The Food & Beverage Service in Malta –
A Russian Customer's Perspective

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This product-oriented thesis flourished from the author's personal interest in the quality of service being given in the restaurants in Malta. This study aimed to empirically examine the quality of service given in food and beverage establishments in Malta from a Russian customer's experience perspective.

The literature review is divided into three sections. The first section gives a general overview of the Maltese hospitality and service industry together with figures regarding Russian nationals. The second section deals with cultural dimensions and cross-cultural communication between Russian and Maltese nationals. Finally, the third section focuses on customer experiences.

Two data collection methods were used for this study, a sequential data gathering approach was implemented. Such approach gave the opportunity of combining participant observation and survey data by alternating between them. Seven restaurants in Malta and five in Russia were observed and assessed, whilst 106 participants took part in the survey, out of which 33 were Russian tourists.

The main finding in this study, with the exception for a few scenarios, indicate that there is a general above average consensus on the perceived service in the Maltese restaurants. Nevertheless, issues pertaining to soft skills and customer interaction need to be taken in account and addressed.

This study gives a mere fraction of information of what is going on in the restaurant service in Malta. In the future, it would be of great importance to the hospitality industry to conduct studies related to the whole meal and dining experience. This study can also be considered a solid starting point in exploring the customer experience and service not only in restaurants, but also in other equally important sectors in the tourism and hospitality business.

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1   Introduction

Malta was traditionally viewed as a mass market tourism destination. However, recently it shifted away from this and moved towards a more lucrative high value quality-of-life-oriented tourism. This has moved this tiny Mediterranean island further up the value chain and made it a mainstream tourist destination. Each year Malta hosts over one million visitors and this accounts for 23% of GDP. Thirty per cent of the Maltese population is directly employed in this fast-growing sector. (Malta Tourism Authority, 2016)

The international hospitality industry is very dynamic. State of the art technologies, high-tech production methods, latest service techniques, modern computerised billing methods, automated order taking systems, and new food commodities are some of the few forceful factors which affect this complex sector.

Malta's catering industry is also affected by such aspects. Maltese entrepreneurs invest in latest products on a regular basis in order to make their catering establishments more efficient, effective and economical. In 2014 Travel & Tourism contributed to 12% of total investment and should rise by 2% per annum over the next ten years to EUR205.0mn in 2025. (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015)

Although these resources are extremely important, and help to achieve a unique meal experience, one cannot forget an indispensable input required for making these assets work, that is manpower. In 2014, the total contribution of Travel & Tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, was 29% of total employment. This is expected to rise by 2% per annum to 62,000 jobs in 2025. (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015)

No matter the amount of dishes an establishment has on its menu, or innovative cuisines and current culinary trends; if one's customer service leaves much to be desired the tendency is that clients will not come back due to unpleasant experiences. Whilst quality and genuinely good food is extremely important, it is the experience in itself from the minute customers walk in the establishment to their departure that truly counts. Restaurateurs should always keep in mind that customer's needs at the forefront of every meal experience. One important aspect in acquiring competitive advantage over other establishments is to focus on quality of service. This study aims to empirically examine the quality of service given in food and beverage establishments in Malta from a Russian customer's expe-

rience perspective. The target group for this research are Russian individuals who are residing in Malta as well as those visiting the islands for touristic endeavours. It was decided to target this particular nationality for various issues mainly the fact that: it is a new growing market, Russians tourists are the highest spending per capita (National Statistics Office, December 2015) and there is an increasing amount of Russian nationals residing in Malta – according to the latest census which was held in 2014 there is a count of 918 nationals (National Statistics Office, 2014).

Customer service is the assistance and advice provided to one's patrons. Effective communication skills and genuine attention to clients are the fundamentals of customer service. Guests want to feel welcomed, pampered and treated with care and respect whilst being provided with an exquisite meal. Satisfied customers should be an integral part of any business model, especially in the hospitality and service industry.

The catering industry is a "peoples' industry". Managers in the service sector frequently try to find qualified human resources, particularly during a destination's peak tourism season. This is not an easy task to accomplish, and often managers end up employing part-time staff to fill these posts. Although convenient, such approach can have repercussions; unless it is properly applied and monitored. In other words, service standards in a catering establishment can easily deteriorate with insufficient or no qualified staff at all. Therefore, it is of vital importance to recruit appropriate qualified employees to fulfil the needs of the service industry, and also to reach high levels of customer satisfaction, making this category of business more competitive and profitable. Having worked in the restaurant and service industry for over 25 years I came to understand and comprehend that the style of service offered and being customer oriented is a crucial element in reaching and also exceeding customer satisfaction.

1.1   Research Problem and Objectives

As clients and customers are continuously being exposed to new trends and different styles and types of restaurant settings they have developed an intricate set of criteria in choosing a restaurant for their dining experience. One important aspect in acquiring competitive advantage over other establishments is to focus on quality of service. This study aims to empirically examine the quality of service given in food and beverage establishments in Malta from a Russian customer's experience perspective. The target group for this research are Russian individuals who are residing in Malta as well as those visiting the islands for touristic endeavours. Additionally, an investigation on the service provided by a number of restaurants in both countries will be also carried out.

In today's inter-reliant, international and culturally diverse economy, cross-cultural differences can have an effect on the hospitality industry. Given the different cultural and ethnic customers, this is bringing new communication challenges to the workplace. As an establishment and as an employee, understanding the values, customs and practice of different cultures can clearly influence the outcome of the service and meal experience. Hence, the study's objective is also to understand the different cultural dimensions and cross-cultural differences between Russian and Maltese nationals. In pursuance of the project's aims and objectives two research methods were used. Using both qualitative and quantitative techniques can improve a study by making sure that the limitations of one type of data are counterbalanced by the advantages of another. This will ensure that understanding is enhanced by embracing different ways of knowing.

It was decided to target this particular nationality for various issues mainly the fact that: it is a new growing market, Russians tourists are the highest spending per capita (National Statistics Office, December 2015) and there is an increasing amount of Russian nationals residing in Malta – according to the latest census which was held in 2014 there is a count of 918 nationals (National Statistics Office, 2014). Another important factor is that the author is intrigued by this market segment due to his family ties and close connections to Russian nationals and the Russian Federation as a country itself, something which will help and facilitate to research and data collection process.

1.2 Thesis Structure

The first part of the study will open up the literature review which is divided into three sections. The first section refers to statistical information; a general overview of the Maltese hospitality and service industry together with figures regarding Russian nationals which will help the reader to better comprehend the foundation of this study.

The second section deals with cultural dimensions and cross-cultural communication. The process of sending and receiving various forms of messages between people whose cultural background is different from one another, can lead to verbal and non-verbal signs and expressions being interpreted in different ways. In today's inter-reliant, international and culturally diverse economy, cross-cultural differences can have an effect on the hospitality industry. As an establishment and as an employee, understanding the values, customs and practice of different cultures can clearly influence the outcome of the service and meal experience. Lack of such awareness can result in misinterpretations which may cause offense. Throughout this section, the author will also compare the different forms of cultural dimensions between Russian and Maltese nationals.

The third and last section of the literature review focuses on customer experiences. Defining the term customer experience has left even prominent authors with a difficult task at hand; in fact, today there is a common disagreement on its actual meaning. This stems from the fact that the concept of experience is very used in the common language with multiple meanings and interpretations. Something which is characterised by multidimensional ideals that makes the experience only definable through different customer views and perceptions.

The second part of this study deals with the research methods used for data collection. Two data collection methods were used for this study, a sequential data gathering approach was implemented. Such approach gave the opportunity of combining participant observation and survey data by alternating between them. Using both qualitative and quantitative techniques improved the study by making sure that the limitations of one type of data were counterbalanced by the advantages of another. The participant observation methodology permitted the author to play a part and closely witness the activities which occurred during the day to day business in restaurants, whilst the survey was a suitable tool used particularly to define and describe specific features of the chosen target group.

The third part of this paper relates to the empirical findings in relation to the two types of research methodologies which were used to gather data. For the observation research, a total of twelve restaurants were chosen, seven in Malta and five in Russia, whilst for the survey, there was a total of 106 respondents, out of which 33 were Russian tourists. Throughout this part an overview of the main findings which resulted from the field notes taken and participants response will be explored.

The in-text citations and references in this paper are listed using the Harvard Anglia 2008 embedded in Office Word 2013.

2 Literature Review

The literature part of this research is divided into three chapters; facts and figures of the hospitality industry, cultural dimensions and customer experience. These three areas have been chosen as they are essential to pragmatically examine the level of service given in food and beverage establishments in Malta from a Russian customer's experience perspective. Furthermore, the matters chosen for the literature review have a clear relation between each other, something which is vital in supporting this research and its findings.

Firstly, with its' vital contribution towards Malta's financial growth, the tourism industry has projected itself as a key player in the national economy. By means of facts and figures, the author intends to give a general overview of the Maltese hospitality and service industry which will help the reader to better comprehend the foundation of this study. To give and added value to this research it is imperative to understand why and how quality recognition in Malta is being assessed and monitored. Something which is relatively new in the hospitality industry in Malta is the Quality Assured Seal. This scheme, which started in 2014 by the Malta Tourism Authority, was initiated to assess and eventually motivate entrepreneurs to improve the quality of service offered.

Secondly, in today's inter-reliant, international and culturally diverse economy, cross-cultural differences can have an effect on the hospitality industry. Given the different cultural and ethnic customers, this is bringing new communication challenges to the workplace. As a matter of fact, the process of sending and receiving various forms of messages between people whose cultural background is different from one another, can lead to verbal and non-verbal signs and expressions being interpreted in different ways. Thus, understanding the values, customs and practice of different cultures can clearly influence the outcome of the service and meal experience.

The idea behind this line of thought is to show how understanding and adapting to cultural dimensions can have a positive effect on the service given in catering establishments and subsequently on customers' experience. The author will also compare the different forms of cultural dimensions between Russian and Maltese nationals

2.1 Facts and Figures of the Hospitality Industry

There are various explanations of what statistics really are, Sir A.L. Bowley defines statistics as "Numerical statements of facts in any department of enquiry placed in relation to

each other." Webster describes statistical information as "The classified facts respecting the condition of the people in a state - especially those facts which can be stated in numbers or in tables of numbers or in any tabular or classified arrangement." (Mehta, n.d.)

According to the latest statistics published by the World Tourism Barometer, the arrivals growth rate in the Maltese islands greatly exceeded previous figures by registering an increase of 11% between January and April of 2016. Moreover, there are strong signals that the year 2016 is expected to further outperform the previous year. The figures for the first six months already indicate an increase of almost 10% over the same period of last year. (Ministry of Tourism, 2016)

The total tourist expenditure for the year ending 2015 had an increase of 7.5% when compared with the previous year (National Statistics Office, December 2015). It is important to highlight that 57% of tourists' total expenditure is on Food and drinks; out of which 35% was on restaurants only (Malta Tourism Authority, 2015). Such figures, show how crucial the catering establishments are within the hospitality industry.

2.1.1   The Russian Tourists in Malta

In 2015, with an average length of stay of twelve days, the seasonality of the Russian market remains the highest being registered in the third quarter with 45% followed by the second quarter at 26%. In terms of purpose of visit there was a drastic fall with -57% for business and -37% for holidays. However statistical evidence shows an increase of 36% as what regards visiting family and relatives (VFR) (National Statistics Office, December 2015). Such an increase can be attributed to the fact that there is an increasing amount of Russian nationals residing in Malta – according to the latest census which was held in 2014 there is a count of 918 nationals (National Statistics Office, 2014). Interesting also the statistic which shows that a quarter of the total inbound tourists from Russia visited Malta for English language learning (National Statistics Office, April 2016).

In 2013, a record of over 40,000 tourists from Russia were registered. Unfortunately, sanctions and the weakened Rouble are the main contributing factors for such a decline in Russian statistics. Since then market has been in free fall and now we are close to half that number. (Micallef, 2016)

Surprisingly enough even if the Russian market in the last couple of years is showing a decrease in numbers in various areas; one very important and positive statistical data is that although the number of arrivals have drastically decreased, Russians tourists are the

highest spending per capita. In these last three years, the spending per capita was of €1513 (National Statistics Office, December 2015).

2.1.2 Quality Assured Seal

Customer satisfaction is an important parameter which should be examined and measured if any establishment aims at providing an excellent quality product or service. To give and added value to this research it is imperative to understand why and how quality recognition in Malta is being assessed and monitored by the Malta Tourism Authority. In 2014, this scheme was launched for all types of restaurants including those in hotels. Such an award is designed to give due credit to restaurants that offer top notch quality standards in food, service and hospitality. Last year 36 restaurants were awarded the QA seal and together with the previous year's 70 restaurants brought the current total of QA restaurants to 106. All participating restaurants were assessed by means of a mystery guest who followed set criteria covering service, hospitality, food, ambience, as well as other areas. The aim of the QA seal is to encourage best practice and recognise those establishments that consistently deliver a quality product. (Grima, 2016)

"The Quality Assured (QA) seal is a Malta Tourism Authority voluntary quality recognition scheme aimed at businesses offering high levels of quality, consistency and professionalism. The QA seal covers three key tourism business operations, namely restaurants, visitor attractions and destination management companies (DMCs). The participating businesses are assessed either annually or once every two years." (MTA, 2010)

Table 1. Catering establishments in the Maltese Islands (Mifsud, 2016)

	Malta	Gozo
Restaurants	491	101
Speciality	93	4
Snack Bars	716	72
Take-Aways	122	2
TOTAL	1422	179

In the above table (see table 1) we can see a clear picture of the different types of catering establishments on the Maltese islands. For the objective of this study the author is focusing only on Maltese restaurants including those which fall under the speciality category.

