



Investigating the Key Factors Influencing the Travellers' Selection of Airline Prior to Travelling to Malta from London

Shaznay Fenech
1900500/3

BA in International Hospitality Management
(June 2025)

Abstract

Author Shaznay Fenech	Date 2 nd June 2025
Programme Level MQF/EQF Level 6	
Research/Project Title Investigating the Key Factors Influencing the Travellers' Selection of Airline Prior to Travelling to Malta from London	16,470
<p>The research aims to investigate key factors such as branding, customer satisfaction with in-flight entertainment, cabin comfort, in-flight meals, and other practical factors such as price, flight schedules and connections, loyalty programmes, airline safety and reputation. These factors are investigated to measure their impact on visitors flying from London to Malta's decision regarding airline selection. The research was deemed necessary since it addresses a gap in understanding how these factors affect travellers' decision for this specific route. A mixed-method approach was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews and close-ended questionnaires as methods for data collection was employed. Two interviews were conducted with marketing managers one from a low-cost airline and the other from a full-service carrier along with the distribution of 150 questionnaires to incoming passengers from London airports. The study overall finds that branding elements have a limited impact on airline selection. Therefore, the findings suggest that for this specific route during low-peak season, the most prominent factors affecting passengers' airline selection were price, flight availability, and airport location. This aligns well with the airline's efforts whereby during this low-peak season they adjust their brand messaging and introduce promotional campaigns to attract several customer segments. The findings also suggest the efforts airlines place on certain branding elements such as loyalty programs, are often overlooked by travellers. In conclusion, airlines operating this route during this season might find it difficult to upsell their premium offerings due to the importance given to price by passengers especially since it's a short flight. The implications of these results highlight the importance of pricing strategies that attract several passenger segments, including price-conscious ones, thus aiding to fill perishable seat inventory.</p>	
Keywords Passenger Preferences, Seasonal Travel Behaviour, Airline Selection, Airline Branding Influence, Branding Awareness.	

Declaration of Authenticity



Student Name and Surname: Shaznay Fenech

Student ITS Number : 1900500/3

Programme : Bachelors in International Hospitality Management

Research Title : Investigating the Key Factors Influencing the Travellers'

Selection of Airline Prior to Travelling to Malta from London.

Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Ms Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

01/06/2025

Date

S. Fenech

Student's Signature

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity and express appreciation to my tutor Miss Fiorentina Darmenia Jochimsen for her support and guidance throughout this research journey and for providing me with her knowledge regarding the subject and helping me shape the direction of this study.

I am grateful to my work colleagues, close friends and family who believed in me throughout the journey. Your encouragement has been a great source of motivation for completing this academic research. I could not have done this without you, making this journey a golden one.

Lastly, I would like to thank all participants both who agreed to fill in my questionnaire during their holiday, and the interviewees who agreed to participate in a short interview providing me with their knowledgeable expertise from the skies, and the ground. Their help has been valuable, allowing this study to take flight.

Table of Contents

- 1. Introduction 1**
 - 1.1 Research Background 1
 - 1.2 Research Aim and Objectives..... 1
 - 1.3 Research Questions 2
 - 1.4 Research Scope and Limitations 3
 - 1.5 Structure of Thesis..... 3
- 2. Literature Review 4**
 - 2.1 Airline Branding..... 4
 - 2.1.1 The Importance of Branding in Airline Management..... 5
 - 2.1.2 The Main Components of Airline Branding 5
 - 2.2 Factors Influencing Airline Selection..... 7
 - 2.2.1 Cost and Affordability 8
 - 2.2.2 Safety and Reputation..... 8
 - 2.2.3 Flight Availability and Connectivity..... 9
 - 2.2.4 Service Quality 10
 - 2.2.5 Loyalty Programmes 11
 - 2.3 Impact of Branding on Consumer Behaviour 12
 - 2.3.1 Brand Image and Perception 12
 - 2.3.2 Brand Loyalty 12
 - 2.3.3 Marketing and Advertisement 13
 - 2.3.4 Social Media and Online Presence 14
 - 2.4 Tourism and Seasonal Travel Patterns..... 15
- 3. Methodology..... 20**
 - 3.1 Discussion..... 20
 - 3.2 Primary Data 21
 - 3.2.1 Questionnaires 21
 - 3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews..... 22
 - 3.3 Sample Selection 22
 - 3.4 Methods of Analysis..... 23
 - 3.5 Limitations 23
 - 3.6 Ethical Considerations 24
- 4. Results, Analysis and Discussion..... 26**
 - 4.1 Overview 26
 - 4.2 Airline Perspective 28

4.2.1 Marketing Positioning and Strategic Differentiation	28
4.2.2 Off-Peak Season Challenges.....	29
4.2.3 Consistency Across Marketing Channels	30
4.2.4 Differentiating Advertising Strategies Between Business and Leisure Travel	31
4.2.5 Role of Social Media in Brand Growth	33
4.2.6 Customer Feedback.....	34
4.2.7 Brand Consistency Across Customer Touchpoints.....	35
4.2.8 Loyalty Programmes and Customer Engagement.....	37
4.2.9 Measuring Customer Engagement	38
4.2.10 Understanding Travellers' Preferences.....	39
4.2.11 Applying Marketing Strategies to Seasonal Travel Trends	40
4.3 Passengers' Perspective	42
4.3.1 Traveller Profile.....	42
4.3.2 Travel Preferences.....	43
4.3.3 Marketing Strategies and Brand Reputation	46
4.3.4 Online Reviews, Social Media, and Word of Mouth.....	49
4.3.5 Brand Loyalty and Perception.....	54
4.4 Author Reflection	56
4.4.1 Social Media	56
4.4.2 Marketing and Seasonality.....	56
4.4.3 Loyalty Programme.....	57
4.4.4 Strategy Differentiation Between Leisure and Business Travellers	57
5. Final Arguments.....	58
5.2 Summary of Key Findings.....	58
5.3 Implications	59
5.4 Limitations.....	59
5.5 Suggestions for Future Research	60
5.6 Validity and Reliability	60
5.7 Concluding Statement.....	60
6. References.....	61
Appendix 1: Interview Transcripts.....	66
Appendix 2: Consent Forms	76

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Within the airline industry, throughout the years, there has been a notable growth, which has led to a substantial increase in airline carriers (Cipriani, et al., 2015). This has led to an increase in fierce competition between airline carriers (Gorkem & Yagci, 2016). Four airline carriers are available for the route from London to Malta during low-peak season, which includes the months from November to March. With the increasing number of carriers available for such a route, airlines are naturally strategising to differentiate their services from the rest of the competition and attract more loyal clientele (Batarliene & Slavinskaite, 2023).

The selected segment of travellers was chosen because during the first three months of the year, according to statistics generated by the National Statistics Office (NSO), a total figure of 107,800 inbound UK tourists entered Malta International Airport. During these months, the above figures show how crucial British tourists are for the Maltese economy since they are the key source of inbound tourists when compared to other nationalities.

—

This research is necessary to fill a gap in the knowledge of how key airline factors such as branding (brand image, brand loyalty, marketing and advertisements), customer satisfaction with in-flight entertainment, cabin comfort and in-flight meals, and other practical factors such as price sensitivity, connectivity and availability, loyalty, and airline safety and reputation affect the tourist's decision for this route. Given the continuous increase in competition within the airline industry, this research can serve as a valuable discernment for airlines that are seeking to boost their marketing strategies.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The research is titled '*Investigating the Key Factors Influencing the Travellers' Selection of Airline Prior to Travelling to Malta from London*'. Therefore, the main aim of the study is to investigate which factors influence airline selection among travellers with a multitude of backgrounds, demographics, and purposes for flying from London airports to Malta between November and March, which are considered as low-peak season. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following objectives.

1. Identify which branding factors have a strong influence on the traveller's airline selection from London to Malta.
2. Examine the impact which other factors, such as service quality, price sensitivity, airline safety, and reputation have on the carrier selection.
3. Assess how factors such as online reviews, social media, and word of mouth affect passengers' perception and loyalty towards the airline.
4. Measure the importance that in-flight services, cabin comfort, and customer service have on brand perception and customer satisfaction.

1.3 Research Questions

To guide the thesis, the central research question allows the researcher to investigate the impact of marketing strategies and brand reputation of the airline on carrier selection for travellers flying from London to Malta International Airport during low-peak seasons. This question intends to measure the effectiveness of airlines' efforts through airline branding to attract travellers during periods of reasonable demand.

To support this investigation, secondary questions are used to examine specific factors which may shape passengers' decisions. The first question considers the role of online reviews, social media and word of mouth in shaping tourists' perception of airline brands and developing brand loyalty. Furthermore, the second question investigates the impact of in-flight services, cabin comfort, and customer service on passengers' perception of the brand and repurchase intention. The last question focuses on the impact of practical factors such as price, connectivity and availability, airline safety, and brand reputation on passengers' final decision.

Although the original research proposal mainly focused on investigating branding factors, initial results disclosed that travellers considered more practical factors previously mentioned. As a result, the author developed the research questions to reflect this wider understanding of airline selection.

1.4 Research Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on tourists travelling during low-peak season from London airports such as Gatwick and Heathrow, two of London's major airports, and Luton and Stansted, which are secondary airports near London. It is important to note that findings cannot be generalised to all passengers travelling from other cities or countries to Malta, nor to passengers travelling from London to Malta during peak season. This is due to the research being restricted by seasonality, and therefore, the result does not essentially depict long-term developments.

1.5 Structure of Thesis

The thesis presents five chapters. The first chapter, which is the current one, is the introduction. In this chapter, the author outlines the research background, identifies the research problem, mentions the aim and objectives, lists the research questions, and lastly, the research scope and limitations.

In Chapter 2, the author presents a comprehensive literature review covering factors relating to both airline branding and other practical factors such as cost and affordability, safety and reputation, connectivity and flight schedule, and service quality of customer behaviour when it comes to decision making.

Chapter 3 is the methodology chapter. This chapter outlines the mixed-method approach which the author adopts to collect data from semi-structured interviews and closed-ended questionnaires, and the methods used to analyse the information gathered.

Chapter 4 presents the results, analysis and discussion chapter. In this chapter, the results from the questionnaires and interviews are presented and thematically analysed. Furthermore, these results are then discussed by presenting the author's final views on the results achieved.

The last chapter is Chapter 5. This chapter concludes the thesis by presenting summarised key findings, whilst providing recommendations on how these results can be used to benefit airline companies and suggesting future research topics.

2. Literature Review

The Maltese Government's incentives to attract low-cost carriers have intensified competition within the airline industry (Graham & Dennis, 2010). This study explores factors influencing travellers' airline selection for journeys from London to Malta, focusing on branding's impact on consumer decision-making. It examines preferences for low-cost and full-service carriers, analysing how branding elements—such as price, service quality, flight convenience, and loyalty programmes—shape customer choices. Malta's selection as the focal destination is justified by its high visitor numbers, with the UK identified as the leading source of tourists (National Statistics Office, 2024). The review further investigates consumer behaviour and brand loyalty within tourism, highlighting social media's role in shaping brand perception.

By building on existing research, this study aims to provide deeper insights into travellers' airline preferences, offering valuable perspectives on consumer-brand relationships in airline marketing.

2.1 Airline Branding

Branding can be conceptualised as the process of linking specific products with distinct brands by constructing and defining a brand within the customer's awareness. This process is aimed at attracting and preserving a loyal customer base by providing products which are more aligned with the company's mission (Andrivet, 2024).

When distinguishing between product and branding, it is evident that branding is the combination of both physical and emotional cues, which are prompted when a customer is exposed to elements of the brand, such as name, logo, and brand colours. Contrastingly, a product is something that can be readily replicated by market competitors (Andrivet, 2024).

In the context of this literature review, there are various companies which offer direct flights to Malta International Airport; however, for these brands to successfully convince clients and market their product, they create a distinctive brand image which sets their

product apart from their competitors. In the next section, the importance of branding in Airline management will be discussed, along with the main components of airline branding.

