadvisor.com (**Hypothesis 4**). More precisely,

> ***Hypothesis 4:*** *There is a negative relationship between the direct price of a room quoted by Maltese five-star accommodation establishments and the rating given by customers' reviews on www.tripadvisor.com.*

4. Methodology

The total number of tourists staying in private and collective accommodation establishments between 2007 and 2011 is shown in Table 4. Given that private accommodation is extremely difficult to research, this study concentrated only on collective accommodation. The collective accommodation establishments in Malta are classified by the Malta Tourism Authority into five main categories, namely aparthotels, guest houses, hostels, hotels and tourist villages. More specifically, this research was carried out on the most common types of collective accommodation, and the target population was composed of hotels, including aparthotels and tourist villages as these share many common characteristics with hotels.

Table 4. Number of tourists by type of accommodation.

Type of Accommodation	*2007*	*2008*	*2009*	*2010*	*2011*
Private accommodation	261,419	283,087	271,842	291,266	323,275
Collective accommodation	982,091	1,007,769	910,648	1,045,125	1,088,473
Hotels	894,749	909,309	829,614	952,726	992,739
Other (comprises aparthotels, guesthouses, hostels and tourist villages)	87,342	98,460	81,034	92,399	95,734
Total	***1,243,510***	***1,290,856***	***1,182,490***	***1,336,391***	***1,411,748***

Source: NSO News Releases

Of particular importance to any accommodation establishment are the price charged and the star-rating classification. It is noted that the star-rating classification is also carried out by the Malta Tourism Authority (further details can be found in Mirabelli, 2011). For this research, the prices were sought from three sources: a direct price as quoted by the accommodation establishment (either through its official website, by email, or by means of a telephone call) and the prices quoted by two booking engines. Following a preliminary survey using a number of booking engines, the two that generated the highest number of records on Maltese accommodation establishments were www.booking.com and www.expedia.com. These two were consequently chosen in order to retain the maximum number of usable entries for this survey and thus limiting the non-response error.

An updated list of all the aparthotels, hotels and tourists villages was generated with the help of three main sources, namely the Hotels Directory 2011 (Mirabelli, 2011), the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) Members List (MHRA, 2011), and the Hotels Section in the Malta Yellow Pages (Yellow Pages, 2011). More than one source was used so as to limit the possibility of having a coverage error within the research by including accommodation establishments that are nowadays inexistent, or omitting any existing accommodation from the research. A total of 159 accommodation establishments were listed in the sampling frame, and these were grouped by their respective star-rating classification. Given that the star-rating classification and the type of establishment results in a competitive difference between establishments and are generally taken into consideration by tourists when opting for one accommodation rather than another, it was considered important to choose a sample that reflects these two characteristics of the population. Hence, a stratified sample of 87 establishments was randomly generated to take part in this survey as shown in Table 5. This sampling technique was preferred over taking all the establishments that feature in the respective source so as to try and retain the proportions of establishments chosen from each star-category to take part in this survey.

Table 5. Number of collective accommodation establishments in Malta and sample size calculated.

Type of Establishment	Star-rating classification									
	Population					Sample				
	2	3	4	5	Total	2	3	4	5	Total
Hotel	13	48	47	16	124	7	26	26	9	68
Aparthotel	13	13	8	0	34	7	7	4	0	18
Tourist Village	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
Total	26	62	55	16	159	14	34	30	9	87

For the accommodation establishments forming part of the sample, the direct price offered by each accommodation establishment and the price from the booking engine www.booking.com were sought. For the same establishments, the rating given by customers on www.tripadvisor.com was also noted. For comparison and verification purposes, a second sample composed of 87 accommodation establishments was generated without taking into consideration the type of establishment or the star-rating classification. For the accommodation establishments in this second sample, only the price from the booking engine www.expedia.com was sought.

The survey was conducted in December 2011 and the prices were collected for the cheapest double-room for seven nights between 13 and 20 June 2012. The average cost per night was then calculated to even out any possible fluctuation in fees that might be charged on particular days of the week (such as on weekends). Although the cheapest price of a double room available in each establishment was the one collected, it is to be noted that due to the fact that different establishments offer different bundles, certain prices could include only the room while others could be on a bed and breakfast basis. Table 6 shows the number of establishments for which information about the required variable was

found.

Table 6. Number of accommodation establishments for which the required information was found.