The main purpose of these statistics is to help us comprehend and better describe the tourism phenomena in Malta archipelago. Based on the information presented, we can undoubtedly conclude that the hospitality and the food and beverage sector in Malta are of vital importance from a customer oriented perspective. Such data clearly implies that tourism is a crucial economic sector, especially given its contribution to the pressing economic challenges of our times. One cannot underestimate the major, and growing, contribution of tourism to the overall economic activity, job creation and trade in the Maltese islands.

2.2   Cultural Dimensions

Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, in their book "Riding the Waves of Culture" explain culture as a common the way in which groups of people understand and interpret the world. Culture is expressed in so-called "cultural products" such as language, food, way of dressing, etc. According to Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, what might be termed as the ground rules of a culture are as a matter of fact, shared basic assumptions of a group that are implicit and not visible from outside the group itself. (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1997)

Geert Hofstede has defined "culture" as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, et al., 2010). According to this Dutch scholar culture is a "software of the mind", that is a mental programming. Hofstede distinguishes between culture that is the civilization and its results such as art, education and literature, and culture in the broadest sense, meaning a collective mind-set that makes an entire group act in the same way, in other words a kind of mental program as a foundation of thoughts, emotions and actions of a group or population.

In today's inter-reliant, international and culturally diverse economy, cross-cultural differences can have an effect on the hospitality industry. Given the different cultural and ethnic customers, this is bringing new communication challenges to the workplace. As an establishment and as an employee, understanding the values, customs and practice of different cultures can clearly influence the outcome of the service and meal experience. Lack of such awareness can result in misinterpretations which may cause offense. It is of utmost importance for restaurateurs to understand that a basic understanding of cultural diversity is the key to effective cross-cultural communications.

The process of sending and receiving various forms of messages between people whose cultural background is different from one another, can lead to verbal and non-verbal signs

and expressions being interpreted in different ways. There are various factors which do hinder communication and understanding between individuals; different ethnical backgrounds, years of history and traditions, as well as the ways of communicating in different parts of the world. In any given culture, the patterns of communication are remarkably consistent. Once these are recognised by an outsider, the behaviour of the particular group will easily be anticipated. (Lewis, 2008)

Without going into the generics of different cultures and native tongues, every individual must understand how to ameliorate one's interaction with others who's their means of verbal communication and language preferences are not similar to ours. It is also erroneous to presuppose that every tourist or foreign customer in a restaurant is able to speak or communicate in good English. For those who are native English-speakers, English could possibly be perceived as the language that is used in order to reach the widest possible audience. However, even in such occasions, cross-cultural communication can be an issue. A good case in point related to the restaurant business is that between different cultures who also speak a common language menu terms can have a total different meaning. For instance, in the USA a main course is commonly called an entrée whilst in Europe entrées are generally small, well garnished dishes, and sweets are commonly called dessert. Really and truly, according to French cuisine terminology, the term 'dessert' denotes fresh fruits and nuts, even if now a day it is becoming more commonly used to denote sweets in general (Cousins, et al., 2014).

2.2.1   Hofstede's National Culture

Hofstede distinguishes four different cultural levels: symbols, heroes, rituals and values (Figure 1). According to his definition, culture can be represented as the layers of an onion, highlighting the symbols as superficial representation, and the values as deeper expression of culture. (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p. 8)
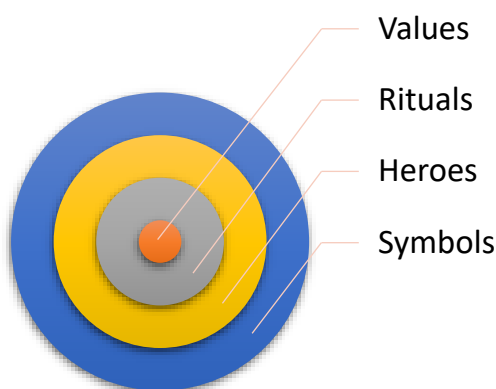

Figure 1. Hofstede's different levels of culture (adapted from Hofstede, et al., 2010, p. 8)

By symbols, Hofstede (2010) refers to words, gestures, images or objects which have an understandable meaning only to the members of the culture, such as language, how to dress, flags and status symbols. Old symbols can easily be replaced by new symbols, and the symbols of a certain cultural group may be included in another group. For such reasons, symbols are the most superficial cultural expression - the outer layer of the onion. Some big brands, such as Apple or Adidas, have become recognized symbols in the world which however can evoke different associations according to the particular cultures. Hofstede (2010) continues his explanation of these cultural levels by defining heroes as people, dead or alive, real or fictitious, who possess specific characteristics that are acclaimed in the culture in question, and therefore work as role models for the society.

According to Hofstede (2010), rituals are common practices that from a social perspective are considered vital within any culture. Generally, such rituals are necessary to achieve the desired purpose, and therefore their use are merely on social aspect. Examples of rituals may include form of greeting, show of respect, social and religious ceremonies, as well as political and sport events.

Symbols, heroes and rituals are part of what Hofstede classifies as "practices", also known as expressions that are visible to anyone who doesn't form part of that specific cultural community. Their cultural significance, however, is hidden and lies in the manner in which such expressions are interpreted within that culture. (Hofstede, et al., 2010) As an example, we might say that brands are part of the practices and advertising aims to create rituals around the specific product or brand.

Values are at the core of Hofstede's cultural levels, these are intangible elements which can hardly be detected and defined. This might be due to the fact that words used to express such values might have an abstract or a total different meaning. A word can be used to highlight a certain value in a culture, but would have a different meaning in another culture (Hofstede, et al., 2010). For instance, we can say that marketing companies often advertise "Happiness" as a holistic value: the priority of this value, however, is not the same for all cultures, and different is what leads to "Happiness".

2.2.2 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

In the second half of the twentieth century, some cultural anthropologists have begun to investigate the values of members from different cultures, and came to the general conclusion that all societies in the world have to deal with the same fundamental problems. Such problems have consequences on how society acts, on the different groups within the

society as well as the individuals inside these groups. The main differences between societies is on how each and every one of them tries to solve these problems. Hofstede, following Inkeles and Levinson, distinguishes six areas which different societies have in common. These areas represent the cultural dimensions from which a culture can be compared with another (Hofstede, 2011, p. 7). Together these dimensions make up the six-dimensional model (6D) of differences between national cultures. The six dimensions identified by Hofstede are Power Distance Index, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint.

2.2.3   Malta in Comparison with Russia

Hofstede's website, https://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html gives the opportunity to compare the cultures of different countries based on Hofstede's 6D model. In this sub-chapter, the author by means of this tool will be comparing the 6D's of Malta and Russia and also drawing conclusions according to each country's score.
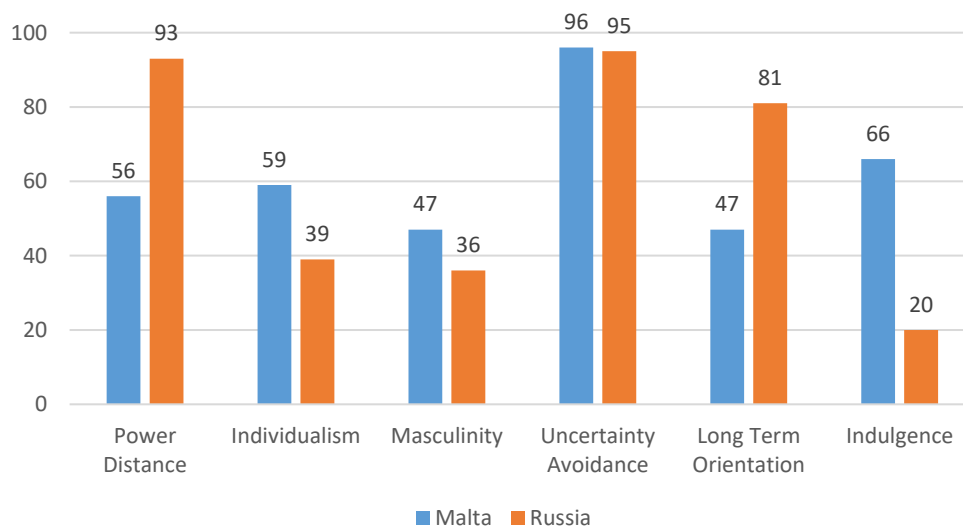

Figure 2. Cultural Dimensions – Malta vs Russia (adapted from Hofstede, n.d.)

Power Distance Index (PDI) measures the degree to which individuals less powerful than others in an organization accept and expect that power is distributed unequal in the organisation itself (Hofstede, 2011, p. 9). This dimension does not reflect the actual distribution of power in a society, but the level of acceptance of inequality. Cultures with the lowest level of power distance emphasize equality among its members and recognize ones' merit; independence is something which is perceived as a positive trait and rights and opportunities are recognized and available for all. On the other hand, cultures with highest level of power distance accept and even expect inequalities between people, recognizing

and respecting the hierarchical power based on formal authority. The consequences of power distance are reflected in different fields, from relationships within the family (more rigid in high PDI cultures to more liberal for those with low PDI) to those at school, work and social communities (Hofstede, 1994).

Both countries in this dimension have high scores (see figure 2). A score of 56 indicates that Malta is more inclined towards a culture based on hierarchy, meaning that every individual has a specific place in society. This tendency can be attributed to the fact that Malta as a country was for hundreds of years ruled by other nations and factions, leaving the population for generations expecting to be told what to do and hoping in having a benevolent autocrat as a ruler. Russia scores a high of 93 which shows that as a nation there is quite a huge discrepancy between power holders and the common citizens. This is clearly shown from the fact that power is extremely centralised, with two thirds of foreign investments being situated in Moscow, reason being that almost 80% of all financial potential is also located in the Russian capital. Russia's high score in this dimension can be accredited to the eighty years of communist regime.

Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV) describes the role of the individual in relation to the group role. In collectivist societies, the interest of the group prevails over that of the individual. The notion of collectivism in this case has no political reference, it refers only to the power of the group. A Society in which the interests of the individual precedes over those of the group are defined as individualist. According to Hofstede a society is individualistic when the mutual ties between individuals are weak; each one only takes care of himself and of his direct relatives (Hofstede, 2011, p. 11). On the contrary, a collectivist society is one where individuals from birth form part of strong, united groups that offer protection for life in exchange for unconditional loyalty. In the workplace context, collectivist and individualist groups are distinguished by cardinal facts that are considered important by each respective group. Individualistic employees or groups prefer leisure, freedom and flexibility at work and motivational challenges which gives personal satisfaction and gratification. In flat opposition, collectivist groups favour training, working conditions and the possibility of being able to make the most of their talents.

Once again Malta has a high score of 56 implicating that on in everyday life individuals are more likely in taking care only of themselves and being responsible for their family and relatives. In such societies, any offence received by an individual can effect negatively one's self esteem and instil a sense of guilt. With a low score of 39 in this dimension, Russia groups itself as a collectivist society, where groups, family and friends, acquaintances and neighbours play a pivotal role in coping with challenges of every days' life (Hofstede,

2011). Even in the language itself, Russians use more the word "we" than "I" and refer to their direct cousins as brothers or sisters, something which also implies the sense of collectivism and closeness. In many instances trust and solidarity is of utmost importance in relationships. Once again all of these attributes can be accredited to the communist era and the feeling of patriotism and comradeship.

Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS) is a dimension which represents the dominant values in culture and sexual equality. According to Hofstede, a society which is inclined towards masculinity when the social gender roles are clearly divided; men are considered assertive, strong and focused on success, whilst women should be modest, gentile, and focused on quality of life (Hofstede, 2011, p. 12). We refer to a feminine society when social roles and gender overlap, that is, both men and women are considered modest, gentile, and oriented towards the quality of life. Same as with the IDV dimension, in the MAS, crucial work-related points have been identified which are deemed important by masculinity groups on the one side and by femininity groups on the other. For countries or organisations which are inclined towards masculinity such aspects would include salary, recognition, promotion possibilities and motivational challenge. When these aspects are considered relatively unimportant, and instead more importance is given to other traits such as good working relationship with the manager, collaboration, working environment and safety, then in such cases the group will be defined more as feminine (Hofstede, 1994, p. 3). Masculinity or femininity are also expressed in behaviour; masculinity is focused on being assertive and competitive, whilst a femininity is being conscious and focused on environment.

In this dimension Malta scores a 47, according to Hofstede with a midway score between the two variances no clear inclination can be actually identified (Hofstede, n.d.). It might come as a surprise that Russia scores as low as a 36, thus being seen as a femininity culture. However, such a score is related Russia's high PDI. It is quite common in the Russian culture that whenever they meet at the place of work or with foreigners, a low profile is kept on ones' personal accomplishments or capabilities. So much so that humbleness and modesty are traits which prevail in the professional strata like scientists, professors and doctors.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) refers to the refusal of the uncertainty, and denotes the degree of tolerance for unpredictable and unexpected situations. Hofstede defines this dimension as "a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity: it ultimately refers to man's search for truth. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations." (Hofstede, 1994, p. 4). In

cultures with a high degree UAI such ambiguity is tried to be minimised by laws and rules. Communication is more formal, with people generally showing a high level of anxiety and tension, moreover there is a general resistance to innovation and change. In cultures with low UAI, insecurity is seen as a normal part of life, people do not feel threatened by ambiguity and are rather guided by the idea that what is different is curious and worth exploring. Rules should be avoided and common sense must prevail. There is high tolerance for innovative ideas, although these may conflict with the norm. The members of such cultures with a low UAI tend not to show their emotions when compared to their opposites which in their case it is highly likely that their feelings are predominantly expressed through gestures, speech and comportment (Hofstede, 2011).