2.1.1 The Importance of Branding in Airline Management

Due to the entry of low-cost carriers (LCC), it is imperative for airlines that cannot compete with the lowest base prices to create a solid brand image. However, creating a solid brand is more challenging than it appears (Sezgen et al., 2023). Establishing and maintaining a solid brand image will provide the airline with several benefits, including higher numbers of customer loyalty, less susceptibility to competitors' marketing promotions, and more approving responses from clients regarding price variabilities, among other advantages (Keller, 2001). Additionally, by enhancing the company's brand image and consistently creating a distinctive company image, the airline company is distinguishing itself from the rest of the competition within the market (Chavan, 2023). This enables airlines to position themselves competitively, which benefits them as competitors may find it difficult to copy some of the airlines' unique offerings (Ahmed & Rodriguez-Diaz, 2020). Moreover, in such an industry, safety is a key factor which customers tend to consider when deciding which airline to choose for their booking. Therefore, building and maintaining a strong brand image will strengthen customers' trust towards that brand (Chavan, 2023).

2.1.2 The Main Components of Airline Branding

Due to the competition within the market, airline companies have to be creative when it comes to the success of the company. Marketing and branding have become a crucial tool for these companies to entice travellers with their irresistible campaigns through their quest for company success (Andrews, 2023).

Branding is often accompanied by the misconception that a brand is merely the creation of a name and logo which the company has chosen. However, there are several components which ultimately contribute to the overall success of a company when it comes to branding (Gartlan, 2023). This view is further supported by Chang Hyun et al. (2019) as they describe branding as an "assembly of intangibles" (Changhyun, et al., 2019, p. 51) which combines various attributes such as the company's name, packaging, history, and status. Altogether, these intangible assets create a cohesive brand identity which goes beyond visual representation and significantly influences consumer loyalty

(Changhyun, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this is not to be regarded as a universal definition of branding since Lin and Ryan (2016) define branding as a process of representation involving the company's constant practices such as production, consumption and distribution and how the final customer interacts with their brand (Lin & Ryan, 2016).

A brand is deemed strong if an effective strategy is implemented, which fosters the development of a durable brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality (Gartlan, 2023). These four components are critical, and when adopted and affiliated purposefully, they form the foundations of a cohesive, sustainable, and enduring brand which offers a competitive advantage within the airline sector.

Due to intense competition within the airline market, customers are exposed to a vast range of airline brands to choose from. A distinctive brand image is what differentiates a company from its competitors (Sezgen et al., 2023), typically created by the consumers' perceptions and beliefs about the brand itself (Landis-Eigsti, 2020). It is essential to distinguish between brand image and brand identity, as they represent distinct concepts. While brand image reflects how customers perceive the company and is beyond the company's control, brand identity refers to how the business places itself and what it stands for. Contrary to common belief, brand image is not devised solely by the company's desired portrayal, but it is hinged on customers' perceptions, often revealed in their reviews and feedback (Shiva, 2005). In instances where misalignment between a company's brand identity and brand image occurs, there are significant negative consequences, as it destabilises consumer trust and can cost the brand's reputation (Landis-Eigsti, 2020).

Brand loyalty emerges as another crucial factor determined by the airlines' ability to properly analyse their passengers' prerequisites and anticipations (Batarliené & Slavinskaité, 2023). A customer is loyal towards a brand when they consistently show an inclination to that brand for repeat purchases, indicating preference over competitors. In this context, brand trust becomes an antecedent to building and maintaining these relationships between the airline and its consumers. Trust is fundamental as it reduces perceived risks due to a lack of product knowledge in the customers' future transactions, giving them the confidence to continue engaging with the same brand recurrently (Zeren & Kara, 2021), ensuring the success of the firm. Moreover, several studies support the

view that a brand cannot achieve loyalty if there is no trust from the customers' end (Kabadayi & Alan, 2012; Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021).

2.2 Factors Influencing Airline Selection

Following the European Union's deregulation of the aviation market through its Open Skies Policy, the airline industry has undergone a significant transformation. This process of deregulation, which began in the late 1990s, enabled Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs) to work freely across countries in the European Union and other third countries (Abate & Christidis, 2020; Christidis, 2015). This agreement was intended to reduce restrictions on capacity, pricing and market access, which previously affected airlines' operations across various countries (Christidis, 2015).

The route examined in this thesis, between the United Kingdom and Malta, provides consumers with a broader range of carriers, including both full-service carriers (FSC) and low-cost airlines. As a result, full-service carriers such as KM Malta Airlines and British Airways may be directly competing with ULCCs such as Ryanair and LCC such as EasyJet. By modifying their business model, FSC appeals to audience segments which are normally served by LCCs (Klophaus & Fichert, 2019), which prioritise offering low fares instead of offering premium services (Eugenio-Martin & Perez-Granja, 2021). Moreover, with there being only one airport in Malta, this cannot be used as a competitive advantage by FSC. Since FSCs are reputable for flying to primary airports, offering enhanced connectivity as well as the possibility for lounge access, LCCs fly to secondary airports, benefiting from lower fees, thus minimising operational costs (Graham, 2013). Additionally, in recent years, a shift was noted within LCCs' strategy whereby they are gradually offering their services in major airports. This move provides them with access to additional passenger segments such as business travellers who are willing to pay additional fees as long as they fly to major airports, both for departures and arrivals (Beria et al., 2017). The route chosen for the scope of this thesis confirms this as EasyJet offer flights from Gatwick airport (one of London's major airports) to Malta.

When investigating which factors are likely to influence airline selection, it is fundamental to differentiate between LCCs and FSCs. These two models implement distinct strategies, leading to a variation of consumer preferences when choosing an airline (Rozenberg et al., 2014).

The following section aims to analyse how variables such as price, quality, flight availability, reputation, and loyalty influence travellers' airline selection.

2.2.1 Cost and Affordability

In airline selection, some tourists exhibit sensitivity towards certain prices, making it an element which affects passengers' decisions. This sensitivity has led to the popularity of LCC models, which surfaced following the liberalisation of the skies (Whyte & Prideaux, 2008). ULCCs such as Ryanair and LCCs such as EasyJet offer more affordable prices as an alternative to FCCs by eliminating the overheads of extra services and allowing passengers to pay for services which are deemed necessary for them (Yolci, 2024). Moreover, these airlines maintain low operational costs by flying to non-major airports where ground handling fees for aircraft's ground time are commonly cheaper (Picardo, 2024).

Conversely, other researchers argue that reduced prices alone are not always the determining factor for passengers. Ying et al. (2024) argued that price fairness is also a crucial determinant of airline selection. If passengers identify a price to be fair, they are likely to choose that airline for their travels; however, if a price is thought to be unfair, this could result in negative reactions and a drop in purchasing intentions (Ying et al., 2024).

2.2.2 Safety and Reputation

Airline reputation and safety records are significant factors which can alter one's decision of which airline to choose for their travels (Shiwakoti et al., 2021; Squalli, 2013). An Airline's safety reputation is built on factors such as the total number of injured individuals, the severity of the injuries, how recent the last accident the airline was involved in, and the size of the airline. Having public safety records will benefit airlines as there is less chance for passengers to shape subjective perceptions of the airlines' safety records. By publicising this information, travellers can see objective information from trusted sources such as the company itself and previous travellers (Fleischer et al., 2015). Moreover, these records, besides affecting the final opinion of the traveller, can also influence the approval and loyalty towards that airline (Shiwakoti et al., 2021).

According to Fleischer et al. (2012), it is important to distinguish between passengers who are affected by the factor 'fear of flying', since the choice of airline carrier for these

individuals' travels is not solely based on ticket pricing, or quality of service (Fleischer et al., 2012). Fear of flying is described to be a type of anxiety involving emotions such as panic, usually triggered by being exposed to news covering recent accidents within the aviation industry, amongst other possibilities (Babic et al., 2023). By revealing details regarding its safety records, an airline with high safety records will profit from increased demand, no matter the price, especially from individuals suffering fear of flying, since they are willing to pay more for safety (Fleischer et al., 2012). Literature review conducted by Yang et al. (2016) suggests that how an airline responds and recovers from an accident is irrelevant for passengers, however, it is factors such as the alleged risk of air travel, individual flight experience with the airline, and faithfulness which are of substance when it comes to airline selection post-accident (Yang et al., 2016). These claims are further supported by various other authors, such as Fleischer et al. (2015) and Molin et al. (2017) who sustain the claim that passengers' perception of airline safety does influence their choice of airline.

Due to a lack of recent academic literature regarding this topic, the author was limited when it came to supporting these claims with more current academic research. This inability recognises a gap within the current body of literature, which suggests the possibility for future research on the topic.

2.2.3 Flight Availability and Connectivity

Flight availability and connectivity can also impact the decision of passengers concerning airline selection. Travellers tend to select airlines which fly directly and regularly to their chosen destination to accommodate their schedule or limited availability (Kucukaltan & Topcu, 2019). Airlines which travel more frequently between one destination and another, and are more flexible in terms of schedules, tend to attract more customers as these factors minimise some of the stress which is due to travel arrangements (Tu, 2024). This factor might be of higher importance to business travellers rather than passengers travelling for leisure. This is because business travellers are more sensitive to time rather than price, as they tend to choose flight times which align with their work schedules (Nenem et al., 2020). Moreover, more time-conscious travellers may consider airport location as a key determinant when choosing an airline. Since FSCs are reputedly known for flying to primary airports which are closer to city centres, this accessibility may appeal more to such a segment of travellers (Albalate & Fageda, 2023).

Additionally, connectivity is also crucial for airline selection since it significantly affects which route passengers choose. LCC carriers tend to travel point-to-point, therefore, such airlines may offer more frequent and direct routes at lower costs (Redondi et al., 2021). Hence, since FSCs function on a hub-and-spoke model, passengers might find this less convenient since, in some cases, they might be required to take indirect routes to their destination. This may result in passengers who prefer travelling via direct flights reverting to LCCs to avoid any potential complications and interruptions due to connecting flights (Hunt & Truong, 2019).

According to Ali et al. (2019), the main complication which passengers may encounter whilst flying through an indirect route is missing their connection. This could be a result of several factors, such as delays caused during their first sector, and long walking distances from the arrival gate to the departure gate, both of which are a result of not enough layover time in between flights (Ali et al., 2019). Furthermore, due to shorter connection times, there are higher chances for the passenger's luggage to get lost, especially if there is some uncertainty regarding the operation of that flight (Leeuwen et al., 2020). Research conducted by SITA, an international provider of global information and telecommunications solutions for the aviation industry, found that in 2024, 63% of passengers' luggage was mishandled (SITA, 2024).

2.2.4 Service Quality

The quality of service which airlines offer to their customers is another factor which significantly affects passengers' airline selection. By continuously delivering exceptional service, airline companies will benefit not only by gaining new customers, but also by maintaining current ones, resulting in stronger loyalty towards the company and higher intentions to repurchase (Park et al., 2020).

In the study vis-à-vis the impact of service quality on passenger satisfaction and loyalty, Yas et al. (2022) dissect service quality into three stages: the pre-flight stage, in-flight and post-flight stage. Prior commencement of the journey, factors such as pricing, reservation systems, and creating an uncomplicated approach to travelling are likely to leave a good first impression on passengers. For the in-flight stage, factors such as multi-lingual crew, quality of food and entertainment, and security enhance the experience of passengers, which leads to higher rates of satisfaction. Lastly, the post-flight sector of service quality involves the professional management of delays and affected customers,

responsiveness to complaints, frequent flyer programmes, and managing passengers' luggage. These are the services which, if handled correctly, will result in a lasting impression that encourages passengers to use the airline's service again since there is increased satisfaction and trust, and a sense of emotional connection to the brand (Yas et al., 2022).