	No. of Rooms	Prices			Trip Advisor Rating
		Direct	www.booking.com	www.expedia.com	
Responses	86	69	68	48	80
Response rate	98.85%	79.31%	78.16%	55.17%	91.95%

5. Findings

5.1 Sample characteristics

The prices of the accommodation establishments in Malta collected in this survey from each respective source are summarised in Table 7, and the box-plots in Figure 2 illustrate the distribution of the data collected. Both indicate that the distributions of the prices collected do not follow a normal distribution.

Table 7. Sample measures for Price (in €) from the three sources

Source	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Skewness	Kurtosis
Direct from establishment	76.31	60	50.3	1.984	4.552
From www.booking.com	86.48	69.79	61.37	2.653	9.753
From www.expedia.com	99.04	71.97	85.84	3.194	13.669

Figure 2. Box-plots showing distribution of prices from the three sources

5.2 Generalisations to population of establishments

The prices obtained for the establishments forming part of the sample can be used to estimate the true mean price of the population of accommodation establishments in Malta. For this end, 95% symmetric confidence intervals were calculated for the price from each source. It can thus be claimed with 95% confidence that the true mean price available directly from the establishment lies somewhere between €64 and €88, the price through www.booking.com is between €72 and €101, while the price from www.expedia.com is within the range €74 and €124. Given that stratified sampling was utilised for compiling the first sample, the results from the direct source and from www.booking.com can also be generalised according to the star-rating and the type of establishment. The 95% confidence intervals for the true mean prices of the accommodation establishments in Malta charged directly from the establishment and through www.booking.com according to the star-rating are shown in Table 8. These intervals should, however, be treated with caution especially when the sample size is small due to the data not being normally distributed, and thus the Central Limit Theorem cannot be employed to guarantee that the sampling distribution of the mean prices is approximately normally distributed.

Table 8. Sample results and 95% confidence intervals for the population mean prices.

Source of Price	Star rating	Sample size	Sample Mean (€)	Sample Stand. Dev. (€)	Stand. error of Mean (€)	*t*-value	95% conf. interv. for mean (€)	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Direct (P1)	2	9	44.99	12.29	4.10	2.3060	35.54	54.44
	3	25	53.20	23.75	4.75	2.0639	43.40	63.00
	4	26	75.94	28.23	5.54	2.0595	64.54	87.34
	5	9	172.93	62.45	20.82	2.3060	124.93	220.93
	Total	**69**	**76.31**	**50.30**	**6.06**	**1.9955**	**64.23**	**88.40**
www.booking.com (P2)	2	8	44.71	16.56	5.85	2.3646	30.87	58.55
	3	25	73.57	73.14	14.63	2.0639	43.38	103.76
	4	26	83.32	27.92	5.48	2.0595	72.04	94.60
	5	9	168.64	56.21	18.74	2.3060	125.43	211.85
	Total	**68**	**86.48**	**61.60**	**7.47**	**1.9960**	**71.57**	**101.39**
www.expedia.com (P3)	**Total**	**48**	**99.04**	**85.84**	**12.39**	**2.0117**	**74.11**	**123.96**

5.3 Hypotheses tests

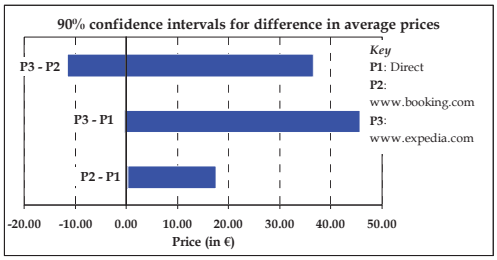
Two tests were carried out to verify **Hypothesis 1**. The first test compared the accommodation establishments whose prices were found ***both*** from the direct source and from www.booking.com (63 establishments qualified for this test), while the second test compared all the accommodation establishments whose prices were found from the direct source and all those whose prices were found from www.expedia.com. For each case, the hypothesis that the direct price of rooms was less than that from the booking engine was tested.

As discussed above, the data collected is visibly skewed and does not follow a normal distribution, and thus non-parametric tests (one-tailed) were conducted because these do not require any prior assumptions on the distribution and hence are more robust (that is, outliers do not unduly affect the results). The first test used was the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test because the variables being compared (namely, the prices) were repeated measurements on a single sample, while the second test used was the Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test (or Mann-Whitney U Test) because the prices belonged to two independent samples. It is evident from Table 9 that the first test strongly supports **Hypothesis 1**, while the second test also supports **Hypothesis 1** at the 5% level of significance.

Another non-parametric test was carried out to verify **Hypothesis 2**, namely that there is no evidence of a difference in the price of rooms booked through different booking engines. Again, the test used was the one for independent samples (two-tailed), and the result shown in Table 9 provides strong evidence that the two prices cannot be assumed to be different.