Both Malta and Russia have a high score in this dimension with 96 and 95 respectively (see figure 2), meaning that both countries try to avoid uncertainty and feel imperilled in perplexing circumstances. As a small nation, in this dimension the Maltese society might fight it very difficult to accept instances which go out of the norm and unorthodox behaviour is not easily tolerated. There might also be a resistance to change however in such cultures there is the urge for rules and hard work is a norm in every days' life. In Malta's case, such traits can be accredited to the 160 years of British rule, a legacy which still lives on in many aspects of daily life in Malta today. In Russia detailed and meticulous planning is quite common and no wonder why they have one of the most complex bureaucracies in the world. As an outsider of such a culture one might perceive the way Russians act and interact with strangers and foreigners as very formal and distant. However, in society formality is used as a sign of respect. The use of patronymic names when referring to individuals is another correct example of a sense of formality in the Russian society.

Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO) or Confucian dynamism, is a dimension that was added later, which mainly relates to Asian societies and it can be interpreted as the pursuit of virtue. Can be defined as the extent to which a society shows a pragmatic perspective, future-oriented rather than a conventional short-term perception (Hofstede, 1994, p. 5). Long Term Orientation possess values which include the perseverance in achieving objectives, the respect of hierarchy and ones' status and sense of modesty. The respect for nature is also very much important. The long-term orientation suggests investment in the future and sees the truth as its element, irrespective of the context and the situation. On the contrary, the short-term orientation, puts a great emphasis on pursuit in finding the absolute truth, and includes stability, respect for tradition, the fulfilment of social obligations, honour and the reciprocity of gifts and favours.

These values are of Confucian origin, but according to Hofstede can be applied to not served society and influenced by Confucianism (Hofstede, 2011, p. 13)

Just like in the Masculinity Dimension Malta has once more scored 47. Once again with a halfway result one cannot actually predict any assessment. On the other side of the coin Russia gained a high score of 81, which clearly shows that as a nation, its society has a logical and rational approach. In such instances groups with this kind of cultural background believe that the truth pretty much depends on the context and the situation at hand. The encouragement in education is a fundamental trait in order to prepare for the future ahead.

Indulgence versus Restraint (IND) has like the previous mentioned dimensions, two opposite extremes. IND measures a culture's ability in meeting the immediate needs and personal desires of its members. Indulgence is characterized by the perception that one is free to act as he wishes, on one's free will, to overspend and indulge in leisure and entertainment: in other words, everything that can determine a state of relative happiness. Restraint the contrary focuses on the idea that ones' actions is subject to a number of restrictions and bans and the feeling that to indulge in expenses and entertainment is somehow wrong. (Hofstede, n.d.)

Malta's high score of 66 projects the islands' culture towards and Indulgence dimension. As Hofstede explains, people which fall under this dimensional category tend to act as they please and spend money as they wish as long as they are spoilt in various ways of life enjoyment and fulfilment (Hofstede, n.d.). On the contrary, Russia scores a low of 20 which clearly positions itself on a Restrained cultural approach. Such a low score may possibly indicate that societies which fall under this category might have the tendency to sarcasm and scepticism. Moreover, in contrast to Indulgent cultures not a lot of importance is made to leisure time and personal gratification. The generic perception of this dimension is that ones' actions are controlled by social norms and that indulgence goes against the societies' principles and beliefs.

Hofstede stresses that the cultural dimensions are only a scheme that helps to assess a culture and then make the best decision-making processes. There are other factors to consider, such as personality, family history and personal wealth. The proposed dimensions do not allow to foresee people's behaviour and do not take into account individual personalities.

2.3   Customer Experience

Defining consumer experience is a task that even scholars and authors have identified as challenging: even today there isn't still a common agreement about its meaning. This stems from the fact that the concept of experience is much used in everyday language with multiple meanings and understandings: it is characterized by a multidimensional nature that makes an experience defined only through different interpretive scenarios.

Meyer and Schwager (2007) define customer experience as the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company or service provider. Customer service is the basis for any successful catering establishment, however the exact meaning of all this is often left open to different interpretations. What makes a positive meal experience varies greatly by any individual or customer. It is often the tiny details that clients remember even more than the dining or the service they received. Such details that customers notice, and give them that feel-good factor about not only dining in a restaurant, but having such an experience at a specific establishment. Companies have incorporated customer experience as a way to obtain viable competitive advantages (Shaw & Ivens, 2005); so much so that Pine and Gilmore (1998) claimed that customer experience will be the next competitive battleground.

A customer's expectation of a particular service is determined by issues such as commendations, ones' necessities and previous experiences. In relation to service, clients' expectations and what is actually perceived might not always be the same, thus leaving a gap. The service quality model or the 'GAP model' developed in 1985, points out the main requirements for delivering a high-quality level of service. The idea of service quality is normally defined on the fundamentals of the disconfirmation theory. This theory revolves around the fact that clients compare and evaluate the quality of a particular service given with what was their initial expectation. In simple terms, giving a quality service is when the customers' expectations are met or even better exceeded (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). According to this model, it is possible to identify five dimensions of a service in order to judge the quality of the services offered (see figure 3).

Dimension	Definition
Reliability	ability to perform the promised service consistently and accurately
Assurance	staff's competence and courtesy - the ability to inspire trust and confidence
Tangibles	the aesthetic and functional components like equipment and personnel
Empathy	attentive and personalized care that is given to users or clients
Responsiveness	willingness to help customers and provide a prompt service

Figure 3. The five SERVQUAL dimensions (Parasuraman, et al., 1985)

Diners' expectations and needs during the years evolved due to a number of factors. Healthy awareness and dieting, culinary culture and cultural influences are crucial elements, just to mention a few. In his article "Great Expectations" (Wishna, 2000) already was anticipating that, in the future, customers will be more demanding where it comes to the meal experience. Something which we are now presently and constantly experiencing in the service industry. This occurrence is due to the fact that clients, especially of younger generation are keen to broaden their dining possibilities and try new things. Customers will always seek new dining and innovative experiences that will satisfy their ever-changing expectations. Thus, it is important to know, understand and meet customers' expectations.

During a meal, customers experience the quality of service performance and compare it to their expected product performance level. Satisfaction judgments are then formed based on this comparison. The end result is labelled positive disconfirmation if the performance is better than expected, negative disconfirmation if it is worse than expected, and simple confirmation if it is as expected. In short, customers evaluate service performance by comparing what they expected with what they believe they received. (Oliver, 2010)

2.3.1 Customer Experience Management

In an increasingly saturated market, where products are ever more similar and where the consumer is more and more aware and less loyal to particular brands, companies need to shift the consumers' focus on other elements, such as the "experience". The focus switches from a product based economy on to an experience one. In this sense, the companies become "suppliers" of sensations and experiences. The experiential marketing is based more on consumer experiences rather than on the actual value and the use of products.

Nowadays the product itself is not enough to create value to a concept, but also the experience that allows the consumer to relate to. The consumer is in search of emotions and sensations that the products can inspire. Adidas and Nike for example, no longer sell sportswear, but they sell the culture of sport and physical activity and the consequential well-being. The product becomes more and more the form through which to communicate a cultural message.

Over the years, scholars have examined the concept of consumer experience from different perspectives. The first school of thought came from Schmitt (1999) where he studied

the managerial tools adapted to enrich the emotional content and meaning of the purchase and use of products or services sold, in order to become the same source of experience.

2.3.2 Experience Economy

A second theory, however, sees the experience as a real object of exchange and then as a stand-alone product (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). According to the latter, the experience is a new kind of offer that comes in addition to commodities (interchangeable materials), goods (tangible products) and services (intangible activities). Sold experiences can then be ranked according to consumers' active or passive participation.

As a matter of fact, Pine and Gilmore (1998) identify four types of experiences: **Entertainment**: when consumers passively assist, through their senses, to what happens and activities being performed. They are not actively taking part but their mind and thoughts are focused in the event. (The flambé dishes being prepared by a food server at their table). **Educational:** customers are actively involved with the body or the mind to the event (cooking classes or wine tasting sessions). **Esthetic:** individuals are physically immersed in what happens, but remain passive (themed restaurant with cultural and heritage concepts embedded in its' interior design offer such an Esthetic experience). **Escapist:** clients are totally immersed in the experience and take part in an active way (re-enactments of banquets or historical events where clients are also totally dressed up for the occasion).
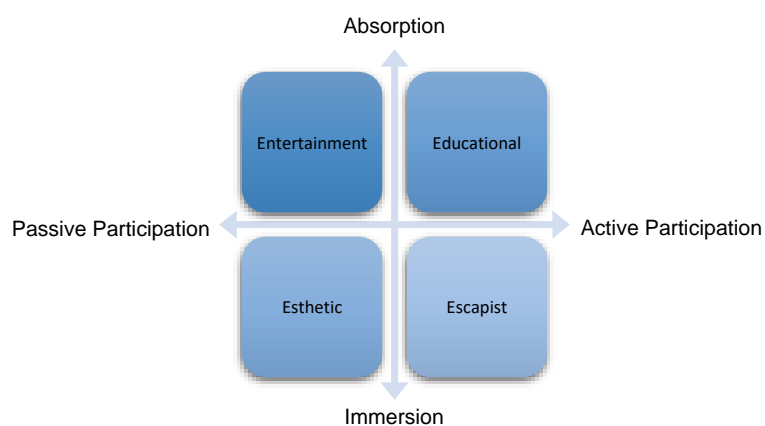

Figure 4. The four realms of an experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

An experience can engage guests in the context of two different dimensions, these are represented along the axes (see figure 4). The horizontal axis corresponds to the level of participation of the guests: at one end of the spectrum is the passive participation, where customers do not act or affect directly on the performance itself; the other end is the active

participation, in which the customers are directly involved in the performance or event that produces the experience. The second dimension of experience, the vertical axis, is about the involvement that describes the type of connection the customers have with the event. Absorption is "occupying customers' attention by bringing the experience into the mind" and immersion is "becoming physically or virtually a part of the experience itself" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 31). The union of these dimensions defines the previously explained four areas of experience, also known as the 4 Es; which are often mixed together to form unique, tailor-made and personal experiences.

2.3.3 Experiential Marketing

Bernd H. Schmitt was the first who theorized the experiential marketing theory. Schmitt labels it as a memorable experience that the customer has to undergo, in order to exceed their expectations. Convinced of the fact that consumers want, besides the product, something that touches their hearts and stimulate their minds, he believes that companies should try to create a holistic and unforgettable experience (Schmitt, 2010). Their aim must be to bring a product or service from being an "occasional purchase" to be "a daily part of the consumers' life." This only happens when the customer lives a remarkable experience, an experience that lingers in one's mind and feeling. Such an experience should definitely be associated with feelings or memories that unconsciously triggers the customers' emotional beliefs in considering the product or service amongst his favourite brand to purchase.

This assumption inspired Schmitt in theorizing his principle of experiential marketing. First and foremost, the business strategy must change its direction, the main goal becomes to figure out what the best kind of experience is needed that will enhance the product and not to identify the object or service that best fits the needs of the customer. For instance, it is not important the type of "gym shoes", but the experience of exercising using those specific gym shoes.

2.3.4 Strategic Experiential Modules

Schmitt classifies experiences through **FIVE** Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs), each of which has their own structures and intrinsic processes. These modules also act as objectives and direct the strategies associated to the Experiential Marketing programs. These types can and must be translated into specific strategic actions aimed at creating that memorable experience (Schmitt, 1999, pp. 64-68). Following is the author's explanation of Schmitt's five SEMs which are Sense, Feel, Think, Act and Relate

The first module, **Sense** builds the experience based on our five senses. Any commercial or marketing activity that somehow evoke any of the five senses may be included in this category. It can be said that the Sense operates mainly in activating our attention through the sensory perceptions and it is for this reason that Schmitt have considered this form as the first level. Almost always present in every experiential situation although not always decisive: the senses are connected to our primitive nature and do not differ much from those of other living beings and have the fundamental importance in enhancing our every-day experiences.

The five human senses are taken into account, and thus sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste by means of which sensory experiences are created. It can be used to distinguish between companies and products and, in general, to increase the value of goods and ser-vices, as well as to motivate customers' purchase (Schmitt, 1999). In a restaurant setting it is quite evident the importance of taste and smell, but also sight usually can have its fair share. A meal experience can involve all five senses, including touch, that is, the pleasure of touching and handling utensils such as cutlery, but also to appreciate furniture, ambi-ence and decor; also, the sense of hearing, can grasp the emotions caused by back-ground music or even the silence of secluded areas that make it an intimate and memora-ble experience.

The **Feel** SEM, deals with experiences which involve the clients' moods, emotions and feelings. Companies evoke consumers' most intimate and inner feelings like nostalgia in such a way to try and create a harmony with them. It appeals here to purely psychological aspects of human nature, such incitements usually focus on a specific feeling and chal-lenge consumers to react to their message. For Feel to really work, marketers should un-derstand which stimuli can actually trigger that emotion in prospective clients (Schmitt, 1999).

The third SEM is **Think**, this appeals to ones' intellect and the ability to think, solve, plan and has the goal of creating cognitive and problem-solving experiences that engage cus-tomers from a creative point of view. Usually through intrigue, incitement the consumer is attracted to creatively interact with the company and the product or service (Schmitt, 1999). These stimuli are more long-lasting than others, since the customer is involved not only emotionally, but also by mentally challenging ones' creative abilities and imagination.

Experiences which involve physicality are attributed to the SEM **Act**. The individual is challenged as a whole (mind and body) to intensify and improve his lifestyle. The mes-sages are persuasive and provocative in order to encourage consumers to try new things,

of course, needless to say through the product or service the company intends to sell. Such experiences are often promoted through societies role models like athletes. A perfect "act" marketing example is Nike's slogan "Just do it" (Schmitt, 1999).