Moreover, Lim and Lee (2019) contrast Yas et al.'s (2022) three stages of service quality and assert that factors affecting service quality differ for FSCs and LCCs. Therefore, factors which are important for one type of carrier are not necessarily crucial for the other. Their study finds that in the case of LCC, reliability is crucial for the satisfaction of passengers, whereas empathy is not as significant since LCC customers do not seek personalised services, but rather a basic service that is reliable, as they have less confidence in this business model due to the price being paid. As for FSCs, passengers consider factors such as in-flight comfort, meals and entertainment, therefore, these factors are crucial for the selection process (Lim & Lee, 2019).

2.2.5 Loyalty Programmes

Frequent Flyer Programmes, commonly used by full-service carriers (FSCs) are intended to minimise direct price competition between airlines, and instead focus on building a solid customer base (Terblanch, 2015) which will aid the airline in collecting information about its members and, in return, provide rewards and packages which can interest various customer segments (Sahin et al., 2021). Moreover, individuals with high income levels and long-term memberships tend to appreciate the rewards and services more, resulting in a stronger preference towards the airline offering these programmes. Consequently, FFPs help foster repeat customers and preserve long-term relationships between the airline and customers (Sahin et al., 2021).

Conversely, the low-cost carriers (LCCs) business model avoids employing such programmes and chooses to compete on price. In such cases, customers choose to remain loyal towards a low-cost brand due to "calculative commitments" (Akamavi et al., 2014, p. 535). This means their loyalty towards the brand is due to its cost-effectiveness rather than an emotional attachment. Switching airline brands would result in sacrificing cheaper prices to paying higher fees for services which are not a priority (Akamavi et al., 2014).

2.3 Impact of Branding on Consumer Behaviour

The following section aims to analyse how variables relating to airline branding, such as brand image, brand loyalty, marketing and advertisement, social media and online presence influence travellers' airline selection.

2.3.1 Brand Image and Perception

As established in the previous chapter, brand image is a critical determinant of company success if implemented properly (Landis-Eigsti, 2020). Companies with a strong brand image are more likely to differentiate themselves from competitors, exploiting the brand associations rooted in consumers' minds through various brand signals, including products, services, and marketing communications (Sezgen et al., 2023; Williams, 2023). These associations foster a consumer's perception of the brand, strengthening loyalty and motivating impending buying behaviour (Nguyen & Mai, 2023).

Consumer perception, specifically in the airline industry, is notably shaped by the brand image, sustained by the creation of a consistent and distinct brand identity (Huang & Liu, 2020). Applying the concept of brand image to the airline industry, recent literature links improved customer satisfaction and loyalty, emphasising the direct influence of brand identity on purchasing evaluation (Nguyen & Mai, 2023). A robust brand image can affect customers' perception of the quality of service, safety, and trustworthiness, leading to an increase in assurance in the brand. Conversely, contrasting evaluations suggest that although brand image is significant, it is inadequate to uphold long-term loyalty. In fact, in a recent article, Hassan and Salem (2022) argue that factors such as responsiveness, reliability, and overall customer experience are pivotal in shaping customer perception. An earlier article by Munsamy et al. (2011) aligns with this, implying its continuous significance over time. These elements are precarious in the airline industry, where customer expectations go beyond just brand perceptions to include noticeable service-related experiences (Hassan & Salem, 2022).

2.3.2 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is crucial for the maintenance of long-term customer relationships and supporting an airline's competitiveness. A customer is loyal towards a brand which manages to evoke positive emotions and create a lasting association that prompts customers to repeatedly purchase products or services from that brand (Kekes-Szabo,

2024). For Zeren and Kara (2021), brand loyalty is essentially linked to brand trust, in which trust is an antecedent that, if nurtured, results in loyalty. This trust flourishes when customers feel at rest when relying on the brand to consistently deliver its promised product or service without associating any risks with that exchange. Customers who lack this trust are unlikely to engage with that brand (Zeren & Kara, 2021). Viewing this from a psychological perspective, trust eases customers' concerns with reference to performance, consistency, and value. Chonsalasin et al. (2020) assert that when customers feel self-assured and recognise that the airline poses no drastic risks, they are more likely to remain loyal customers (Chonsalasin et al., 2020).

Airline companies that successfully employ effective tools to attract high-value customers benefit the brand significantly, as repeat business is achieved through repeat purchases and long-term commitment, reduced costs in client acquisitions, and a higher customer lifetime value (EveIT, 2023;Kekes-Szabo, 2024; Kumar & Shah, 2004). Strong brand loyalty, as previously established, increases repeat purchases from loyal customers who consistently prefer a specific airline for their needs, thus causing an increase in sales. Moreover, when nurturing a loyal customer base, the company can appreciate a stable revenue stream whilst also reducing the cost of securing new ones. Having customers commit to a brand for a long period helps the latter foster greater customer engagement, which successively increases the customer lifetime value. This means that over time, the customer is open to spending more since their confidence and trust within the company have grown, thus resulting in higher rates of productivity (EveIT, 2023;Rane et al., 2023;).

2.3.3 Marketing and Advertisement

Marketing strategies have a critical role in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly within competitive markets. Utilising marketing campaigns helps companies increase their reach as well as gain an advantageous position over their competitors, thus creating a strong connection between the brand and consumers' purchasing decisions (Pandagre et al., 2021). Having effective publicity assists in shifting consumer attitudes, such as increased trust and loyalty, since the brand is perceived as reliable. Customers developing positive associations with the brand eventually help customers shift their attitudes since fewer risks are associated with the respective brand (Lim & Rasul, 2022;Pappas , 2016).

Mitchell and Olson (1981) noted that consumer attitude is fundamental in understanding how advertisements inspire individual decision-making processes, underlining that effective campaigns lead to positive emotional engagement with the brand (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Moreover, to assess the success of marketing efforts, one can investigate purchase intention. The main function of this is to not only foresee consumer behaviour, but also to guide marketers in evaluating the effectiveness of promotions and provide insight into how well the targeted audience has connected with this (Morris et al., 2002).

The positive influence of advertising on consumer behaviour is further reinforced by Soti's (2022) findings, which confirm that consumers exposed to advertisements that emotionally resonate with them tend to form a stronger relationship with the brand. This engagement results in consumers' continuous interaction with products and services offered by the brand. This strategy emphasises the analytical role of sentimental appeals in developing brand loyalty and boosting customer purchase intentions, since individuals are enticed to brands which elicit positive feelings and are in line with their values (Soti, 2022). However, as stated by Soti (2022) and Sarilgan et al. (2022) they highlighted that advertisements may not guarantee purchasing intention since travelling requires thorough planning and can be subjectively expensive. Thus, passengers are likely to consider these factors over their sentimental appeal towards the brand (Sarilgan et al., 2022; Soti 2022).

2.3.4 Social Media and Online Presence

Social media has evolved in a dynamic space where individuals can freely express and share personal views (Eun Ju et al., 2020). As of October 2024, the number of active users amounts to 5.22 billion, which makes up 63.8% of the total global population (Petrosyan, 2024). These platforms allow brands, including airlines, unrestricted access to this population, which can be targeted with the brand's ads. Through means of likes, shares, and comments – jointly referred to as engagement – brands can profile consumer perceptions and build trust as high levels of progressive engagement are often connected with positive brand impressions (Sellas, 2024).

Airlines, particularly American Airlines, use social media as a tool to augment customer experience by providing them with a more tailored experience throughout their customer experience and brand journey (Hock, 2018). Moreover, using social media, brands can strengthen word-of-mouth marketing where users share their experiences and opinions

about their experience with the brand with other followers. Positive experiences generate positive, user-generated content, which heightens the brand's reputation. Nonetheless, negative comments negatively impact the public's perception of the brand. (Naeem & Okafor, 2019). By using platforms like TikTok and Instagram, brands are driven to create captivating visuals that will help strengthen their brand identity. Through this engaging content, they solidify the relationship between the brand and the customer whilst also hoping for unceasing engagement (Hernandez & Vazquez Sacristan, 2024).

Conversely, some scholars argue that directing too much attention to social media strategies will result in overlooking other channels of communication. Furthermore, keeping up with present social media trends leads the company in building short-term customer relations rather than long-term ones due to the impermanent nature of these trends. This suggests that although social media is a key tool, it should be balanced accordingly as part of a multi-channel strategy to produce efficient customer engagement (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016;Zhu & Chen, 2015).

2.4 Tourism and Seasonal Travel Patterns

Malta's tourism industry plays a vital role in supporting the national economy (Briguglio, 2023). While Malta is promoted as an all-year destination, the summer season remains the busiest (Lasys, 2023). In 2024, tourist arrivals continued to grow, with the UK remaining the leading source of inbound visitors. Between January and March, 107,800 UK travellers arrived at Malta International Airport, collectively spending 645,032 nights in Malta (Figures 1, 2, and 3; National Statistics Office, 2024). During the summer months, UK visitor numbers surged to 296,334, with a total of 2,041,272 nights spent on the island (Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7; National Statistics Office, 2024). This data supports Lasys's (2023) assertion that summer remains the peak tourism period despite Malta's year-round appeal. The strong UK presence highlights the importance of maintaining strategic tourism policies to sustain economic growth while accommodating seasonal variations in visitor demand.

Inbound tourism: January 2024



Main tourism indicators

Total inbound tourists **172,021**

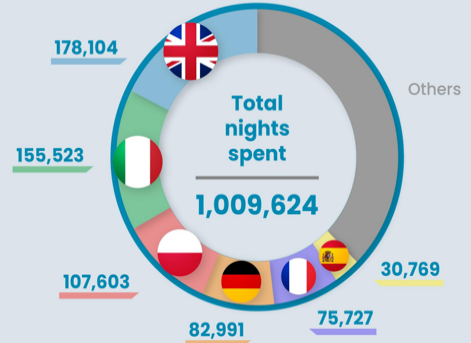
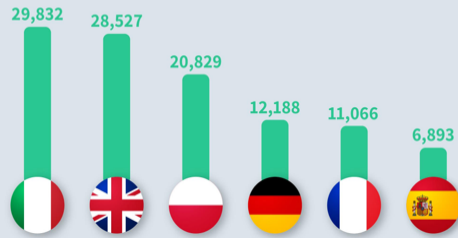


Figure 1: NSO: Inbound Tourism January

Inbound tourism: February 2024



Main tourism indicators

Total inbound tourists **168,967**

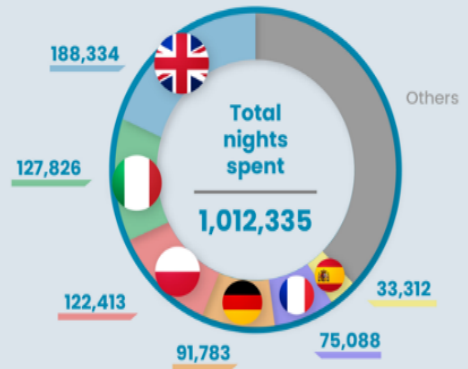
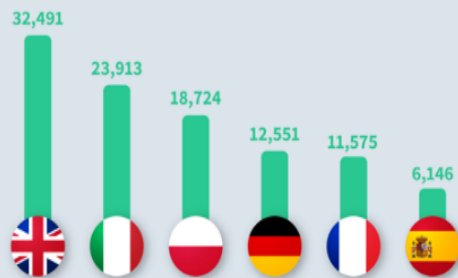