As a follow-up to the first two hypotheses, the 90% symmetric confidence intervals for the difference between average prices from the different sources were calculated and are illustrated in Figure 3. When comparing the average price available directly from the establishment to the average price quoted by the two booking engines, it is noted that (with 90% probability) by booking directly through the establishment vis-à-vis www.booking.com one can save up to €18 and vis-à-vis www.expedia.com one can save up to €45.

Figure 3. 90% confidence intervals for the difference in average prices.



In view of the conclusion that the price offered directly by the accommodation establishment is significantly cheaper than the price offered by the two booking engines considered, only the former price will be taken into consideration for the tests that follow.

Andersson (2010) concluded that in the case of Singapore, he found significant evidence of a relationship between the star-rating and the price charged for a hotel room. Table 8 provides an indication that a similar relationship holds for accommodation establishments in Malta if the direct price offered by the establishment is taken into consideration. First of all, the sample mean price charged by the establishments augments with the star-rating of the establishment. Secondly, although the 95% confidence interval for the direct price of 2-star and 3-star establishments overlap, the confidence intervals for 3-star, 4-star and 5-star have no overlapping, indicating clearly that a higher price is charged by establishments of a higher star-rating. To confirm this, a chi-squared test was conducted to check whether the star-rating and the direct price charged (grouped in classes of €10 each for ease of handling) are independent of each other. The results obtained (shown in Table 9) and conclusion reached further confirm **Hypothesis 3**, namely that a strong relationship exists between star-rating and direct price offered by accommodation establishments in Malta.

Table 9. Summary of tests conducted in relation to Hypothesis 1, 2 and 3.

	H_0 (Null hypothesis)	H_1 (Alternative hypothesis)	Test statistic	*p*-value
Hyp.1 – Test 1	P1≥P2	P1<P2	$z = 2.3590$	0.0092
Hyp.1 – Test 2	P1≥P3	P1<P3	$z = 1.6449$	0.0499
Hyp.2	P2=P3	P2≠P3	$z = 0.5381$	0.5905
Hyp.3	Independent	Related	$\chi^2 = 80.175$	0.00097

P1: Direct price from establishment; P2: Price from www.booking.com; P3: Price from www.expedia.com

The customers' rating given to an establishment through the reviews posted on www.tripadvisor.com were also analysed for a possible relation between these ratings and the direct price charged by an establishment in Malta. The establishments were analysed according to their star-rating classification, and in each case a chi-squared test of customers' rating against direct price charged (grouped in classes of €10 each for ease of handling) was carried out. The findings presented in Table 10 show that the most significant evidence of a relationship between price and customers' rating is for five-star establishments, being the star-category featuring the smallest *p*-value, although this relationship is not very strong (in fact, it is only valid at the 18% level of significance) and thus must be handled with caution.

Table 10. Summary of tests conducted in relation to Hypothesis 4.

Star rating	Customers' rating on www.tripadvisor.com						Number of establishments	χ^2-statistic	*p*-value
	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	4.5			
2 star	0	1	4	2	1	0	8	8.333	0.501
3 star	3	1	5	9	6	1	25	23.471	0.931
4 star	0	1	4	8	11	2	26	42.218	0.548
5 star	0	0	0	0	5	4	9	9.000	0.174

A closer look at the results obtained for five-star establishments (Table 11) shows that, in general, the customers gave a lower rating to an establishment charging a higher price, thus supporting the claim made in **Hypothesis 4** of a negative relationship between price and customer rating.

Table 11. Price charged by five-star establishments and associated customers' rating.

	Price charged (in €)						
Customers' rating	80-90	110-120	120-130	160-170	220-230	230-240	270-280
4				3	1	1	
4.5	1	1	1				1

6. Conclusions, Implications and Limitations

The tourism industry in Malta and its sustainability are essential for the economic growth and well-being of the Island and its citizens. Malta needs to enhance its competitiveness to become one of the top destinations of choice for first-time visitors and simultaneously encourage repeat tourism. Given that holiday prices are largely influential on the final choice of the holiday destination, it was deemed necessary to investigate Maltese collective accommodation prices as these highly affect the total holiday price. This study tried to shed some light on the prices of Maltese accommodation establishments by generalising survey results through hypotheses testing and confidence interval estimation. This section presents the main findings and limitations of this research, discusses some implications for key stakeholders in the tourism industry, and puts forward some ideas for future work.