The last module **Relate**, focuses on experiences which arise from an individual's relation with himself, with other cultures and other people. Starting with an intrinsic desire for personal success, self-image, of belonging to a group or a social class, the "relate" marketing puts forward the idea of joining a group of people having the same interests and aspirations which one can relate to (Schmitt, 1999).

2.3.5   Experience Providers – ExPros

The main function of the Customer Experience Management is to manage the five strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs). But how to trigger these strategic modules in the market scenarios? The answer is provided by Schmitt in theorizing the ExPro (Experience Providers), tools which are available to companies that are able to stimulate one or more modules (Schmitt, 1999). These seven tactical tools which act as a kind of experiential levers are Communication, Identity, Products, Co-Branding, Environment, Websites and People (Schmitt, 1999).

The ExPro related to **Communications** include advertising and corporate communications, internal and external. These might include advertising campaigns, slogans and annual report. **Identity** is the tool associated with the distinctiveness of a company both from a visual and a verbal matter, including names, logos and brand signage. Examples: onomatopoeic names (Schweppes for aerated drinks or Crunchie for Cadbury's chocolate) or that evoke sensations (Smoothie), logos and original and interactive brand signage (Google or Yahoo). On the other hand, one can also find the **Products** ExPro, which refers to the experience related products' design, packaging (One Million Perfume - in the shape of a gold ingot) and brand characters (Bibendum – the Michelin Man of Michelin Tyres).

The ExPro of **Co-Branding** includes marketing and event sponsorships, alliances, partnerships, licensing and product exposure in movies. Events are a perfect example; they truly practise the values and the principles of the brand and often offer memorable experiences to the customer – Isle of MTV which has been held yearly in Malta since 2007). Anything on which and in which the product or service offered can be advertised falls under the **Environment** ExPro. Shops, offices, public spaces, transportation, buildings and com-

mercial stands are just a few examples to what it is being referred. According to the experiential marketing the interior and exterior architecture (ExPro) should express how the company sees itself and the experience that wants to instil to its employees and its customers.

Web Sites also form part of these seven tactical tools. Apart from conveying information, this ExPro is rich in experiential elements like music, animation, video and audio clips, chat, etc. The sales staff are a key element, due to the fact that the consumers significantly take into account the service offered and received. Thus, the seventh and final ExPro is about **People**, not only from the consumer but also from the salesperson perspective. The ultimate goal is always to give the consumer a positive experience, not only in the time of the transaction, but also in former and future prospective purchases.

Thanks to these Experience Provides the company can stimulate one or more forms, and then create different types of supply depending on these combinations. In particular, it can create: a mono-modular experience, resulting from the stimulation of a single module; a poly-modular experience resulting from the use of several modules; a holistic experience, resulting from the interaction of all modules, a vital goal of experiential marketing.

Schmitt also designed a valuable managerial tool: The Experiential Grid (Figure 5). This grid correlates the different SEMs and ExPros and allowing, in this way, to study the four central aspects of the experience which are:
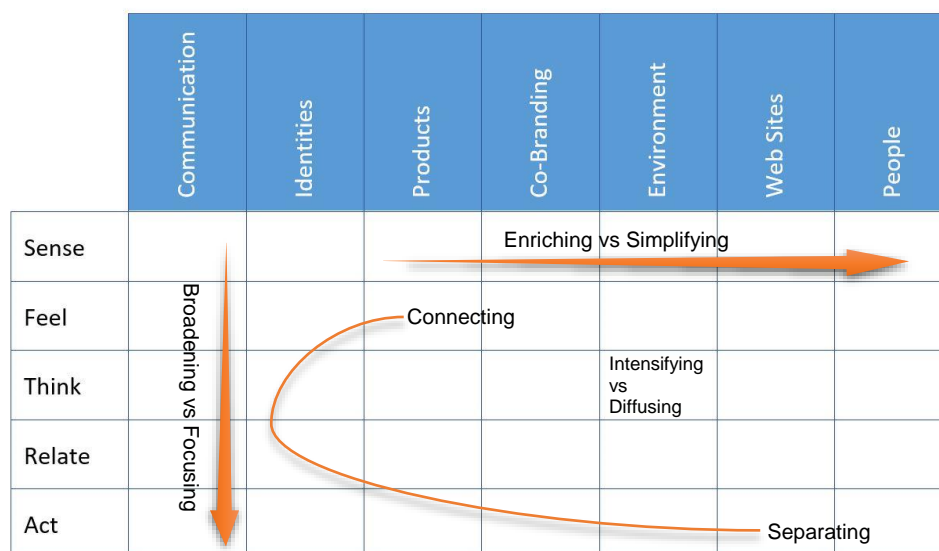

Figure 5. The Experiential Grid (adapted from Schmitt, 1999)

Intensity: Intensifying vs Diffusing, refers to the use of a specific ExPro to stimulate a specific SEM. Represented by Schmitt within each cell of the grid. It is the company's decision whether to increase or decrease the stimulation of a SEM. On the other hand, **Breadth: Enriching vs Simplifying,** relates to the use of more than one ExPro to stimulate the same SEM, which on the grid is illustrated by a horizontal arrow. The company can then determine whether to increase or reduce the set of stimuli that relate to a specific SEM, using one or more ExPros.

Linkage: Connecting vs Separating, is graphically it represented with a curve that cuts across the cells, it refers to the relation between the different grid elements. The company must analyse and understand which relationships can be created through the various SEMs and ExPros, choosing whether to enhance or mellow such relations. **Depth: Broadening vs Focusing,** relates to the use of a same ExPro to stimulate more than one SEM. Shown with a vertical arrow, it indicates the influence of an Experiential Provider on different modules. The company must decide whether to take action in stimuli of a specific ExPro on one or more SEMs.

To recapitulate, the Schmitt model contains experiential modules (SEMs) that stimulate various experiences, instances capable of stimulating the creation of experiences (ExPros) and a concrete framework (Experiential Grid) that puts them in the system, connecting them and creating a feasible experiential marketing scenario. Schmitt's approach is so interesting because it does not want to create a new type of product or service, but to re-explore existing ones, to discover the emotional and sensory side and use them to make the customer live and holistic experience. Thus, being able not only to encourage the purchase, but also to create a real connection with the company and the product or service.

It is quite evident that, "the experiential marketing" theorized by Schmitt differentiates itself from "the experience economy" of Pine and Gilmore, and this because it puts the focus on the experience of the consumer and not on the experience as a product. Pine and Gilmore believe, however, that it is not in their interest or goal to deal with "experiential marketing" or new marketing formulas, since the intent of "the experience economy" is not to create new ways to communicate with the clients, but simply to give them what they want: an experience (Gilmore & Pine, 2002).

3   Research Methodology

As clients and customers are continuously being exposed to new trends and different styles and types of restaurant settings they have developed an intricate set of criteria in choosing a restaurant for their dining experience. One important aspect in acquiring competitive advantage over other establishments is to focus on quality of service. This study aimed to empirically examine the quality of service given in food and beverage establishments in Malta from a Russian customer's experience perspective. The target group for this research were Russian individuals who are residing in Malta as well as those visiting the islands for touristic endeavours. Additionally, an investigation on the service provided by a number of restaurants in both countries was be also carried out.

In today's inter-reliant, international and culturally diverse economy, cross-cultural differences can have an effect on the hospitality industry. Given the different cultural and ethnic customers, this is bringing new communication challenges to the workplace. As an establishment and as an employee, understanding the values, customs and practice of different cultures can clearly influence the outcome of the service and meal experience. Hence, the study's objective is also to understand the different cultural dimensions and cross-cultural differences between Russian and Maltese nationals.

In pursuance of the project's aims and objectives two research methods were used. Using both qualitative and quantitative techniques can improve a study by making sure that the limitations of one type of data are counterbalanced by the advantages of another. This will ensure that understanding is enhanced by embracing different ways of knowing.

Due to the fact that two data collection methods were used for this study, a sequential data gathering approach was implemented. Such approach gives the opportunity of combining participant observation and survey data by alternating between them. The time frame which was set for the research strategy involved that firstly the qualitative data would be collected and subsequently the quantitative data collection would follow. The information gathered through participant observation facilitated the development and design of the quantitative survey questionnaire by "mapping out" key issues and approaches, something which was further explored and assisted the overall progress of the research.

The independently data collection from the two research methods were then incorporated for interpretation and conclusions at the time of reporting. Mixed methods may be used in order to combine data to make certain if the findings from one method mutually validate the findings from the other method. This process is known as triangulation. There are four

basic types of triangulation, the one which was adapted for this research paper is Methodological triangulation (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). It validates data and research by cross verifying the same information. The main purpose of triangulation is to eliminate or reduce biases and increase the reliability and validity of the study. Integrating more than one method to study a single phenomenon, as in the case with triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin, 2012)

3.1 Observations

DeWalt and DeWalt (2002, p. 92) state that "the goal for design of research using participant observation as a method is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given the limitations of the method" Participant observation is a means to increase the validity of the study by providing a better perception of the situation in place. The use of other research methods such as surveys or questionnaires and interviews in conjunction with participant observation, helps in making the validation process more feasible. (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002)

Participant observation is a methodology that permits the researcher to play a part or closely witness the lives and activities of those whom they are studying. Data obtained through participant observation serve as a check against other customers' subjective perception of what they believe and think on the research topic at hand. One of the main benefits of this qualitative research method, is that although one may get answers to the research question, there might be the possibility that the right questions are not always asked. By means of participant observation, researchers can also reveal further important elements for a deeper understanding of the research problem that were unknown at the initial study design. Consequently, participant observation can assist not only in understanding the information gathered through other various methods, but also to formulate and design questions for such methods that will give us the best possible data for the research study which is carried out. There are two dimensions to this type of qualitative research method: overt or covert observation (Saunders, et al., 2016).

A complete participant role and thus covert observation was chosen and the real purpose of the dining experience was not revealed to the selected restaurateurs. For this research, a total of twelve restaurants were chosen, out of which seven in Malta and five in Russia. The reason for assessing restaurants from both countries is to actually compare and contrast the main differences and similarities in relation to the service given. The majority of these visits were carried out during dinner sessions. However, to have a better realistic understanding the chosen days varied between weekdays and weekends. All the twelve

restaurants were chosen according to their specific settings. Such criteria included the Quality Assured Seal (in the case of Maltese restaurants), location, hotel and franchised restaurants, casual and fine dining.

In this study, the author travelled to Russia during August and this gave a better opportunity to gather any relevant data at source. As a potential customer, various restaurants both in Russia and in Malta were visited, observed and assessed in relation to the services offered. An observation chart (Appendix 1) was compiled using the Likert scale system and detailed field notes were also taken during the data collection process (Mack, et al., 2005).

The chart was planned according to the sequential procedures which customers undergo throughout the meal experience, from the time they set foot in the restaurant till the time of bill payment and departure. The observation chart was structured using the Institute of Tourism Studies standard operating procedure and the restaurant practical exam guidelines and policies (Appendix 3).

3.2 Survey Strategy

Survey research is a quantitative method in which a set of questions are posed to a group, or a section of individuals. This research method is a suitable tool used particularly when the aim is to define or describe specific features of large groups.

Kraemer and Pinsonneault (1993) identified three unique features of survey research. Firstly, it is used to quantitatively define detailed characteristics of a particular segment of the population. These characteristics most often include the connections amongst variables. Secondly, the information needed for survey research is gathered by means of structured questions to individuals; and as individuals their answers can be based on their personal perception. Lastly, this type of methodology uses a chosen percentage of the population from which the results can later be generalised back to the whole population. With difference to survey research, a survey is purely a means of data collection in order to carry out a survey research. Kraemer and Pinsonneault (1993, p. 77) define a survey as a "means for gathering information about the characteristics, actions, or opinions of a large group of people referred to as a population"

The survey research was done by using a structured questionnaire as a means of data collection. For this purpose, a combination of close-ended and matrix questions were for-

mulated (Appendix 2). The planning to formulate the questionnaire involved mainly mapping out the primary information required and secondly to determine the secondary data which is needed for analysis purposes (Brace, 2008). The information gathered through participant observation facilitated the development and design of the quantitative survey questionnaire by "mapping out" key issues and approaches, something which was further explored and assisted the overall progress of the research.

There are two main types of surveys in relation to time period: cross-sectional and longitudinal. Cross-sectional surveys are carried out at just one point in time whilst longitudinal surveys are those that are conducted over some extended period of time. For the benefit of this study and due to the research question at hand, the cross-sectional survey was chosen. This gave the author the opportunity to grasp the respondents' perception and thoughts at the particular point in time that the survey was administered (Saunders, et al., 2016).

A non-probability strategy approach was taken for the questionnaire distribution and data collection. This sample strategy was adopted since it is very easy to carry out with the cost and time required being quite small when compared to other sampling practices, giving the author the ability to achieve the desired sample size in a relatively fast and effective way. It was relatively impossible to get hold of all the Russian residents and tourists for them to take part in the survey, and therefore the non-probability method was chosen. The adopted strategy for the non-probability sampling was via Facebook pages, emails and with direct contact with the tourists at the Malta International Airport (MIA). In actual fact, to ensure in having a good realistic data, a **minimum** of 60 respondents was targeted.

By means of Facebook pages Russian Group in Malta/ Мальта and Мальтависта (MaltaVista) the structured questionnaire was distributed as an online survey to Russian nationals staying in Malta. The survey was created online using the Survey Monkey platform. Subsequently, an email with a link to the online survey was also sent to Russian students studying at ITS. The survey was kept available online of four weeks. This survey was also conducted in the departures lounge at the (MIA) with a number of Russian tourists at the end of their stay in Malta. The survey had a total of 106 respondents out of which 33 were from Russian tourists.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study and the research involved has been complied in accordance with the ethical guidelines by The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (http://www.tenk.fi/en). The author took the following ethical considerations into account during the whole research process and in the final write-up of the study.