Figure 2: NSO: Inbound Tourism February

Inbound tourism: March 2024



Main tourism indicators

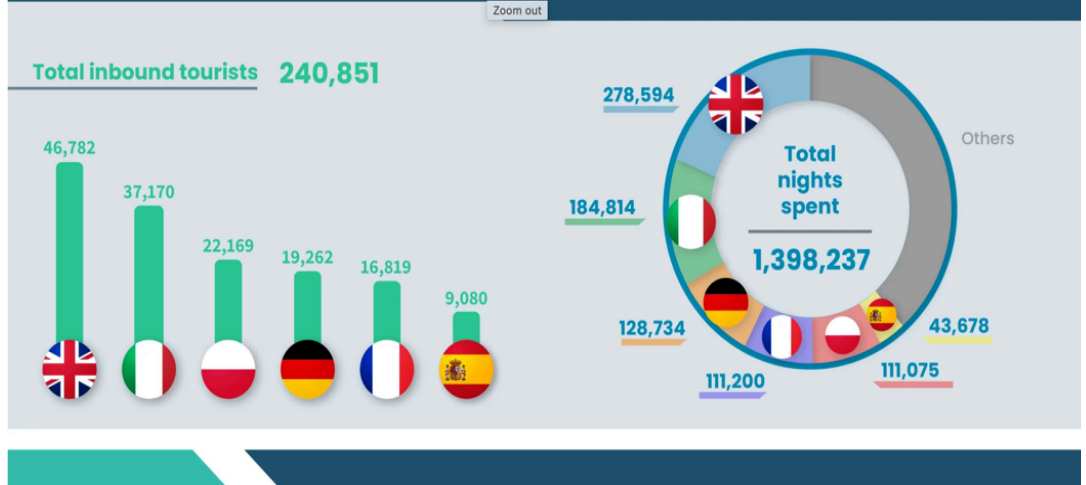


Figure 3: NSO: Inbound Tourism March

Inbound tourism: June 2024



Main tourism indicators

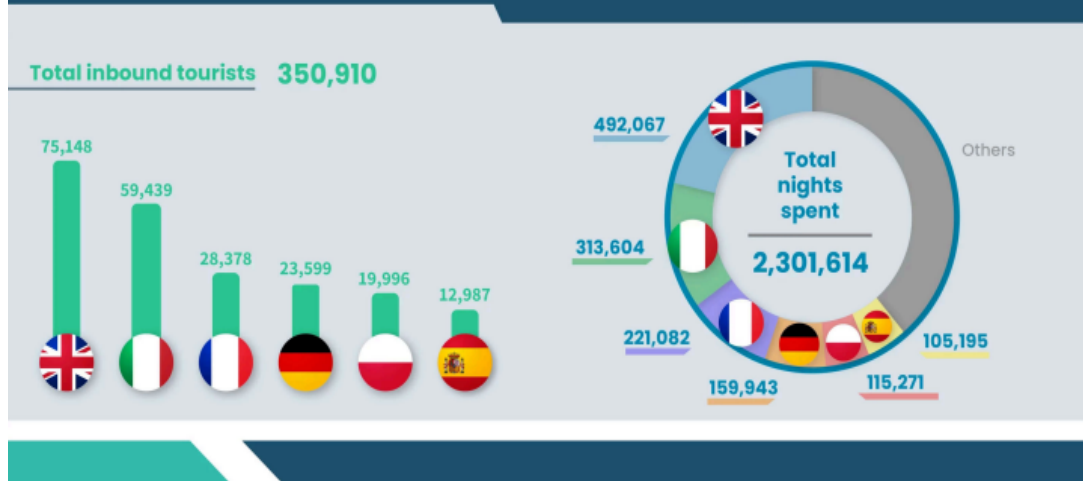


Figure 4: NSO: Inbound Tourism June

Inbound tourism: July 2024

Main tourism indicators

Total inbound tourists **385,591**

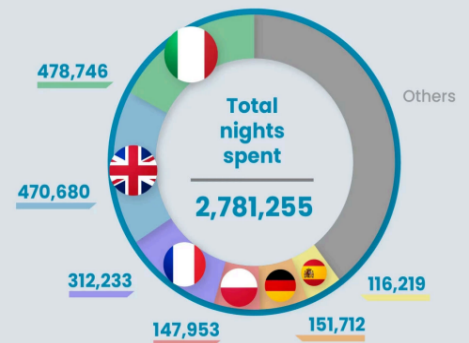
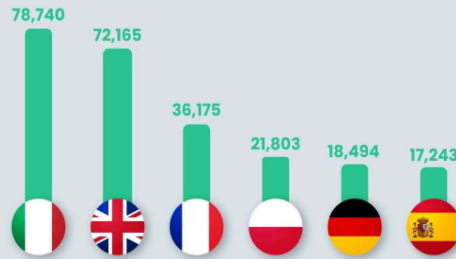


Figure 5: NSO: Inbound Tourism July

Inbound tourism: August 2024

Main tourism indicators

Total inbound tourists **429,111**

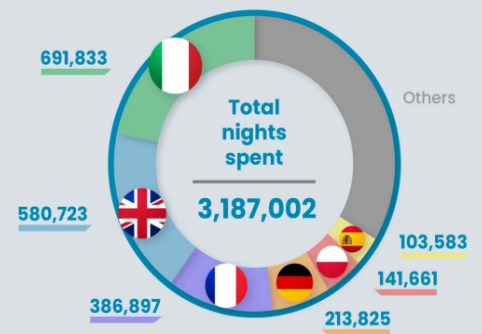
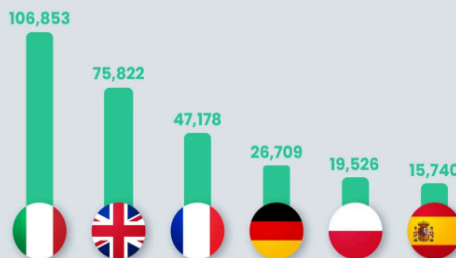


Figure 6: NSO: Inbound Tourism August

Inbound tourism: September 2024



Main tourism indicators

Total inbound tourists 361,015

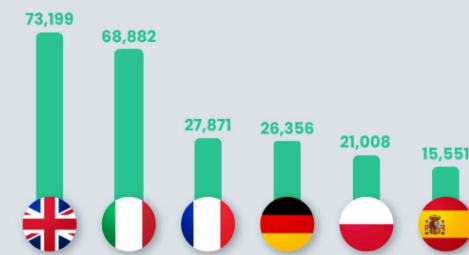


Figure 7: NSO: Inbound Tourism September

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, airline selection is influenced by branding factors like brand image and loyalty, alongside service quality, safety, price sensitivity, and customer satisfaction. Price and schedule availability are particularly crucial, as high costs and limited flight options impact traveller choices (Yolci, 2024; Tu, 2024). Branding elements strengthen customer retention, especially when combined with superior service quality. While Malta is a popular summer destination, rising year-round tourism underscores the need for airlines to adjust strategies across seasons. Adapting pricing models and flight schedules can enhance competitiveness and ensure airlines continue meeting the evolving preferences of travellers effectively.

3. Methodology

This research aims to investigate which key factors, such as price, security, convenience and reputation of airlines, influence passengers' choice of airline before travelling from London airports to Malta International Airport (MLA) during the low peak season. The study aims to address a gap which has been identified within existing research to further (McLeod, 2023) understand consumer behaviour in this specific route during this specific time.

Due to the methods chosen to collect data, the research adopted a mixed-method approach. The author utilised mixed-questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tools. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed to incoming travellers from London airports, which included Heathrow airport (LHW), Gatwick airport (LGW), Luton airport (LTN), Stansted airport (STN), London City Airport (LCY) and Southend airport (SEN). However, the latter two airports, LCY and SEN, do not presently offer direct flights to Malta, therefore, participants were from the other four airports mentioned. Moreover, two interviews were conducted with one ultra low-cost carrier (ULCC) or one low-cost carrier (LCC) and one full-service carrier (FSC) which fly directly from London to Malta during low-peak season.

The results of this research aim to project valuable indicators for airlines to evolve their competitive tactics and improve customer fulfilment.

3.1 Discussion

This research's mixed-method approach to data collection enabled a wide-ranging investigation of the factors influencing passengers' airline selection. Moreover, this method allowed the researcher to examine the impact of key factors on passengers' decision-making by analysing the data collected from the questionnaires numerically and by considering the descriptions gathered from interviews. Focusing solely on one method would not capture the complexity of customers' decision-making processes. By utilising both closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the study ensured depth in the data collection process.

Employing closed-ended questionnaires facilitated structural comparisons of data across a broad sample of visitors, aiding the author in identifying recurring patterns and key

factors influencing airline selection. Additionally, the questions were easier to answer than those in open-ended questionnaires and were less time-consuming, resulting in a higher response rate from the chosen population. However, by using this questionnaire method, the author risked several respondents not completing all the questions, as they might not have found options that aligned with their most introspective perceptions. (Hyman & Sierra , 2016).

Moreover, semi-structured interviews with representatives from low-cost and full-service carriers provided more comprehensive and contextualised insights into the airline's business approaches and their discernment of travellers' comportment. This type of interview was preferred as it allowed the researcher to be flexible and ask further questions, and inquire more about specific responses, whilst also providing a set of safety questions which the author could revert to if the conversation strayed away from the topic (Ruslin et al., 2022).

A single-method approach was rejected due to its limitations in either qualitative or quantitative data collection. Questionnaires risked low response rates, while quantitative interviews could constrain genuine opinions. A mixed-method approach was deemed more practical, ensuring authentic, in-depth results while balancing efficiency and participant engagement.

3.2 Primary Data

The two primary tools used to collect primary data, close-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, were chosen to ensure that a wide-ranging exploration of factors influencing airline selection was carried out.

3.2.1 Questionnaires

The close-ended questionnaires were designed to gather consistent responses from travellers arriving in Malta from London. The questionnaire consisted of 32 questions, including Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and ranking formats covering topics such as ticket pricing, flight frequency, airline reputation, and customer satisfaction. Additionally, these questionnaires aimed to find the relation between airlines' online reviews, word of mouth, and social media on their perception of the airline brand and their loyalty towards it. The distribution of the questionnaire took place over eight weeks, from the 1st of January 2025

till the 28th of February 2025, targeting travellers who had just landed and were passing through the arrival terminal at MLA. The questionnaires were distributed in person using a QR code, which travellers could scan using their own mobile devices, which directed them to the questionnaire platform. Moreover, questionnaires were also completed by individuals at the departure terminal, after confirming their arrival from London airports, either on hard copies or using the author's electronic devices, both methods ensuring immediate responses.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews took place between December 2024 and February 2025 and involved marketing representatives from a low-cost carrier and a full-service carrier operating flights between London and Malta. These interviews were conducted virtually via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Teams, allowing for flexibility and convenience. The representatives were provided with an interview guide before the interview with pre-defined questions, covering topics about customer engagement strategies, perceptions of travellers' priorities, whilst leaving room for follow-up questions to explore emerging topics in deeper detail.

3.3 Sample Selection

The sampling technique determined to be efficient for both closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was convenience sampling. This type of sampling method allowed the researcher to collect data effortlessly from passengers who were readily available and willing to participate in the study (Golzar et al., 2022).

As previously mentioned, in the case of questionnaires, convenience sampling allowed the researcher to collect data with minimal effort from travellers arriving at Malta International Airport from London. Participants were informed about the scope of the research, and those who agreed completed the questionnaire at the terminal. Those who declined participation due to time constraints were given a business card with the questionnaire's QR code, which they could access through their devices at their convenience. This type of sampling provided the author with flexibility in the range of participants who could take part in the study (Golzar et al., 2022); however, it also risked

over-representing some sample segments more than others or missing out on important opinions (Fleetwood, 2023).

Convenience sampling was used to select airline representatives, both low-cost and full-service, operating between London and Malta. Marketing professionals willing to share insights were contacted via email. This method ensured access to knowledgeable industry experts without limitations imposed by stricter sampling techniques.

3.4 Methods of Analysis

To analyse the data collected and certify that the insights collected supported the research objectives, the author used thematic analysis to interpret the structured responses for the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is a strong qualitative research method used to identify themes when analysing qualitative data (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024). This method is particularly effective when highlighting connections and dissimilarities in scrutinising the perspectives of diverse participants and producing unforeseen results (Nowell et al., 2017).

For the questionnaire analysis, descriptive statistics were used, which encompassed summarising and interpreting the data collected to deliver a clearer understanding of the data collected and the topic being researched (Regoniel, 2023). For a wide-ranging understanding of travellers' inclinations, the results were presented through tables and figures highlighting the frequencies and converted into significant data.

3.5 Limitations

Although the study provided valuable insights into the key factors affecting passengers' airline selection before travelling from London to Malta, the author encountered several limitations.