The results evidenced that the prices offered directly by the accommodation establishments in Malta (either through their official website, when contacted by email or by telephone) are significantly cheaper than those shown on booking engines, while there is no evidence of a significant difference between the prices offered by different booking engines. This carries an important implication to policy makers in Malta and to the managers of the accommodation establishments, because potential tourists, especially first-time visitors, would most probably be unaware of the hotels available in Malta and hence would seek accommodation through a booking engine. This is more worrying because Chatterjee and Yawei (2010) have found that consumers prefer using these booking engines over the provider's own website, and thus Malta's competitiveness in these regards is not being adequately marketed. Maltese establishments and policy makers should take decisive action on these grounds by, for example, promoting more the establishments' own websites with customers to encourage repeat tourists to book any future accommodation directly through the establishment's website, posting direct links to the establishments' websites on Malta's official tourism site www.visitmalta.com, and offer better deals to booking engines so that these can in turn offer better prices to their users.

This study also confirmed a positive relationship between the star-rating of the accommodation establishment and the direct price charged by the establishment, showing that the economic recession did not leave an effect on the general perception that higher star-rated establishments charge higher prices, at least in the case of Malta. Furthermore, 95% confidence intervals for the mean price of the establishments in each star-category were calculated and presented. Hoteliers could use these intervals to check whether the price they are charging is lower or higher than the price being charged by other establishments in the same star-category, and possibly decide to adjust their prices accordingly. As Andersson (2010, p.238) argued, 'A rate that is lower (higher) than the expected value (i.e. a negative (positive) Residual) may indicate that there is room for an upward (downward) adjustment in room rates, but it may also signal a problem of missing variables.' The variables that could be potentially missing are the meals included in the room rate and any other facilities that the establishment might have which offer a competitive advantage over its competitors in the same star-category. In actual fact, one of the limitations of this research is the lack of consideration of these variables, and future work should attempt to take these into consideration.

A negative relationship, albeit a weak one, was found between the direct price offered by Maltese five-star accommodation establishments and the customers' rating of these establishments through reviews provided on a leading online travel advice website. This confirms what was stated before that tourists staying in five-star establishments tend to be more easily dissatisfied with the service received and consequently give a lower rating to establishments charging higher prices.

Future studies should concentrate on other variables that could have a relationship with the price charged by the Maltese establishments. In his study of Malta's international competitiveness as a tourist destination, Azzopardi (2011, p.224) identified 'sixty tourism-specific and business-related variables […] having significant influences on island TDC [Tourism Destination Competitiveness].' For the Maltese scenario, the top three business factors he identified as having the greatest weight are accessibility, quality of service, and value for money. These three variables could easily be applied for accommodation establishments and the existence of any relationship between price and the tourists' perceptions of each could be examined. Data about these variables (and possibly others) could be collected by adding a few more questions to the Tourstat Questionnaire (NSO, n.d.) that is currently conducted by the National Statistics Office with tourists departing from Malta.

Studies on hotel prices are rare for destinations in the Mediterranean region, even more so for Malta. This study attempts to start addressing this deficiency, although more could be done. One suggestion for future studies is to construct an hedonic price model for accommodation establishments in Malta. Although some studies on hedonic price models for collective accommodation establishments in some countries were undertaken, these are still few in number (for example, Andersson (2010) considered Singapore's market for hotel rooms, Espinet *et al.* (2003) studied holiday

hotels in Spain, and Thrane (2005) worked on the Norwegian case). Hedonic price estimation is widely used in the real estate markets, but as the market for hotel rooms has characteristics that are similar to other real estate markets and is affected by 'a bundle of attributes that is not easy to repackage' (Andersson, 2010, p.229), hedonic regression could also be adapted to the price of a hotel room. Espinet *et al.* (2003) mention the location of the hotel (in terms of distance to town and distance to the beach), the star category, the hotel's size (number of rooms), and the services available to guests (such as parking place) as examples of such attributes. In hedonic price estimation, the price would be taken as the dependent variable and the attributes mentioned above, and possibly others (such as the customer review ratings), would be the explanatory variables.

Mediterranean tourism has high price elasticity as a result of comparable products being offered by many tourist destinations in the region (Mangion *et al*., 2005), and hence assessing Malta's relative price competitiveness in comparison with other Mediterranean destinations is one main direction that future studies should take in trying to gauge Malta's overall competitiveness in the tourism sector. Apart from investigating the prices offered by collective accommodation establishments in Malta, this research is also meant to give a sound basis for such comparative studies to be conducted in the future so that Mediterranean tourism continues to receive the due importance it deserves.

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