This research is fully compliant with all legal requirements vis-à-vis the collection, storage, handling and data analysis. Furthermore, the study was planned, conducted and reported according to the Haaga-Helia guidelines for writing Bachelor thesis. The literature review has been carried out in a comprehensive manner and is truthfully stated and quoted, thus respecting and safeguarding others' intellectual property.

Participants in the survey questionnaire were given full and accurate information in relation to issues such as the background, nature and purpose of the research. Moreover, sufficient details were given on the study in question in order to allow them to make an informed decision and thus give their consent to participate or otherwise in this study.

The author was also particularly aware of his obligations to safeguard the interests of vulnerable or potentially 'at risk' groups who took part in the research. This included mainly Russian nationals residing in Malta which are a subgroup of the population, making them an ethnic minority in the Maltese islands.

Participants in the survey questionnaire had the right not only to agree to participate in the research but also to choose which information to provide to safeguard and not to hinder their privacy. The information provided by participants was treated as confidential and used for research purposes only. Information was not disclosed in any way to third parties which would allow such information to be linked with to any recognisable individual.

A complete participant role and thus covert observation was chosen and the real purpose of the dining experience was not revealed to the selected restaurateurs. The author takes full obligation not disclose specific characteristics that could allow others to guess the identities of the observed restaurants. Nevertheless, the author also takes the ethical responsibility to preserve the anonymity of the establishments in the final write-up and in field notes to prevent their identification, should the field notes be required for scrutiny. Restaurants' confidentiality will also be respected during eventual presentation of the data in public dissemination events, as well as in printed publications.

4 Empirical Findings

Throughout this chapter, we will be looking at the findings through the data collected from both the observations and questionnaires carried out in this research paper. For both research methodologies, a 5 point Likert scale system was used, thus all average figures shown in the charts are scored at a maximum of five.

4.1 Restaurant Observations

For this research, a total of twelve restaurants were chosen, out of which seven in Malta and five in Russia. Through an observation chart (Appendix 1) and detailed field notes which were also taken during the data collection process, the gathered data was analysed to compare and contrast the main differences and similarities in relation to the service given in both Malta and Russia respectively. Most of these visits were carried out during dinner sessions. However, to have a better realistic understanding the chosen days varied between weekdays and weekends. All the twelve restaurants were chosen according to their specific settings. Such criteria included the Quality Assured Seal (in the case of Maltese restaurants), location, hotel and franchised restaurants, casual and fine dining. At this stage, it is also important to underline that the findings show what the author observed and assessed in these twelve restaurants and do not possibly reflect the overall scenarios in the majority of the Maltese and Russian restaurants.
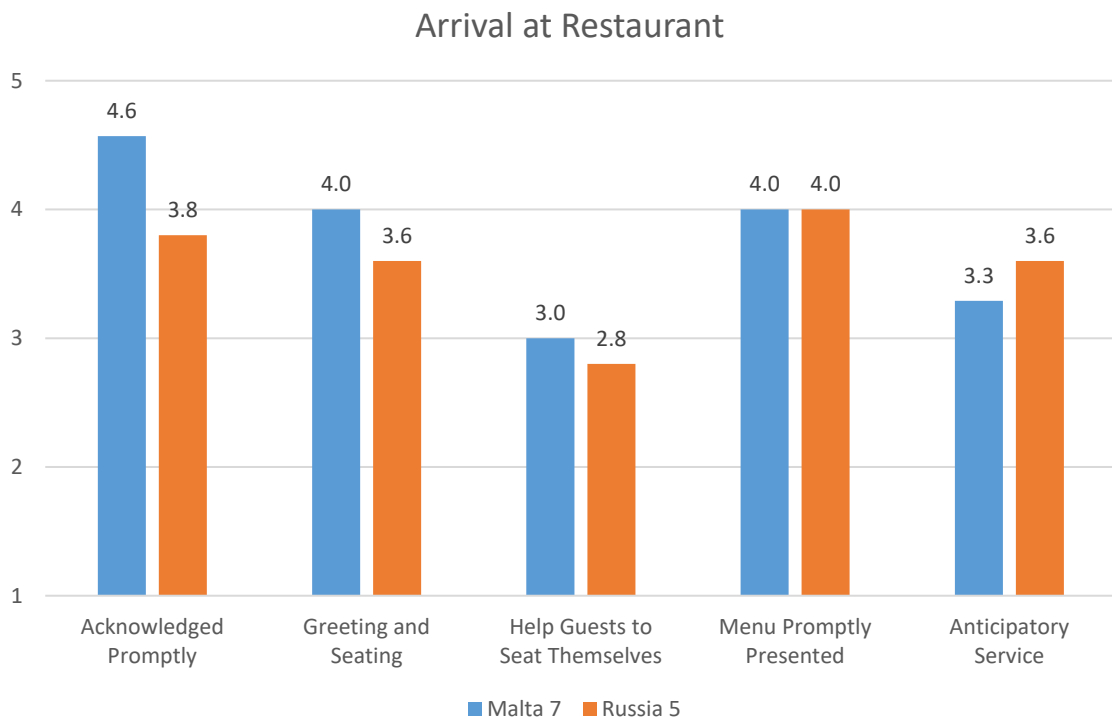

Figure 6. Arrival at the Restaurant

Based on the author's observations, in respect to the arrival at the restaurant (Figure 6) one can see that there are two main dissimilarities. The assessed Maltese restaurants indicate a higher score rating in "acknowledging", and in "greeting and seating".

Annotations in the field notes suggest that this finding could be attributed to language and communication barriers, which the author experienced when dining in Russian restaurants. In the majority of the Russian restaurants the author's annotations also indicate that unless asked, no menus in English were being presented. Furthermore, these menus showed spelling and grammatical mistakes as well a pricing errors.
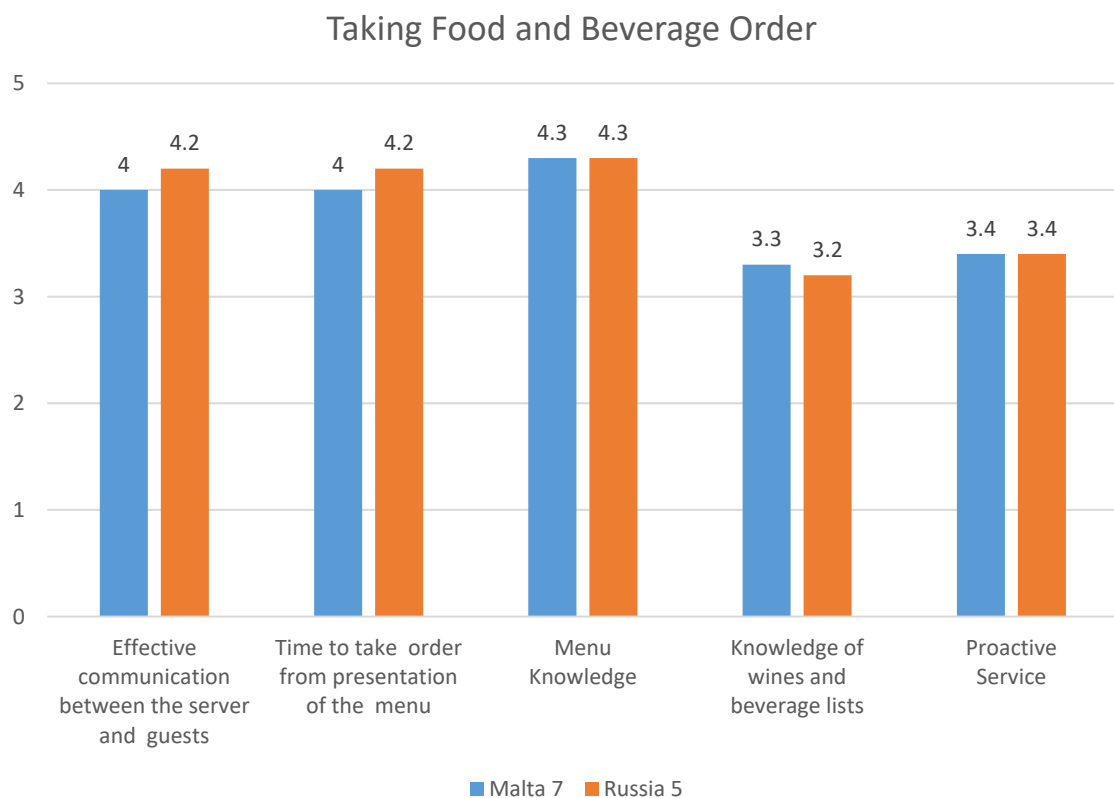
Figure 7. Taking Food and Beverage Order

In order taking, (Figure 7) it seems that no differences were noted between the observed restaurants. In the author's field notes it is remarked that effective communication in Russia was facilitated and effective since one of the guests was Russian speaking.
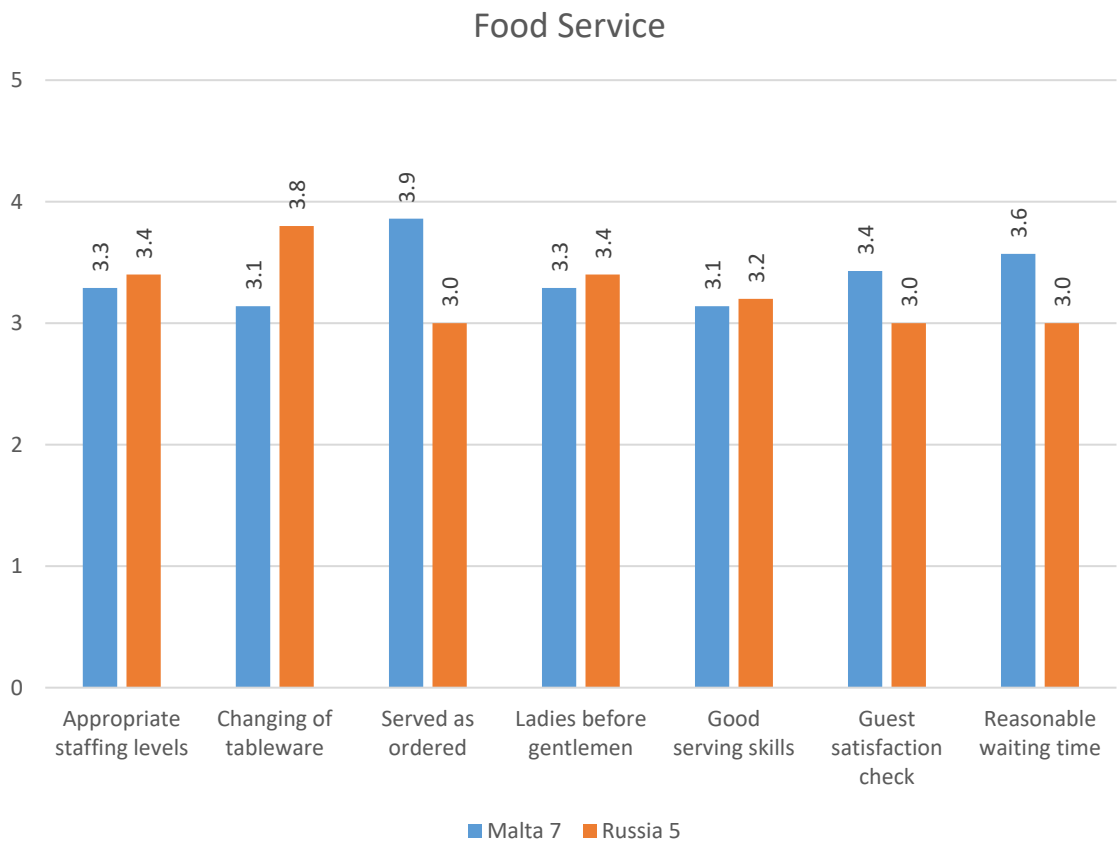
Figure 8. Food Service

According to the author's observation and annotations, when it came to the actual food service (Figure 8), more attention to "changing of tableware" was given in Russian restaurants. Then again, based in this data, it seems that the seven Maltese restaurants had a better score on "food served as ordered", "satisfaction checks" and the "waiting between courses" when compared to their Russian counterparts.