The limitations encountered were due to the following:

- 1. Close-ended questionnaires:** Although these questionnaires yielded consistent responses due to the short time required to complete them, they may have restricted participants from fully expressing their thoughts and feedback, as there was no option to provide their own written opinions.

2. **Data collection methods:** The researcher provided a QR code for participants to complete the questionnaire on their mobile devices. Those in a hurry received a business card with the code. However, there was no guarantee that they would complete the questionnaire or provide accurate responses.
3. **Sampling:** As established above, convenience sampling was used to choose participants for interviews and questionnaires. This sampling may have resulted in a potential bias. This is because the participants in this research may not have fully represented the entire population of travellers flying from London to Malta, meaning that individuals with different travel motivations and priorities might have been excluded due to their unavailability to participate.
4. **Interviewee selection:** Given the limitation of selecting only two airline representatives, the interviews, while providing the author with valuable insights, may not reflect the full range of perspectives within the airline industry; therefore, the results should not be generalised to the entire sector.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

To conduct ethical research, the author considered several factors to ensure the reliability of the study. The main considerations included:

1. Participants were informed about the study's scope, data collection, and usage to ensure transparency and obtain informed consent.
2. The questionnaire included study information and a consent question to ensure informed participation, particularly for those completing it later via the QR code provided at the airport.
3. To maintain confidentiality, no identifiable information was collected in questionnaires or interviews, and all data was anonymised
4. Interview and questionnaire questions were carefully designed to avoid emotional or psychological distress and excluded sensitive topics such as religious beliefs.

By adhering to the above-mentioned ethical considerations, the research maintained a high level of integrity, preserved the participants' rights and guaranteed reliable and ethical results.

4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Overview

This chapter comprises the data collected from the two semi-structured interviews conducted with marketing representatives from one low-cost carrier, referred to as **Airline A**, and one full-service carrier, referred to as **Airline B**, presented in a thematic analysis. The transcript to these interviews may be found in the appendices. Additionally, due to the mixed-method approach of the research, the author collected feedback through closed-ended questionnaires distributed at both the departures and arrivals terminals at Malta International Airport. The semi-structured approach for the interviews was chosen as this allowed the researcher to ask further questions besides the ones that were planned before. As for the closed-ended questionnaires, the author considered that incoming travellers might be under a time constraint since many would be in a rush to get to their accommodation or their next destination. Therefore, it was deemed that a closed-ended questionnaire would appeal more to travellers who would participate in the study since they would take less time to complete.

The analysis of these interviews delves into the airline's marketing strategies, and the brand reputation's influence on the selection of airline carriers for passengers who are flying specifically on the London (any airport from London Gatwick, Heathrow, Stansted and Luton) to Malta International Airport route. The discussion in both interviews was structured around topics relating to the airline's branding and marketing efforts, the brand's perception and reputation, customer engagement and loyalty, and passengers' travel preferences and behaviour towards the airline. The sub-sections present in this section represent different topics which were discussed during the interview process.

Moreover, additional data was collected through a questionnaire designed to identify factors influencing the passenger's final carrier selection during the off-peak season. This enabled the researcher to gauge the impact of marketing strategies and the airline's brand reputation by examining the familiarity which passengers had with the variety of available airlines, assessing how influential airline marketing was during their booking process, and investigating whether higher prices are associated with enhanced service. Furthermore, the questionnaire explores the role of online reviews, social media and word of mouth references by determining how likely passengers are to consult online reviews before booking their flights. It also identifies which platform they mostly use from

TripAdvisor, Google reviews, and other social media channels. Finally, the questionnaire evaluates passengers' loyalty towards the brand by examining their participation in frequent flyer programmes and their loyalty to their chosen airline. Furthermore, it evaluates the likelihood that the passenger would rebook with the same airline or recommend it to friends and family. Additionally, the questionnaire identifies key determinants which may lead passengers to switch airlines for their future travels, such as increased prices, less schedule flexibility, and poor service quality and passenger experience.

The current chapter incorporates insights from literature and data gathered through interviews and questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of the airline's marketing efforts in influencing passengers' choices when travelling from London to Malta. The structure of the chapter is as follows:

1. Section 4.1 introduces the chapter by providing the nature of the results which will be presented in the following sections.
2. Section 4.2 presents the airline's perspective with data that was collected through semi-structured interviews. The results, analysis and discussion are presented in one chapter as it allowed the author to present analysis and discussion with the results. In this section, several other sub-sections are present which address different themes discussed during the interviews, which were identified after analysing both interview transcripts.
3. Section 4.3 presents the passengers' perception of airline selection, which was collected through a closed-ended questionnaire dispensed at the arrivals and departures airport terminal at Malta International Airport. In this section, results are presented using graphs and tables.
4. Section 4.4 is a comparative analysis of findings collected from the interviews and questionnaires. In this section, the author identifies areas in which results from interviews and questionnaires align, as well as areas where they diverge from one another.
5. Lastly, Section 4.5 concluded this chapter by presenting a summary of key insights.

4.2 Airline Perspective

4.2.1 Marketing Positioning and Strategic Differentiation

The first question asked in the interview was regarding any strategies used to differentiate the airline from competitors on the London to Malta route. In this question, both airlines mentioned how they strategically positioned themselves during this period, which distinguishes them from competitors. Airline A answered that they positioned themselves as a low-cost carrier (LCC), strategically placing their services between those of an ultra-low-cost carrier (ULCC) and full-service carrier (FSC). They mentioned that when it comes to strategy, nothing is done differently; however, it comes down to the way they sell it. This allows them to distinguish their brand from competitors, and thus, establish an individual brand identity which appeals to travellers who are looking for something that is only offered by Airline A, e.g., flying to a main airport at a cheap fare price (Ahmed & Rodriguez-Diaz, 2020).

“We invest more money in Skyscanner or paid search to sell the route, but this is more seen as acquisition and making sales rather than strategic differentiation.”

Whilst Airline B responded that they position themselves as a full-service carrier, offering passengers a choice between economy and business fare types, providing a distinctive service as compared to LCCs. Moreover, Airline B mentioned how they integrate airport location into their strategy to further distinguish themselves from competitors.

“London is one of our biggest markets and our most popular route. We travel to both Heathrow and Gatwick, with Heathrow being the most popular one because it’s obviously closer to the centre with easier access to trains. We specifically choose these airports because they are the main hubs, are closer to the city centre, and help us with connecting flights. So, we have other partner airlines where we are sort of their airline provider for flights to Malta, and they are our providers for flights into other destinations.”

Their decision to leverage major airports into their strategy is associated with Albalade and Faged’s (2023) literature which highlights the benefits of selecting significant airports on passengers’ perception of the airline brand. This can be further linked to the

questionnaires' responses from passengers arriving at Malta International Airport from London, whereby the location of the airport resulted in being the third most popular factor for which a specific airline was chosen for their travels.

Since both airlines position their service differently, their approach to influencing passengers' choice is different. Airline A's approach seems to be focused more on the cost and being accessible to the majority of customer segments, including those who tend to be more sensitive to price. Contrastingly, Airline B's approach offers a business-class option for those passengers who would like to undergo a more elevated travel experience with priority boarding, enhanced seating comfort, and an in-flight food experience. Moreover, partnering with other airlines allows Airline B to extend their services beyond their direct destinations.

4.2.2 Off-Peak Season Challenges

The next question asked both airlines how they position their brand during the low-peak season to appeal to travellers. Low-peak season is defined as the period in which fewer people visit certain destinations. Malta is described as a summer destination by Lonely Planet due to the weather, beaches, and events happening around the island. (Grace, 2024), although an older article disclosed in the literature review described it as an all-year destination (Lasys, 2023). During off-peak periods, airlines A and B intensify marketing efforts to sell seats for their airport slots. Conversely, during summer, the islands' peak season, seats sell effortlessly with minimal advertising needed, as demand naturally increases. The difference in strategy reflects seasonal variations in passenger interest.

With Airline A operating on a low-cost business model, they responded that the company maintains the same flight schedule all year round to uphold the company's secured slots.

“The position is the same, the message is what changes. During this period, there are more sales such as the January sales, Black Friday, etc, and many travellers use this opportunity to book their holiday. The brand places heavy marketing of both holidays and flight offers with loads of promotions to fill up seats during this period.”

Thus, Airline A uses this period to tempt price-sensitive customers to purchase a quick city break and some winter sun. This promotional approach adopted by the airline confirms how potential travellers are likely to book their flight if the pricing is seen to be fair (Ying, et al., 2024). Furthermore, providing package holidays, the airline distinguishes itself further from the competition since this is not the norm.

Airline B answered that although they also increase their marketing efforts, they equally benefit from a system of affiliations and codeshare arrangements, which ensures travellers booking a long-haul flight with one of the company's partner airlines can easily combine their segment to Malta with the same booking. They also mentioned other efforts which are leveraged into their strategy.

"We work with MTA since they have representation in the UK market, therefore we work a lot with them. We also use Fam trips to benefit us, where we bring people or journalists to visit Malta and write about it, and we incentivise aggregators such as Skyscanner and other distribution channels, which we try to sort of push and promote our airline. Marketing is such a broad aspect as anything you can do to promote the brand, you do it. It's not only about posting on social media and thinking you can get away with that. It's more about the experience and showing the Maltese culture and heritage."

Furthermore, Airline B mentions maintaining relationships with travel agencies and incentivising them to use the airline's service. Cultivating a relationship with travel agencies highlights the importance of the crucial role these agencies have, especially when it comes to the British market, in which the role of a travel agent remains positively influential due to their preference for purchasing travel packages.

4.2.3 Consistency Across Marketing Channels

When asked how the airlines ensure consistency across various marketing channels, both airlines mentioned how important it is to maintain a strong and distinguishable brand across various channels. Airline A approaches brand consistency through scientific collaboration with the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science. They focus on appropriate attributes for a distinctive background, such as the right colour and font for the brand, which remain associated with the airline even when presented standalone without the airline's name and logo. Furthermore, they disclose how their strategy goes

beyond just recognition and emphasises attaining emotional engagement with their customers.

“This is done since one of the airline’s pillars is to stand out from the competitors and engage emotionally with customers so that they think of us for their travels. Before going live with our strategies, these are tested to ensure whether these are good enough to deliver short-term sales, the likelihood of delivering long-term sales, and if it emotionally engages with people by using a system called System One.”

As for Airline B, they responded that brand consistency is enforced through internally approved standards, which reflect the identity which the airline wants to portray.

“We are friendly; however, we are the national airline, so we still have that kind of identity to portray.”

Although Airline B does not directly mention achieving emotional engagement, they mention their efforts in balancing a sense of friendliness and approachability in their tone, along with maintaining the status of the national airline since they are part of the identity of their base country. Ultimately, this confirms the important role which their marketing campaigns play in achieving a connection between the brand itself and their customers’ purchasing decisions (Pandagre, et al., 2021).

Airline A’s approach towards marketing consistency is seen to be more data-driven. This is perceived as such due to their collaboration with an institute specialised in marketing science, as well as testing their marketing campaigns to forecast the success of the campaign. Yet Airline B focuses more on using material which is approved by management, which shows a more stratified approach; this seems to be benefiting them in achieving a more cultural alignment with the brand.

4.2.4 Differentiating Advertising Strategies Between Business and Leisure Travel

For the next question, both airlines were asked how they distinguished between campaigns that target leisure and business travel. Airline A disclosed that most of their advertising campaigns are normally directed towards the leisure sector, which makes up 80% of the company’s business. However, the company recognises that around 15-20% of its customer base includes business travellers as well.

“We don’t necessarily have a different product, but sometimes we tell people we have this offer where they can pay £249 and it would include free luggage, advanced seat booking and speedy boarding.”

Therefore, to appeal to both types of travellers, the company incorporates targeted messaging into its campaigns, highlighting its premium option, likely to interest more business travellers, thus demonstrating the airline’s flexibility in attracting various traveller segments. Through its database, Airline A identifies potential business customers and adjusts advertisements in a way suitable to their needs. Moreover, it provides businesses with the opportunity to purchase a block of 10 memberships, which can then be distributed to their employees.

Similarly, Airline B mentioned that they do not implement targeted advertisements solely for business or leisure segments; however, they highlighted that they have not established their own distinctive advertising campaigns due to focusing more on establishing their brand identity following the recent rebranding.

“Now we are at a place where we are building the strategic plan moving forward. Doing so, certain questions arise, such as if we want to market our business class, and if there are certain media mediums which we can use to target a higher-end type of customer. So instead of promoting economy, we push more on business class where we would use images of the food, cabin crew, etc, whereas when it comes to more generic marketing, we use visuals of Malta and our aircraft.”

Moreover, Airline B mentioned that they do not limit promotion of their business-class cabins solely to business travellers. Airline B implements email marketing campaigns into its tactics by providing economy class passengers with the opportunity to bid for a business-class upgrade. Although the aircraft’s business class does not include the same amenities one would normally find in a full-service carrier such as reclining seats, and beds since the longest flight currently being offered by the airline is to London which is about 4 hours, the experience is enhanced through a superior in-flight meal prepared meticulously by a renowned MasterChef.

Although Airline B does not currently implement campaigns specifically targeted towards business travellers, the business class option is still promoted for travellers interested in an elevated experience, superior in-flight meals and exceptional crew service. Moreover, Airline A's strategy highlights the flexibility of the airline since it still manages to cater for frequent business travellers without the business-like service.

4.2.5 Role of Social Media in Brand Growth

When asked whether they believed that their social media and marketing campaign strategy are crucial for shaping brand perception, both Airlines A and B agreed that social media is critical to shaping brand perception and indispensable to increasing brand visibility. Airline A associates the growth within the tourism sector to the strong brand identity and their tactical marketing campaigns achieved through their holiday section, which focuses on the airline's current customers.

By offering both flights and travel packages, Airline A implements its data-driven marketing strategy and targets travellers who, based on their booked destination, are likely to be interested in purchasing a full travel package. This tactic demonstrates how effective behavioural segmentation in marketing can be, allowing the airline's strategies to be personalised to the traveller's needs.

Contrastingly, Airline B, whilst acknowledging that social media is crucial, also recognises that the customers' experience and their perception of the quality of service received throughout the whole customer journey also aids in shaping the brand's reputation.

"I think it's one of the main ways that you can create a brand. Obviously, there's the service itself, so once you get to the airport, the check-in experience, security going up, etc, although these are factors which are not controlled by the airline company, they are still perceived as being part of the airline. Then there is also the service on board. So, I think it's two-fold, there's the experience and there is also what we communicate out there, cause for experience, there are too many people involved, and one person can either ruin the traveller's experience and the whole airline is tainted or make it a great experience. Of course, there will always be complaints, and people have really high expectations without understanding how many things the airline goes through for them to be able to sort of fly from one destination to another."

This perspective aligns with research conducted by Hassan and Salem (2022), whereby they link airlines' responsiveness and overall customer experience as critical components when it comes to shaping customers' perception of the brand (Hassan & Salem, 2022)

Additionally, Airline A mentioned that the way they presented themselves in the past was key to the growth they currently benefit from.

“Over the years the brand was running quite risky ads that were challenging within the industry since we were offering travellers the possibility to go to Spain for the price of jeans when back in the day travel was more accessible for people who had more money, and therefore, we made it possible for everyone to be able to get a cheap flight.”

This confirms Whyte and Prideaux's (2008) literature, whereby they assert that ultimately, these affordable prices led to the increased popularity of low-cost carriers since they eliminated unnecessary services and costs (Whyte & Prideaux, 2008).

4.2.6 Customer Feedback

Both airlines approached this next question in a three-fold manner. When asked how they responded to negative feedback to safeguard the brand's reputation, both structured their answers around how they approached the feedback, how they ensured control over the company's narrative to prevent it from being overshadowed by customer complaints, and finally, how they upheld the brand's reputation and maintained the quality of service. Both Airline A and Airline B consider responding to customer feedback as highly important for their reputable brand, yet both approach such a task differently due to their different position within the industry.

Airline B approaches customer feedback using a case-by-case method, by answering some of the online complaints whilst purposefully hiding comments regarding issues which they had no control over; as explained previously, these arise due to the involvement of other third-party companies in the customers' journey.

“We also must control what is being posted on our socials, especially since there are a lot of scams. This has resulted in an increase in daily monitoring since it is not something we can control. We sometimes also receive comments regarding the

previous brand; however, we tend to hide those comments since we are now a different airline, and we don't wish to be associated with the other airline."

Similarly, Airline A has a specialised team which manages these interactions across various platforms. The main tactic used by this airline is by responding to each comment and directing those comments deemed to be more sensitive than others, such as failure to issue refunds, etc, which would require the airline to ask personal questions to the customer, away from public platforms. Such an approach helps the airline maintain its reputation and salvage the strained relationship with the complaining customer (Naeem & Okafor, 2019), whilst ensuring that the customers' perceived quality of service offered by the airline remains unaffected (Nguyen & Mai, 2023).

To remain in control of the airline company's narrative, Airline A prioritises building positive memory structures involving the brand and avoiding negativity as part of their overall marketing strategy.

"Besides marketing, we are also doing a huge amount of investment into the whole travellers' experience. Such as their experience of booking their flights on our website, their experience at the airport (checking in their bags, getting to the gate), their boarding experience, as well as disembarking. Feedback is measured from the whole end-to-end experience, including the food on board. Then we look at the pinch points and try to fix them."

Airline A's approach is more service-driven, meaning that as a company, they invest in the whole customer experience, starting from the booking process and services available at the airport, to their boarding experience and in-flight comfort. On the other hand, Airline B focuses mainly on their rebranding efforts to ensure it maintains a distinct brand identity from the previous airline brand. To do so, a reactive approach is implemented, which suggests that their main emphasis is to maintain control over the airline's reputation before introducing or enhancing their services.

4.2.7 Brand Consistency Across Customer Touchpoints

The airlines were next questioned about any procedures in place to ensure consistency in brand messaging across various touchpoints. This was seen as crucial for both interviewers. This claim supports the findings presented in the literature review of Landis-

Eigsti (2020), which considers brand consistency a crucial factor for a company's success. Airline A implements a structured strategy which is mostly influenced by the company's distinctive brand assets, whilst ensuring that its set brand guidelines are followed throughout its interaction with customers.

"We also must make lots of content to feed the digital algorithms such as TikTok, Instagram, etc... However, we are also looking into reducing costs for these since they are expensive to produce and searched for cheaper production models. So now we are moving more towards automation and AI content generation, such as copywriting. We template most of our stuff, so it becomes quite modular, therefore, it is not only cheaper but easy to localise in local markets. And this is a core part of our strategy as we don't want to have something that is done in the UK and then adapted in French, as this will likely not resonate with customers in the way that we want to. And if it does not resonate, you cannot build that kind of positive memory structure."

The approach adapted by Airline A aligns with Hernandez and Vazquez Sacristan's (2024) claim that through engaging online content, the airline strengthens its relationship with its customers (Hernandez & Vazquez Sacristan, 2024).

Contrastingly, Airline B responded that they tend to rely more on their marketing management team to ensure that they consistently deliver content which is uniform and in line with the brand's guidelines across all customer touchpoints. However, they did not mention any specific content production strategies.

"We are still in the beginning, so we are still trying to understand where we stand, however, I think that we are going out of that phase. At a point, we were viewed as the previous brand's ugly sister, however, people moved away a little bit from that mindset. We are also focusing more on the international markets so that we can gain more traction there."

Airline A highlighted how they make sure that they remain consistent across all customer touchpoints in showcasing their branding. This includes both virtual and physical spaces, such as at the airport's bag drop area, and items onboard the aircraft. Doing so emphasises the airline's brand throughout all the stages of the customer's journey.

However, Airline B fails to mention similar branding efforts primarily because it is still in the process of strengthening its presence within various markets.

This shows that Airline A is more advanced in ensuring brand consistency when compared to Airline B. This can be supported by the fact that Airline A has been operating longer than Airline B, and whilst they have already found what works and what does not work well for the company, Airline B is still in the process of defining its long-term strategy following its recent rebranding.

4.2.8 Loyalty Programmes and Customer Engagement

Moving on to the next question, airlines were asked if any present loyalty programmes help in retaining a loyal customer base. Due to the market position of both airlines, their approach to loyalty programmes differs. Airline A implements mainly a transactional model, whereby for a yearly fee, passengers can benefit from the company's bag drop, fast boarding, an allocated seat, fast track security, as well as some other exclusive benefits.

“With our programme, one does not earn points as it's more of a product one purchases if they are a frequent flyer because it gives you benefits.”

Their approach to the loyalty programme eliminates the need for constant engagement, as customers benefit immediately from this programme rather than through repeated travel.

Additionally, Airline B has implemented a gamified loyalty programme in which repeat customers are rewarded with coins and points.

“So, this is like gamifying the process and motivating the customer to remain active since status points will expire. However, the more status points you have will result in more benefits as well.”

Airline B's approach to loyalty nurtures a sort of emotional connection between the customer and the airline itself (Sahin, et al., 2021). On the other hand, Airline A's approach prioritises maintaining things simple whilst ensuring that members of their

loyalty programme benefit immediately without having to constantly engage with the airline to unlock these benefits.

Since Airline A's and B's targeted audience differs slightly, the structure of their loyalty programme may aid in attracting this audience. The structure of Airline A's loyalty programme may attract more frequent users of that airline who look for convenience rather than future benefits, whereas Airline B's loyalty structure may appeal to both local and international travellers. However, the airline acknowledges that foreign passengers may not benefit from this programme the same way that a local traveller would, and to address this gap, the airline plans to expand its loyalty programme by integrating it into the customer's everyday lives.

4.2.9 Measuring Customer Engagement

The next question revolves around how airlines measure the success of campaigns in generating customer engagement. When it comes to evaluating the success of marketing campaigns, both Airlines A and B rely on numerical metrics. Airline A distinguishes between a transactional purchase and an emotionally motivated purchase. Their marketing approach tries to nurture engagement by highlighting the experience by offering holiday packages rather than simply focusing on the travelling part of the holiday.

“A flight is quite transactional cause one is paying to go from point A to point B, and that is it. Whereas a holiday, the organisation is important as it oversees a crucial moment in people's lives, especially since this is a very thought-out purchase. So, we also put in place contact strategies, where we contact people who have just come back from their holiday, and since they are loyal customers, so we offer them a discount on their next holiday. Sometimes we also send emails to the customers to get them excited about the things they can do in their chosen destination.”

Furthermore, Airline A mentions that customer engagement is measured through the number of repeat bookings, frequency and revenue generated by select bookings.

Airline B distinguishes engagement generated by loyalty members from a normal customer.

“So, with our loyalty members, for example, when we have a sale, we usually send it to them beforehand, obviously if they agree to be sent marketing emails. So, we give them earlier notice, for example, we have a Black Friday sale, and we informed our loyalty members a day before and noticed that there has been a big sort of push on that, whereas from social media came after. So, with e-mail marketing, we create stackable links, and through the system, we can see how many people clicked, where they clicked. If it’s through a promo, we can see how much revenue was generated through the use of the specific promo code.”

The strategy adopted by Airline B for engagement is correlated with their loyalty programme, which rewards customers with exclusive offers and personalised promotions for their engagement. Although each airline implements a different approach, their approach still highlights their efforts to move away from purchases purely based on a transactional motive towards a more emotional and incentivised motive. By combining these, airlines develop their strategies to increase campaign effectiveness.

4.2.10 Understanding Travellers’ Preferences

Next, airlines were asked if they had any insights about the London to Malta route. However, neither Airline A nor Airline B acknowledged that specific data is collected from travellers flying on the London to Malta route. While they do not collect any demographic data, they collect basic data, which includes the number of passengers flying on that booking and the travel dates on which passengers depart from one airport to another.

Airline A abstains from collecting any data specific to the route; however, the airline emphasises tailoring its marketing strategies to national preferences.