Field notes indicate that whilst dining in Russian restaurants there were instances in which the wrong dishes were served or not to the customer's requests; something which had a negative snowball effect also on longer waiting time until the situation was rectified. During the observation process, the author also noted that in certain cases, servers in Maltese restaurants were not proficient in changing the tableware according to the customer's choice of dishes. A case in point was when clients ended up asking themselves for steak knives when fillets were ordered.
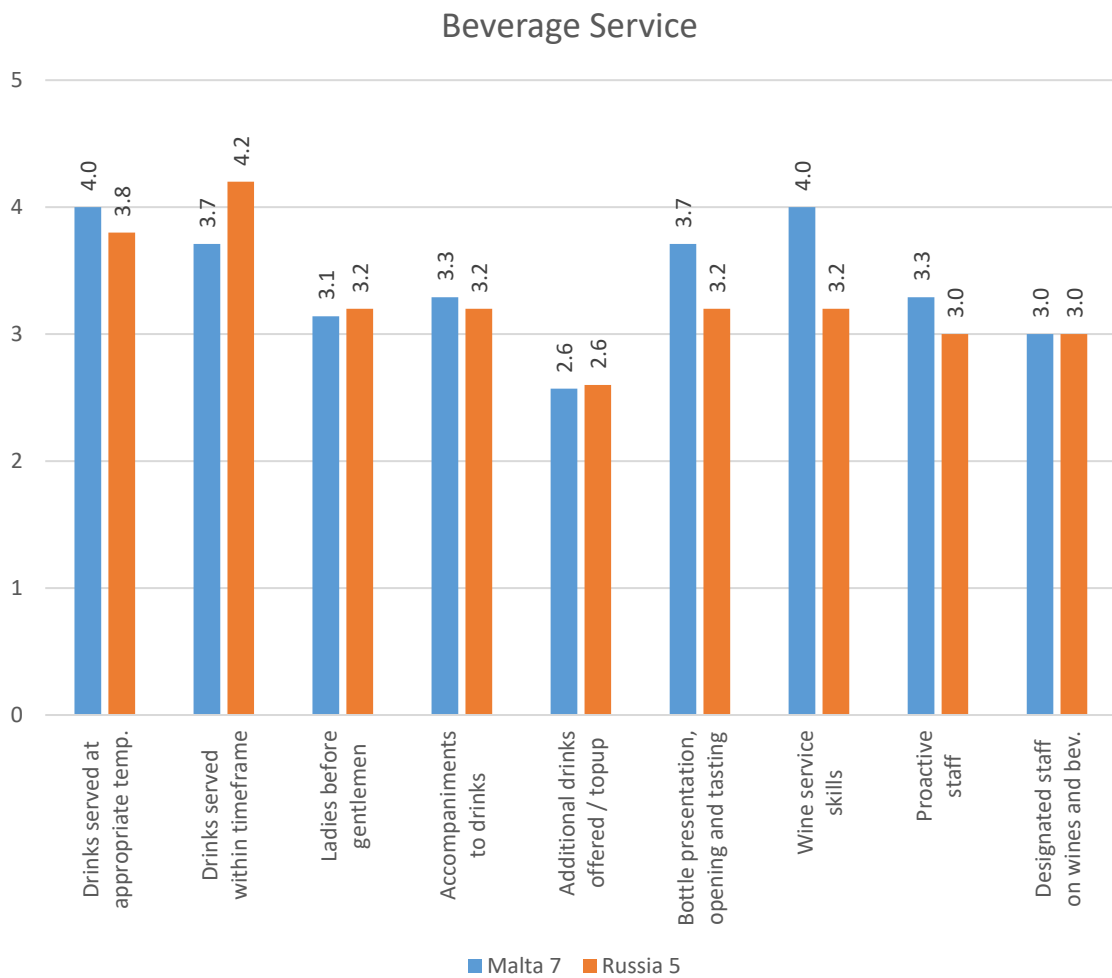
Figure 9. Beverage Service

During the observation process and based on the author's valuation, it is quite interesting the fact that in Beverage service the Maltese restaurants performed relatively well when it came to the actual wine service skills on "bottle presentation" and "wine service" when compared to their Russian counterparts (Figure 9). However, Russian restaurants out-weighed on the time taken for beverages to be served.

According to the author's annotations, whilst dining in Russia, the wine list was hardly ever presented or even no wines were available on the beverage lists. Field notes also suggest a good level of proficiency from Maltese servers when it came to wine service skills and food paring. Based on the field notes taken, in both the Maltese and Russian restaurants, little or no attention was being given to the topping up of beverages or additional beverages offered, leaving the clients to help themselves or having to ask for assistance.

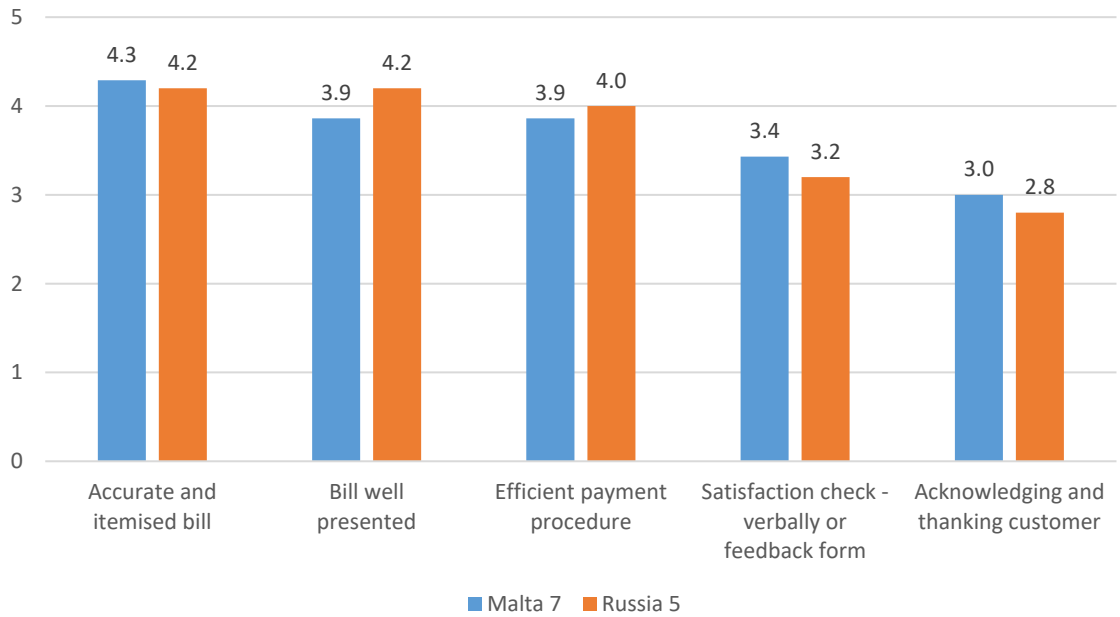## Departure from Restaurant

Figure 10. Departure from Restaurant

According to the author's observation and annotations, when it came to departure from the restaurant (Figure 10), no differences were noted between the observed restaurants. However, notes taken during the meal experience suggest that a lack of acknowledging and feedback was quite evident in the assessed restaurants.
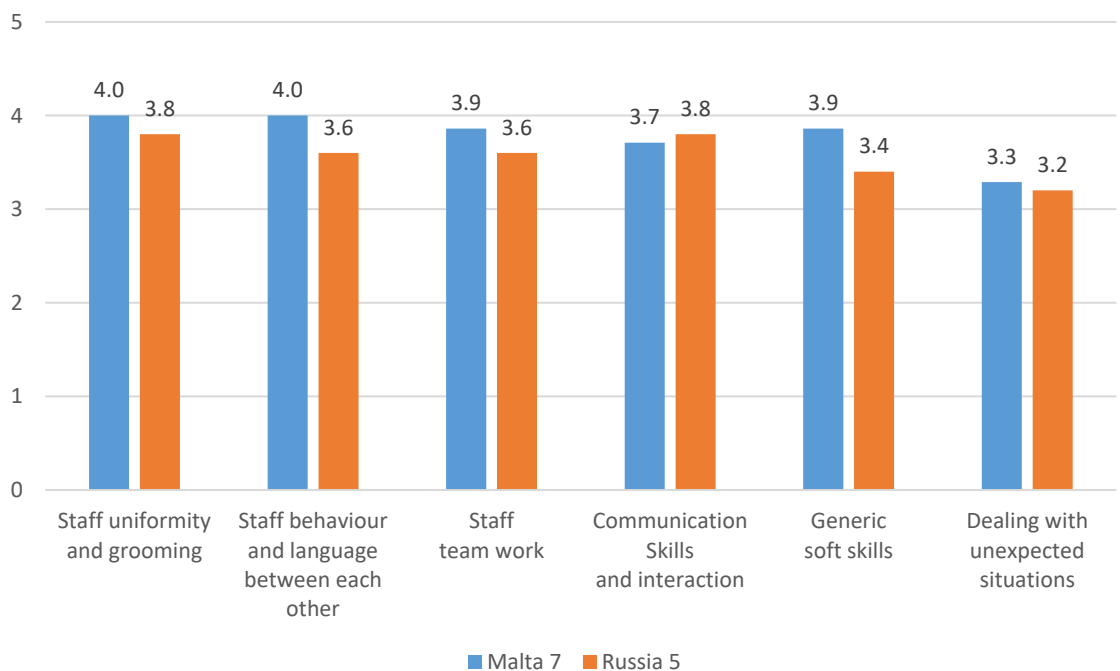
Other Areas

Figure 11. Other Areas

According to collected data and notes taken during it looks like that when it comes to the other areas of the service provided during the observation process, the restaurants visited in Malta slightly performed better those in Russia in almost all areas (Figure 11). Based on the author's assessment, staff behaviour and generic soft skills had the most differences. In his field notes, the author describes instances occurred in Russian restaurants which led to such scores. Reported occasions include: lack of team work, enthusiasm, charisma and initiative.

4.2   Restaurant Survey results vis-à-vis Russian Nationals

The survey research was done by using a structured questionnaire as a means of data collection (Appendix 2). For this purpose, a combination of close-ended and matrix questions were formulated. By means of Facebook pages, the structured questionnaire was distributed as an online survey to Russian nationals staying in Malta. Subsequently, an email with a link to the online survey was also sent to Russian students studying at ITS. This survey was also conducted in the departures lounge at the Malta International Airport (MIA) with a number of Russian tourists at the end of their stay in Malta. The survey had a total of 106 respondents out of which 33 were from Russian tourists. At this stage, it is also important to mention that at the end of the data collection process it was noticed that out of all respondents 80 were shown as Russians staying in Malta (in this study referred to as "Expats") and 33 as Tourists. The total amount shows 113 whilst the actual respondents were 106. The reason for having this minimal discrepancy is attributed to the fact that in question 3 related to the reason for staying in Malta, the participants had the option to choose more than one possible answer. Thus, in reality Expats respondents were 73.
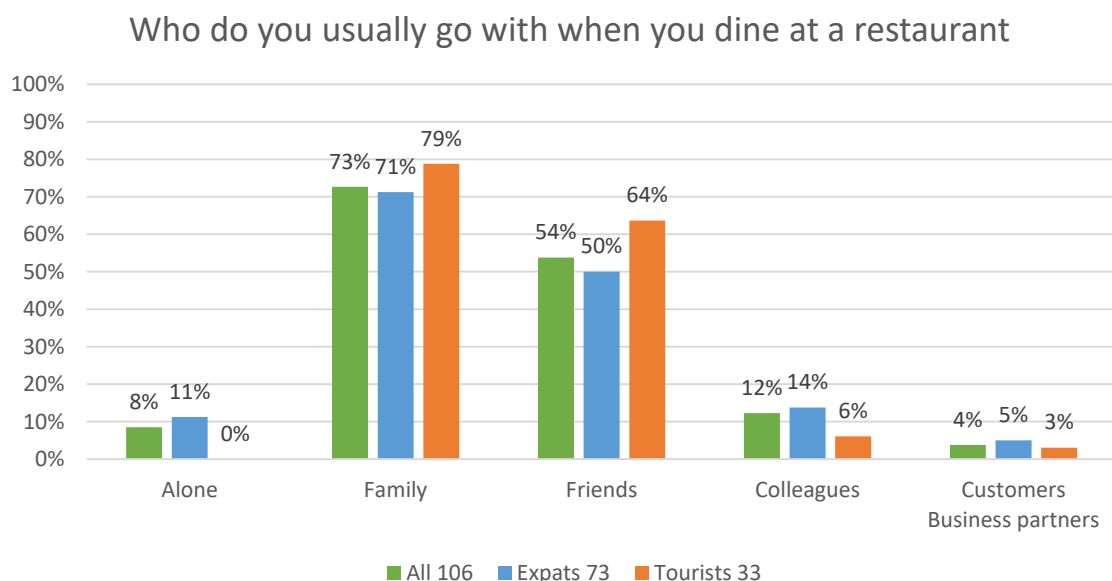

Figure 12. With whom you go out to dine

Based on the gathered data, we can see in Figure 12 that family and friends received respectively the highest scores both from expats and tourists alike. The figures also indicate that tourists gave better scores in both when compared to expats. On the other hand, according to the collected data, expats show a higher percentage score when it comes to dining alone and colleagues.

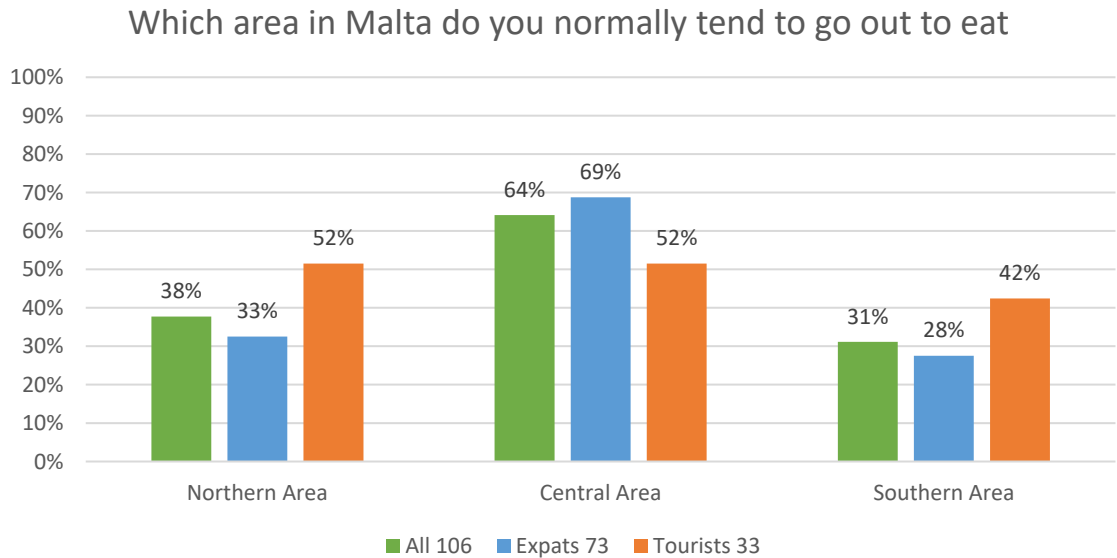## Which area in Malta do you normally tend to go out to eat

Figure 13. Where do you dine in Malta?