“Insights specifically for that route, no, but what we have is a marketing strategy for every single market. So it’s not specifically for Malta because we want our marketing to be really localised. So, we’ll say what do the British people want. Or what is it that French people want?”

This approach allows the airline to gain an understanding of travellers’ behaviour based on their nationality rather than on which route they are travelling. For example, they noticed that French nationals are mostly more sensitive towards price, and thus, when travelling, they prefer to use cheaper airlines even though they would not be travelling

directly to their destination. Contrastingly, British travellers are more inclined towards package holidays rather than booking everything separately. Their strategy is intended to appeal to both customers; hence, route-specific marketing is avoided.

Similarly, Airline A does not currently have any insights available about this specific route since, when booking a flight, they do not ask for any details.

“We are working on a post-flight e-mail, which is a survey based on the customer’s experience, which we previously had in Air Malta; however, we are launching things slowly.

The survey will have questions tackling whether the passenger was travelling alone, if it’s a family holiday or a business holiday. We would also ask about their airport experience so that we can sort of understand whether they have bought something on board of the aircraft or not. We will offer them the possibility to enter a competition to win a free flight, so that sort of incentivises them more to fill the survey.”

Although both airlines seek to develop their strategies through understanding their passenger behaviour, their priorities differ significantly. Airline B’s post-flight questionnaire aims to collect demographic data without altering the booking process for travellers. Airline A, on the other hand, focuses on segmenting marketing according to passengers’ nationality and thus, analyses behaviour on a national level.

4.2.11 Applying Marketing Strategies to Seasonal Travel Trends

Lastly, both airlines were asked how their strategies are adapted to seasonal fluctuations in traveller behaviour. Airlines A and B implement a dynamic marketing strategy that aligns well with travel patterns that change according to season. However, their approach to this strategy identifies different operational concerns for each airline. Airline B leverages significant events happening in its strategy.

“With traveller behaviour, even with social media being so influential, if we see a trend, for example, or if there is something happening in a particular destination. E.g. in Rome this year is the jubilee year, so a lot of people will be travelling for Cardinal events. We try to collaborate with different events like the Euro Pride event that happened in Malta we collaborated with Euro Pride, created a promo code, and

became the official airline. So, it's more about seeing what's out there and see where we can push. Even during the summer period, not just during the shoulder season."

Airline A's approach is similar to that of Airline B. Airline A follows a promotional calendar which identifies periods where more revenue is generated. This allows them to adjust their marketing strategy according to these periods. This approach allows Airline A to plan sale periods during times which might not generate as much revenue during other periods.

"Therefore, we flex these strategies into the months which we know that they bring us the biggest revenue. There's January, for example where we have one of our biggest sale, which travellers can benefit from 20% off flights and £400 off from their holiday."

A key difference between Airline A and B is how cultural sensitivity is approached in their marketing strategy. Airline B highlights inclusivity and tries to be neutral in its messaging. This benefits them as it appeals to a wider segment of customers.

"We have to be careful on how to say it because we obviously need to make sure that we carry different types of passengers. So we need to make sure that whatever we communicate is very wordily, so we don't talk about religion stuff in this case. Obviously, when we talk about Malta, we will mention those things such as churches etc... as this is part of our history and culture."

After analysing both airlines' approach to integrating seasonal trends into their strategy, it can be concluded that Airline A is more structured in its approach. Their plan is backed by data collected from previous years, and it ensures that the airline capitalises on peak times, and revenue goals are met. On the other hand, Airline B tailor their strategy around opportunities to maximise revenue. Their ability to do so shows how their strategy is more reactive to ensure they remain relevant within the market. This shows that Airline A's priority is to remain consistent in revenues, whereas Airline B focuses on generating revenue from actual events.

4.3 Passengers' Perspective

4.3.1 Traveller Profile

A total of 151 participants agreed to complete the questionnaires (see Appendices). The results show that most participants, 53%, meaning 81 out of 151, were females who filled out the survey, whilst 44%, 66 out of 151, were males. Moreover, 2%, 3 out of 151, identified as non-binary and 1%, 1 out of 151, preferred not to disclose their gender. The ages of the respondents varied from 18 to 65, the majority age group being between 25 to 34, as shown in Table 1. The rest of the age groups had a similar number of participants, except the 65+ age group, as only 6 participants agreed to participate within this segment.

Table 1: Participants' Ages

Age	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
18-24	30	20%
25-34	33	22%
35-44	30	20%
45-54	31	20%
55-64	21	14%
65+	6	4%

Participants were then asked about their full-time occupation, to which 60%, 91 out of 151, responded as being full-time employees. As shown in Table 2, the majority were full-time employees, and fewer individuals chose other occupations. This is followed by Table 3, which discloses the annual income for each participant. 10% of the participants, 16 out of 151, wished not to disclose such data.

Table 2: Participants' Occupation

Occupation	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Unemployed	5	4%
Self-Employed	14	9%
Part-time Employee	14	9%
Full-time Employee	91	60%
Part-time Student	1	1%
Full-time Student	15	10%

Retired	11	7%
----------------	----	----

Table 3: Participants' Annual Income

Annual Income	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Prefer not to disclose	16	10%
Less than €20,000	39	26%
€20,000 - €29,999	30	20%
€30,000 - €39,999	21	14%
€40,000 - €49,999	13	9%
€50,000	32	21%

In Table 4, the results show how many times per year each participant travels. The majority, 46%, 69 individuals out of 151, said they travel between 2 to 3 times per year. Furthermore, Table 5 shows the reason for the participants' visit to Malta. These results show that the majority of participants, 46%, choose Malta for a leisure trip.

Table 4: Participants' Travel Frequency

Travel Per Year	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Once a year	44	29%
2 to 3 times a year	69	46%
4 to 6 times a year	23	15%
More than 6 times a year	15	10%

Table 5: Reason for Visiting

Reason for Visiting	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Local living here	59	39%
Visiting friends or family	18	12%
For leisure travel	69	46%
For business travel	5	3%

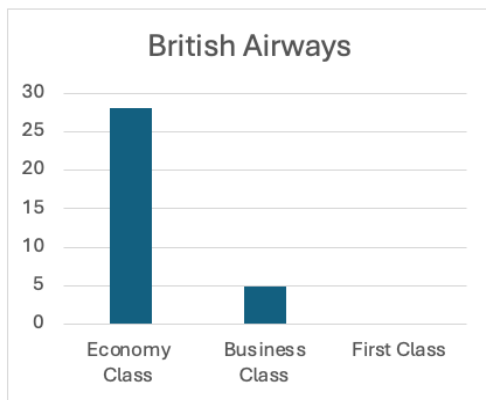
4.3.2 Travel Preferences

In this next section, data was gathered to help the researcher gain an understanding of the travel preferences of the participants. The researcher asked participants which airline

they used for their flight from London to Malta. 34%, 51 out of 151, responded that they used KM Malta, a full-service carrier. These were followed by 30%; 45 out of 151 participants used Ryanair, an ultra-low-cost airline. The rest, 22% of the population, chose British Airways, and 12% chose EasyJet. 2% of the respondents said they travelled via other 3rd parties, but they did not disclose who these were.

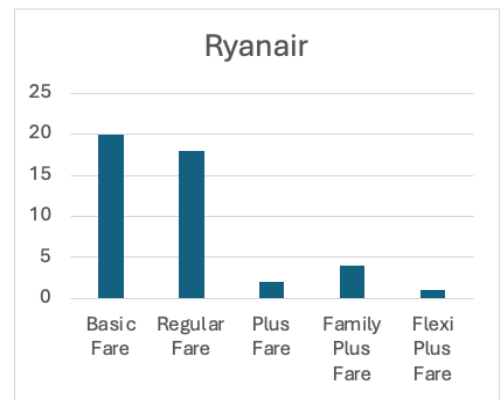
The following tables and figures show what type of flight ticket was purchased by the participants. These results exclude those participants who selected other 3rd parties as their carrier.

British Airways



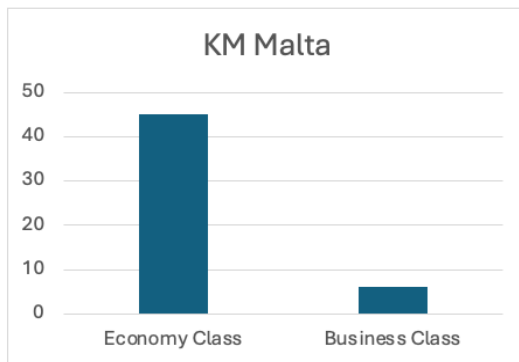
Economy Class	28	85%
Business Class	5	15%
First Class	-	-

Ryanair



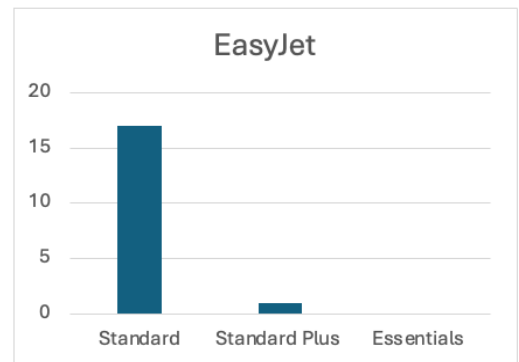
Basic Fare	20	44%
Regular Fare	18	40%
Plus Fare	2	5%
Family Plus Fare	4	9%
Flexi Plus Fare	1	2%

KM Malta



Economy Class	45	88%
Business Class	6	12%

EasyJet



Standard	17	94%
Standard Plus	1	6%
Essentials	-	-

Figure 8: Type of flight ticket purchased

Research findings indicate that the majority of people with an annual income of more than 50K opted to travel via KM Malta, which is a full-service carrier; however, only one chose to travel in business class. When asked which factor convinced them to use this airline for their flight, most reasons were linked to convenience and flight availability rather than price.

The same can be noted for participants with an annual income between 40K and 49K. Here, the majority opted for a full-service carrier, with one choosing to travel in business class. The reasons provided for their selection, however, were mainly related to price.

As for the participants with an annual income of 30K to 39K, no link was found between their annual income and the type of airline selected, as it was very close to parity. Those who chose to travel with a full-service carrier commented that their choice was driven by price. Therefore, this segment remains price sensitive. The same can be said for the other categories, specifically those who earned annually between 20K and 29K and those who earned less than 20K.

Next, participants were asked to list the factors which convinced them the most to purchase their flight ticket. Table 6 illustrates all the factors the passengers mentioned.

Table 6: Factors impacting participants' airline selection

Airline Brand	Tour Operator
Direct Flight	Cabin Comfort
Frequent Flyer Miles	One-way flights
Airline Safety	Price
Flight Schedule Availability	No hidden Charges
New Places	Reputation of the Airline
Airport Location	Convenience
Luggage	Previous Experience with Airline
Quality of Food	Connectivity
Check-in Experience	Package Bookings
Seat Allocation	Nothing

Participants were also asked to rank in order the factors which they perceived to be most to least important vis-à-vis airline selection. The following table shows how many participants placed each factor in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th position, paired with Figure 9, which illustrates the results in a bar graph.