Based on the participants' response (Figure 13), it seems that expats have a high preference of 69% in dining in the Central part of Malta when compared to a contrasting 28% preference to the Southern part of the Island. The compiled statistical information might also suggest that Russian tourists had the same dining preference of 52% for the Northern areas and a fair 42% for the Southern Restaurants.
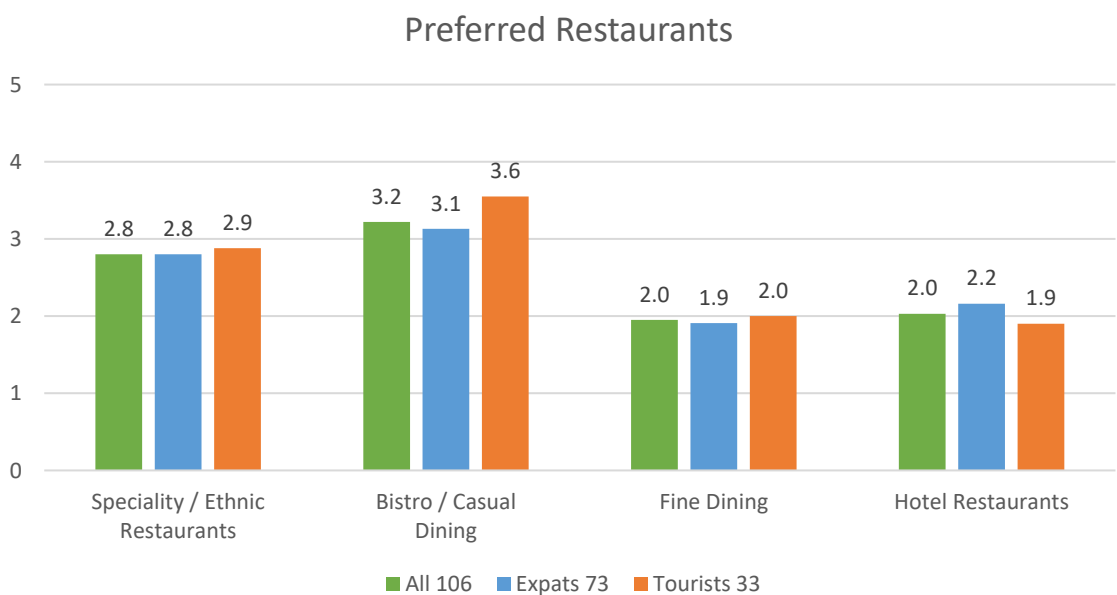
Preferred Restaurants

Figure 14. Restaurant style preference

According to the gathered data, the impression given is that Russian Expats and Tourists had quite similar preferences when it comes to the type of preferred restaurant (Figure 14). So much so that both Bistro/Casual Dining and Specialty/Ethnic Restaurants ranked first and second respectively will all respondents. However, it seems that the main difference was that whilst expats preferred Fine Dining to Hotel Restaurants, for the tourist participants it was totally an opposite scenario.
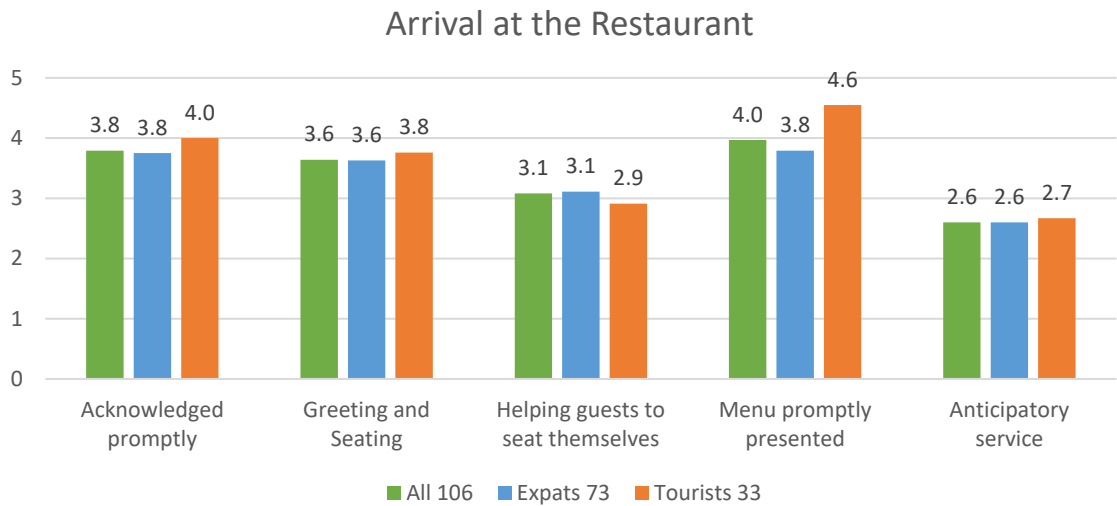
Arrival at the Restaurant

Figure 15. Arrival at the Restaurant

Based on the survey results, it seems that all Russian nationals appreciate the initial stages of the meal experience. So much so, that same similar feedback regarding the arrival in Maltese restaurants was registered (Figure 15). Data also indicate tourists as having a 0.8 higher average score when it comes to presentation of the menu.
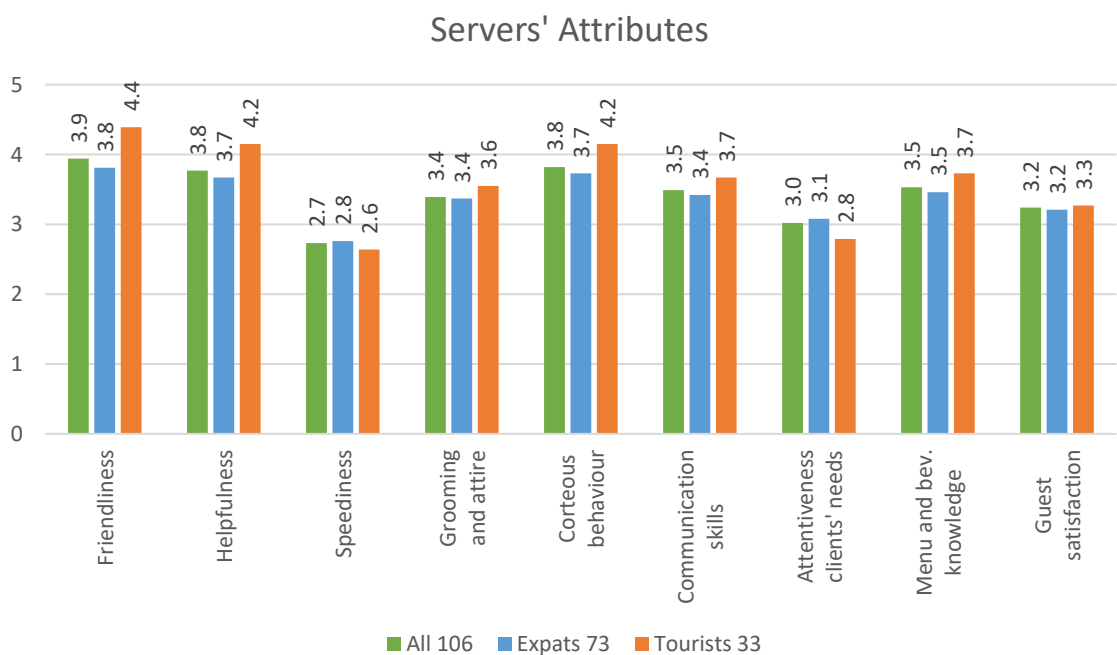
Servers' Attributes

Figure 16. Servers' Attributes

As we can see in figure 16, there is an indication that "friendliness, helpfulness and re-spect"; were given a better score from the Russian tourists, with an average of 0.5 more than the expats rankings. However, it seems that all participants gave the lowest scores on "speediness" and "attentiveness to clients' needs" respectively.

Servers' Technical Skills

Figure 17. Servers' Technical Skills

Based on the survey results, it looks as if all Russian nationals had the same similar feed-back regarding the servers' technical skills (Figure 17). Data also suggest that "ladies be-fore gents" and "offering of additional drinks and top-up" gained the least scores.

Departure from Restaurant

Figure 18. Departure from Restaurant

According the obtained statistical data, it appears as if both expats and tourists have the same response regarding the departure from the restaurant (Figure 18). Based on these figures the bill presentation and efficient payment procedure received the highest scores.
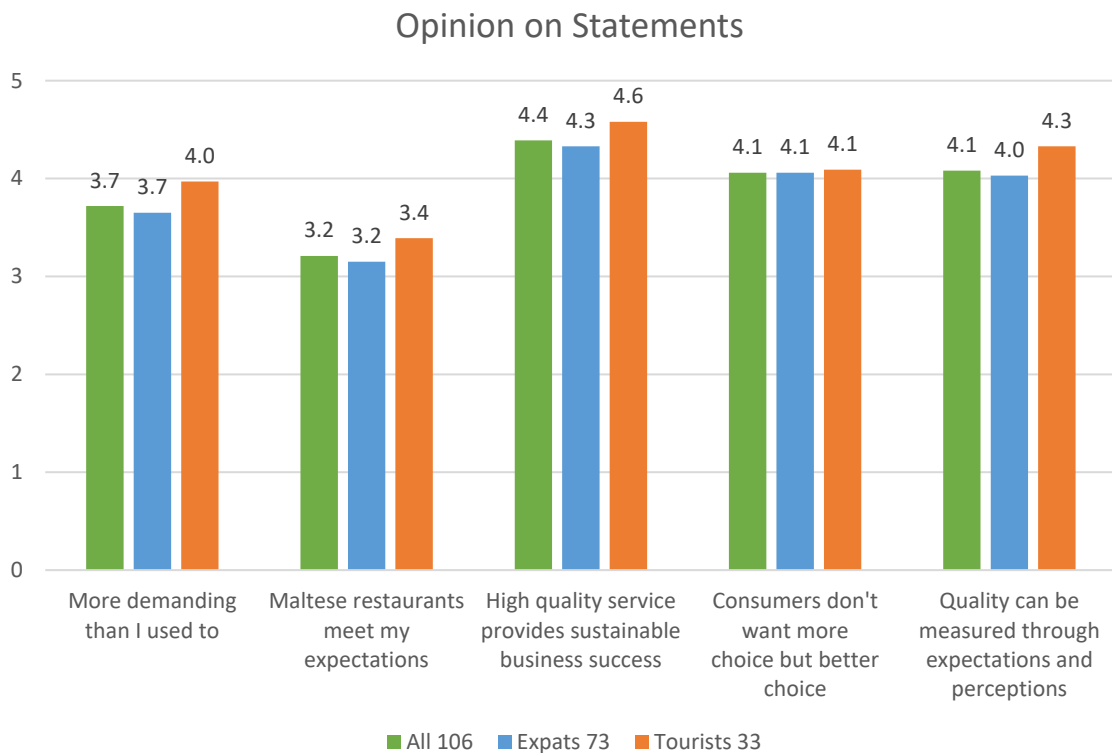

Figure 19. Opinion on Statements

In the survey's last question, the respondents were asked how much they agree with statements regarding to service, quality and consumer preferences (Figure 19). According to the survey's outcome, it appears like the tourist respondents gave higher ratings in all statements when compared with the expats' response. The results could give the impression that the first two statements were given a sight above average rating, when compared with the last three statements which scores are quite high. The statement which resulted with the lowest score from both parties relates to whether Maltese restaurants meets the customer's expectations.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Choosing a carrier as a restaurant server, if done with commitment and dedication, is one of the most delicate occupations, because it needs great physical strength, the capability for constant attention to the clients' needs, good knowledge of languages and gastronomy, and if the restaurant does not provide sommeliers, also of enology, but above all of good psychological skills and finally of the gift to instil a good feel factor in customers.

Today when we decide to go to the restaurant, we do it mainly because this gives us satisfaction, both for the quality of the food, and because it is a pleasure to find who cares and pampers us. This kind of gratification becomes even more important if we are in company. If these are the real reasons why a customer goes to the restaurant, the attitude of the perfect server is one of the most important roles within the brigade: gratification of the customer and consequently the return of the customer.

The conclusions are divided into three subchapters, firstly the discussion of the main results from both the observations and the survey findings. Secondly the conclusions of the research paper including the contributions to the author's field of research and suggestions for future studies. Thirdly, an assessment of thesis, relating to research reliability and validity, as well as the study's strengths, weaknesses and limitations.

5.1 Discussion of Main Results

As clients and customers are continuously being exposed to new trends and different styles and types of restaurant settings they have developed an intricate set of criteria in choosing a restaurant for their dining experience. One important aspect in acquiring competitive advantage over other establishments is to focus on quality of service. The aim of this study was to empirically examine the quality of service given in food and beverage establishments in Malta from a Russian customer's experience perspective. As an establishment and as an employee, understanding the values, customs and practice of different cultures can clearly influence the outcome of the service and meal experience. Hence, the study's objective is also to understand the different cultural dimensions and cross-cultural differences between Russian and Maltese nationals.

Observation findings suggest that both the Maltese and Russian restaurants performed quite well in all the assessed areas. Except for few issues, minimal differences between Maltese and Russian was also registered. The results also support the importance of customer relation and interaction (Schmitt, 1999). Based on the collected data and filed

notes, all the areas covering the direct contact and communication with the clients show the highest means, something which supports Schmitt's previous theories and reports.

However, it is quite distinctive the fact that such high scores are predominantly on the initial stages of the service sequence, mainly upon arrival, greeting and taking orders. As a matter of fact, the observation findings show that servers in both Maltese and Russian restaurants had the tendency to slack on their customer interaction skills at the later stages of the meal experience, especially when attending to customers' needs during the meal and upon leaving from the restaurant. The only exception being related to the bill presentation and payment process were once again a high score was recorded. These instances were experienced in all observed restaurants. From a customer point of view, such findings can be interpreted as restaurateurs being more interested in attracting clients and getting paid for the service provided rather than the holistic approach to customer experience.

Based on the author's assessment, it seems that there are some differences in relation to staff behaviour and generic soft skills between Russian and Maltese. In his field notes, the author describes instances which led to such scores. Reported occasions include: lack of team work, enthusiasm, charisma and initiative. As a matter of fact, Russian servers project themselves as being more stiff and inflexible during service. This element can be linked to Hofstede's 6D model, were Russia scores a high of 93 in Power Distance Index. According to Hofstede, the consequences of power distance are reflected in different fields, from relationships within the family (more rigid in high PDI cultures to more liberal for those with low PDI) to those at school, work and social communities (Hofstede, 1994).

During the observation process, besides using the Likert Scale system, notes were also taken on the service provided. Our findings show that there are three main flaws which repeatedly occurred during service in most of the restaurants which were assessed. Firstly, little or no attention was being given to the topping up of beverages or additional beverages offered, leaving the client to help himself or having to ask for assistance. Secondly, female clients were not being given any preference during service and were served last after male clients were served. And thirdly, a lack of getting customer feedback regarding their meal experience, either verbally or written.

Results also suggest that there is a difference between Maltese and Russian restaurants in relation to wine service. So much so that based on the author's annotations, whilst dining in Russia, the wine list was hardly ever presented or even no wines were available on the beverage lists. This can be accredited to the fact that in Russia it is not customarily to

drink wine during meals when compared to Malta. A report issued by the Wine Institute indicates that wine consumption per capita in the Maltese islands is much higher when compared with the Russian Federation (Wine Institute, 2011). In fact, based on this data and analysis, the findings suggest that there are differences between Maltese and Russian restaurants in relation to wine service skills.

Findings also suggest that in all restaurants which were observed and assessed, the best service offered was in those pertaining to five star hotels, chained/franchised restaurants or those in possession of the Quality Assured Seal. This can be attributed to the fact that such establishments tend to have set standards and policies when it comes to service quality and customer experience management.

Based on the collected data from the questionnaire, except for a few scenarios, it seems that there is a general above average consensus on the perceived service in the Maltese restaurants. According to the survey's statistical information, dining with family and friends received respectively the highest scores both from expats and tourists alike. Tourists scored higher in both when compared to expats, and this can be attributed to the fact that most of the tourists travel to Malta with family and friends. Whilst on the other hand, expats had a higher percentage score when it comes to dining alone and colleagues, something which can be accredited to their reasons for residing in Malta as well as their various life style.

When it comes to dining areas in Malta survey participants tend more to choose restaurants in the central area, however based on this data it seems that the tourists' choice was more varied and spread all over the island. A plausible motive for this distinctive difference between Expats and Tourists can be interpreted on the reasoning that Expats might tend to stick to restaurants close to their place of work or residence, notwithstanding the fact that staying in Malta for a considerable amount of time can also influence the choice of favourite dining spots etc. Whilst on the other hand, Tourists have the tendency to explore what the restaurant business has to offer and not just stick to the proximity of their lodging and accommodation.

The outcome of the survey also seems to indicate that participants preferred choice in restaurants was much more inclined towards speciality cuisines and casual dining rather than fine dining and hotel restaurants. There are various interpretations for such results. As clients and customers are continuously being exposed to new trends and different styles

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and types of restaurant settings they have developed an intricate set of criteria in choosing a restaurant for their dining experience. Eating out is not just a meal experience but it is also a sensory experience (Gustafsson, et al., 2006).

Going to a restaurant is an experience that involves all the senses – not just taste! When people go out to a restaurant for a meal, they go for the full experience, not just for the food itself. Speciality and Ethnic Restaurants do not just focus their business only on the culinary aspects but on a holistic approach, ranging from the atmosphere, setting, ambience, music and décor. Some of them go that extra mile by hiring natives (Indians for Indian restaurants) to work as servers. These findings can be directly linked to Schmitt's theory of experiential marketing. Convinced of the fact that consumers want, besides the product, something that touches their hearts and stimulate their minds, Schmitt believes that companies should try to create a holistic and memorable experience (Schmitt, 2010).

Based on the survey's results, it seems that the lowest scores are all related to the servers' generic soft skills. Namely, anticipation, speediness, attentiveness, top-up of beverages and the courtesy of serving ladies before gents. Through the observation process, the author has also identified similar shortcomings in the sampled restaurants. However why soft skills are so important? These skills go way beyond the server but should be instilled from a managerial perspective as well. In the article "The soft skills" Main (2001) states:

> To grow a crop of truly successful managers it's important to teach and develop soft skills. I like to think of it as a Leadership Development Program. Developing good leaders will benefit your operation in ways far beyond lower food cost, improved employee retention, and higher check averages.

Specific professional skills are clearly the cornerstones of employability: candidates are hired to demonstrate a solid know-how in relation to what is required for a given work role. However, alongside traditional and technical skills, called "hard", however more concern is being given in the today's labour market to transferable skills, also known as "soft" skills. Those who prove to possess them are more likely to remain employed or find new employment; Examples include cognitive flexibility, ability to handle unexpected situations, knowing how to join a group or guide your colleagues to a specific goal. (Bhal, 2015)

Once again, the importance of soft skills can be linked to the participants' response on the departure from the restaurant. Based on the data at hand, it seems that bill presentation and payment procedures got higher results when compared to asking for guest feedback

and acknowledging and thanking the customer. Such findings can be interpreted as restaurateurs being more interested in attracting clients and getting paid for the service provided rather than the holistic approach to customer experience.

By means of the question associated to the respondents' opinion on statements, the data collected suggests that participants gave a slight lower score to the first two statements. The first statement was related to whether the respondents are more demanding than they to be when it comes to the meal experience and the second was whether the service given in the Maltese restaurants met their expectations. It is also good to point out that these first two statements are more of a personal opinion which in certain instances could be quite subjective, whilst the other three are direct statements from peer reviewed journals and papers. Consequently, the results obtained indicate that the respondents are in agreement with the last three statements related to high quality service, consumers' choice and means of measuring quality (Keiser, 1988; Parasuraman, et al., 1985).

5.2   Conclusions and Suggestions for Development

Based on this research, it can be said that some interesting realities emerged and ought to be furthered studied. Notwithstanding the fact that the restaurateurs, the people involved in the tourism business and the hospitality industry in general should take them in account and develop. Both research data results suggest that in general, restaurants in Malta are performing relatively well.

However, there were particular shortcomings which definitely need to be addressed. Soft skills are today's focus for professional training and business organization. They are directly related to the way of being with oneself and with others and enabling individuals to enhance their technical skills and their personality, both in social contexts and in working environments. Based on the collected data, there could be indications of differences between Maltese and Russian restaurants when it comes to soft skills. The need for improving on these skills comes out even though the participants' response. Based on this thesis, it seems that, according to the data at hand, the initial stages of the meal experience look good but servers had the tendency to slack on their customer interaction skills at the later stages, especially when attending to customers' needs during the meal and upon leaving from the restaurant.

According on this study it can also be said that there are differences on wine service between Malta and Russia, and up to a certain extent that Russians are not keen wine lov-

ers. However, statistical data tells us that the Russians' interest in drinking wine has increased throughout the years (Wine Institute, 2011). Nevertheless, Russians seem to be quite pleased with the wine service skills offered in Maltese restaurants.

In general, and according to the collected data, the Russians which took part in this study are pleased with the service offered in Maltese restaurants. Based on the respondents' response, it also looks like that the survey's participants are in accordance with what Wishna (2000) was anticipating in his article "Great Expectations", that, in the future, customers will be more demanding where it comes to the meal experience.

Different means and actions should be implemented to improve the current service situation and to give a better customer experience, not only to Russians but to all the guests and patrons, irrespective of their ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. It is also true that the waiters are not the ones preparing and cooking the food, but as the front liners, they are the ones directly linked to the meal experience and whatever happens during that experience, the customer will immediately hold them responsible for the quality of the event. They are the ones assigned with keeping the customer pleased, and they must do what it takes to get the entire restaurant committed to that quality experience. The waiter's role is not to be the middleman between the kitchen chefs and the customer but more as facilitator between a customer's wish for a great experience and the restaurant's success in providing that experience.

Two initiatives which can help improve the customer service sector are the RPL and P.A.T.H. The Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) have recently launched the Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) which will help professionals in the industry to further their academic studies. Moreover, In May 2017, the Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with MTA have launched a consultation process for Proficiency Acknowledgment in Tourism and Hospitality (P.A.T.H.). This will serve to regulate and upskill the human resources element in the Maltese tourism sector. Both initiatives will give fruitful results to safeguard and ameliorate Malta's reputation in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Since no other extensive research was made on this specific field, it would be greatly beneficial for the restaurant service industry if further studies could be carried out. This study gives a mere fraction of information of what is going on in the restaurant service in Malta. In the future, it would be of great importance to the hospitality industry to conduct studies related to the whole meal and dining experience. This study can also be considered a solid starting point in exploring the customer experience and service not only in restaurants, but also in other equally important sectors in the tourism and hospitality business.

5.3   Assessment of Thesis

This product-oriented thesis flourished from the author's personal interest in the quality of service being given in the restaurants in Malta. Having worked in the operational side of the hospitality industry for the last twenty-five years, out of which sixteen as a lecturer in food and beverage operations, there was always the desire in trying to understand how the clients are perceiving service in restaurants.

The fact that the author is married to a Russian national and has been regularly visiting the country for the last ten years imparted even more the need to explore and investigate the phenomena. However, only by means of some initial research and with the supervisor's guidance that the subject for the thesis was eventually chosen and narrowed down. Once the research problem and objectives were clearly identified and set, the author tackled the review of various literatures pertaining to culture and customer experience. Simultaneously, with the supervisor's assistance the empirical research took place and in pursuance of the project's aims and objectives two research methods were used. Having over twenty-five years of experience in the field, the author had to be careful not to end up being subjective and thus being influenced by his emotions or opinions during the assessments which were carried out in the observational research. Regardless of his beliefs, the author needed to have a good grasp of the differences between the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity whist conducting the research and subsequently writing the end results.

A test is valid if it actually measures what it is intended to measure, for example, in terms of content, in terms of concurrent validity (compared to other tests that aim to measure the same thing) and predictive validity (measurements at different times) The validity of a test is related to the validity of its idea, its factual validity to its apparent validity and its validity in relation to a criterion. On the other hand, reliability maintains the consistency of the result of the measurement of a "same object" carried out by different people in different situations with different instruments, that is, if only the variable that is to be measured is concerned, therefore, it relates to internal coherence, objectivity of findings, and how the interpretations of the findings are carried out (Moskal & Leydens, 2000).

A non-probability strategy approach was taken for the questionnaire distribution and data collection. This sample strategy was adopted since it is very easy to carry out with the cost and time required being quite small when compared to other sampling practices, giving the author the ability to achieve the desired sample size in a relatively fast and effective way. It was relatively impossible to get hold of all the Russian residents and tourists for them to take part in the survey, and therefore the non-probability method was chosen.

The majority of the participants responded to the survey questionnaire mainly through Facebook and emails, and only 33 out of 106 respondents were Russian tourists. This means that one cannot really say how well the data represents the selected population. Moreover, this research was not scientifically tested since the sample was taken only once and it could not be compared to other tests since there was no other similar tests done on the selected population.

Almost a year passed from the writing of the thesis outline till the actual finalisation of the thesis itself. It might be considered a short period of time to complete this research, as well as all the assignments related to the seven modules which formed part of this intensive degree programme. Especially considering the fact that this was not a full-time degree programme and that the author also had work and other personal obligations which he had to attend to. The author also does not deny the fact that some aspects of the thesis process could have been better accomplished. However, the positive side was that during the entire writing of this thesis the author succeeded in enhancing his knowledge on factual realities which the hospitality sector was and is presently going through.

Lastly, after fifteen intensive months, finally the day has come to write these thoughts of appreciation at the completion of my thesis. It has been a period of profound learning, not only scientifically, but also on a personal level. It is not easy to mention and thank, all the people who in one way or another contributed to development of this thesis.

Firstly, my sincere gratefulness goes to the Institute of Tourism Studies who funded my studies and jointly collaborated with Haaga Helia University in making this Bachelor's Degree truly possible. Special thanks also go to my thesis supervisor, Ms Meri Vehkaperä, for the ability that has shown in stimulating my interest in the subject at hand, in showing me the different aspects of research, that without her I would probably have ignored, and finally, for her patience, and for the confidence and enthusiasm that she instilled in me.

My thanks go out to my colleagues, with whom I have gone through the thick and thin of these fifteen-month rollercoaster experience …. it was definitely worth the ride, especially all those moments shared with you all. I am honoured in having you as my "work buddies!"

I want also to say a big thanks to my family. To my parents, who helped me and supported me in all the decisions I took throughout my life. To my wife Oksana, all this would not be possible if not for her constant encouragement, support and above all her enduring patience. Last but not least to my son Ivan, who even at such a young age, understood that his dad needed time to complete his studies. To you my child, I dedicate this study.

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