Table 7: Factors ranked from most to least important

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Price	93	37	16	3	2
Safety and Reputation of the airline	31	49	48	22	1
Service Quality of the Airline	14	34	68	32	3
Flexible Flight Availabilities	11	29	16	76	19
Frequent Flyers Program	2	2	3	18	126

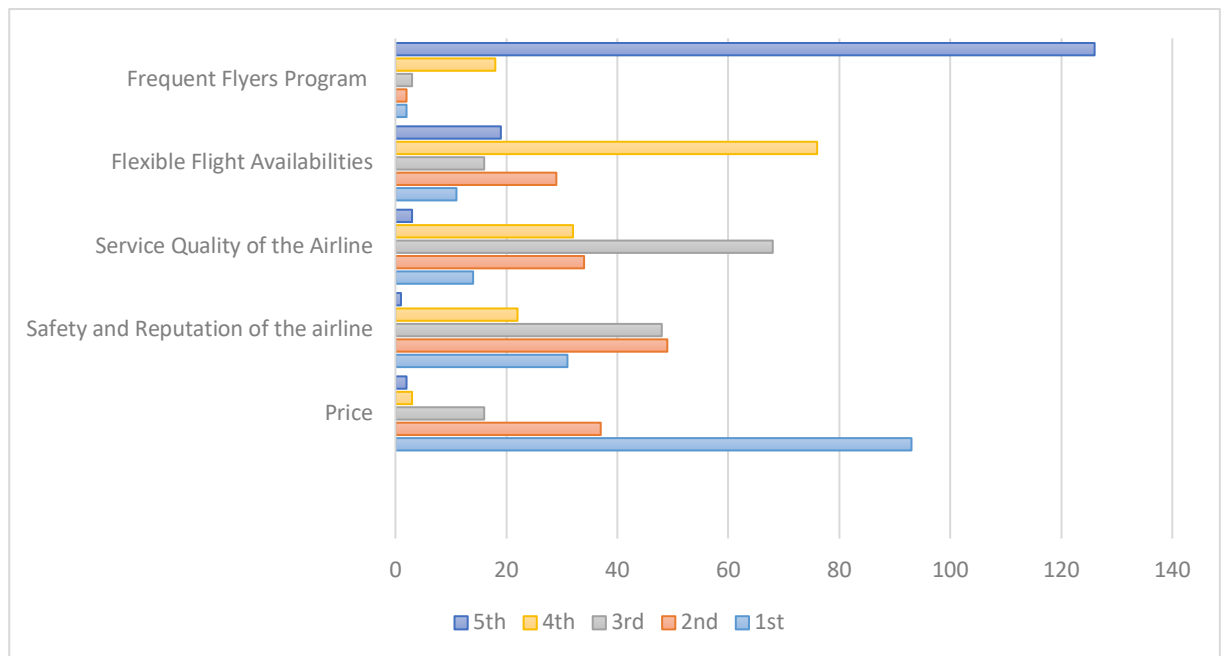


Figure 9: Factors ranked from most to least important

4.3.3 Marketing Strategies and Brand Reputation

In this next section, participants were asked questions to test the effectiveness of the airline's marketing strategies and the perceived brand reputation. First, they were asked how familiar they were with airlines operating on the London to Malta route. The results in Figure 10 show that only 10% of the population participating in the questionnaire were

familiar with the other airline operating between London and Malta, while 23% were somewhat familiar, and the remaining 67% stated they were not familiar with other airlines. The results indicated that those who were unfamiliar with airlines operating between London and Malta International Airport were primarily interested in finding the cheapest flight rather than making a booking based on their previous experiences with the airline, as noted from the results gathered in Table 6.

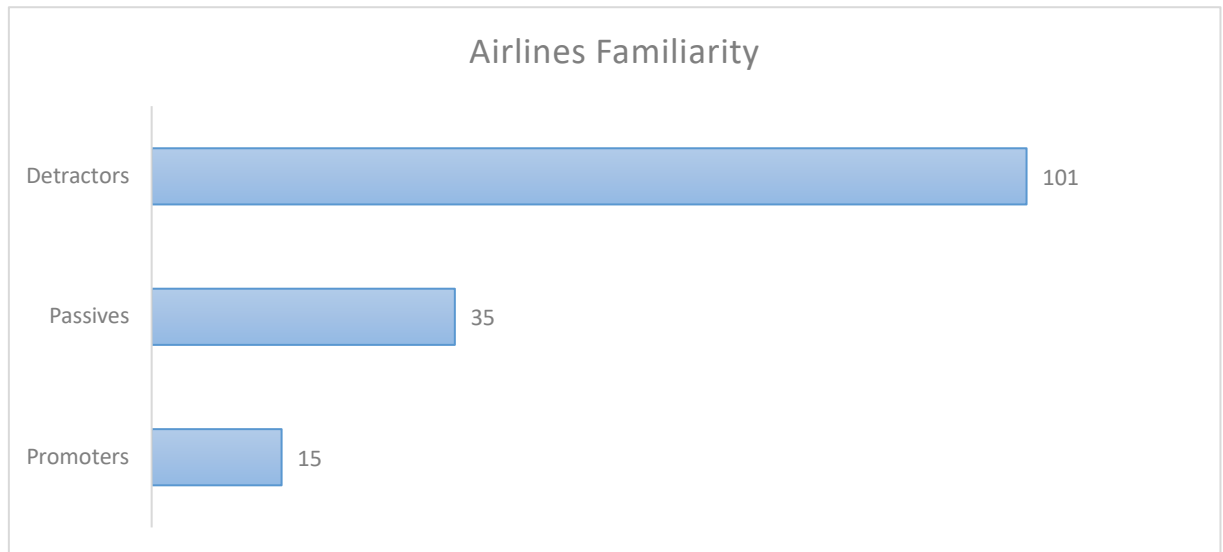


Figure 10: Airline familiarity

Next, participants were presented with a Likert scale where they had to choose how influential the provided branding factors were throughout their booking process. The following table (table 8) shows how many participants found each factor to be slightly, moderately, highly influential or not at all. The table is paired with figure 11 which illustrates the results in a bar graph. The results show that advertisements are the least effective when it comes to choosing an airline carrier. Whereas discounts and price reductions, airline reputation, and online booking platform were found to be highly influential.

Table 8: Branding factors ranked from least to most important

	Not at all	Slightly influential	Moderately influential	Highly influential
Advertisements	74	40	29	8
Discounts and price reductions	24	28	49	50
Airline Reputation	20	29	48	54
Online Booking Platform	16	26	58	51

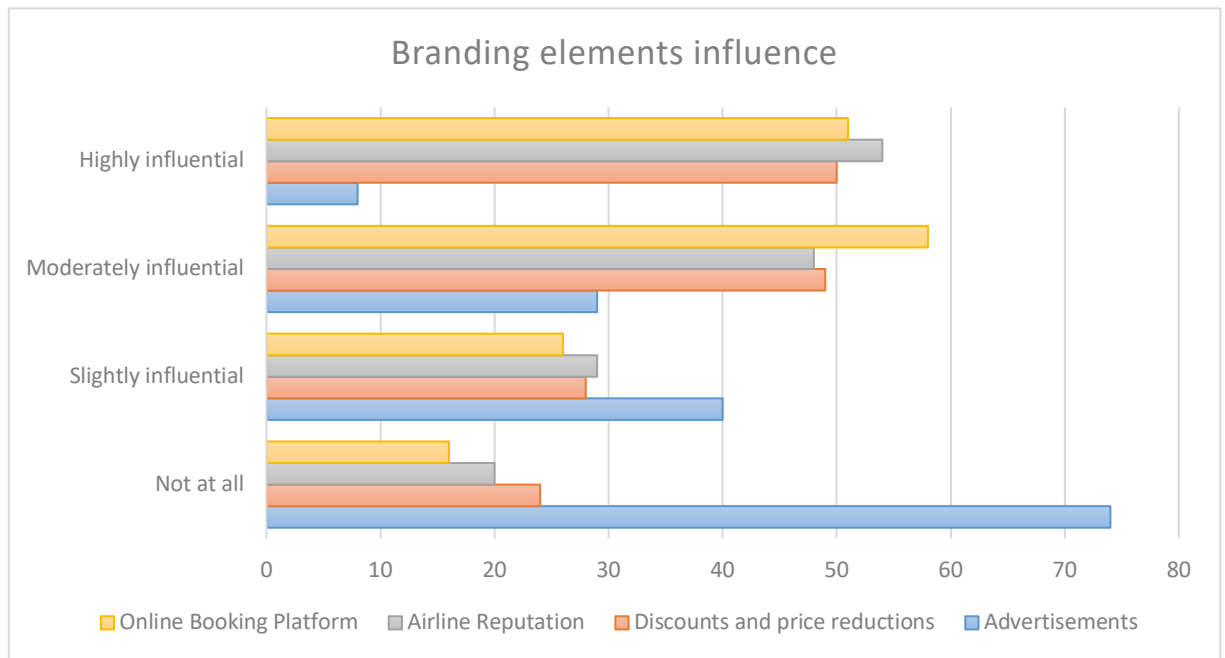


Figure 11: Branding elements influence

Participants were then asked which type of channels for airline marketing they find to be most effective. The majority of participants between the ages of 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44 said that social media is the most effective marketing channel. However, results from participants from the 45-54, 55-64 and 65+ categories showed that the most effective channels for marketing for them were TV advertisements, email campaigns and digital banners on frequently visited websites.

Table 9: Marketing channels effectiveness

Marketing Channel	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
TV Advertisements	38	19%
Social Media Advertisements	95	47%
Email Advertisement Campaigns	29	14%
Digital Banners on frequently visited websites	40	20%

However, when asked if their airline selection was ever impacted by a marketing campaign, the majority, 55%, 83 out of 151, responded with 'no' (see Figure 12).

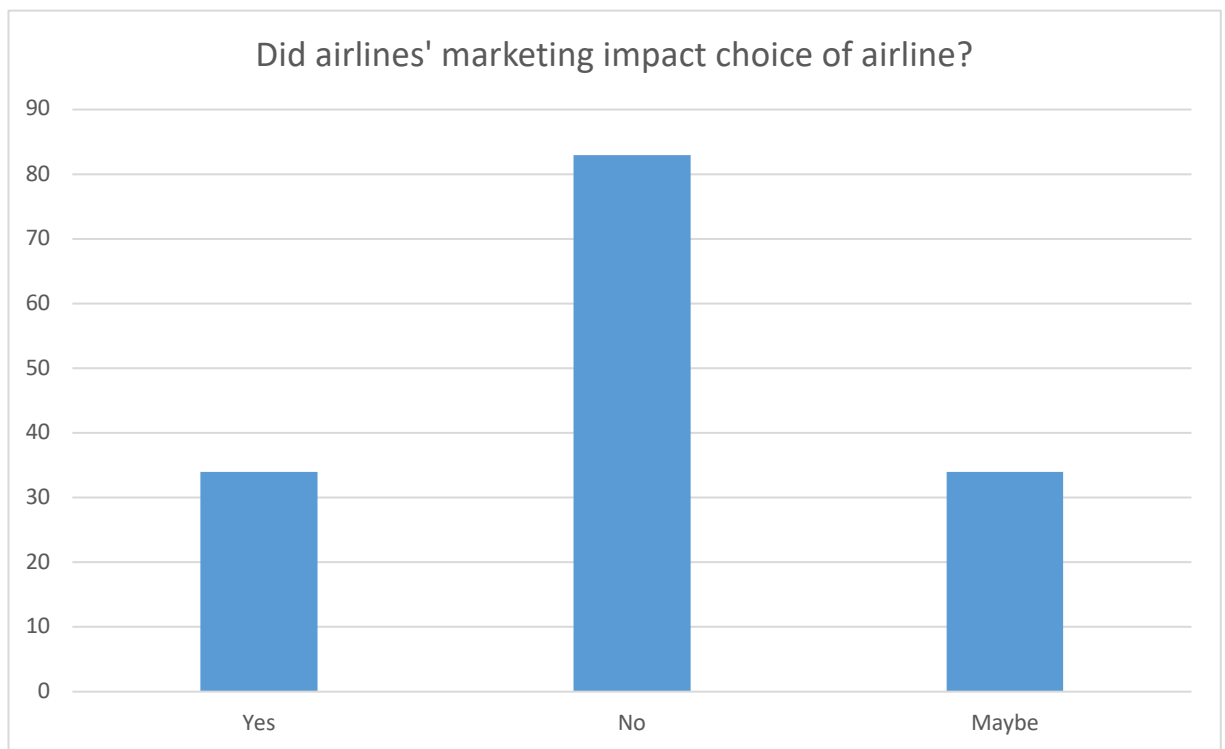


Figure 12: Airline Marketing Impact on choice of airline

4.3.4 Online Reviews, Social Media, and Word of Mouth

In the following section, the author's questions aimed to gather an understanding of the impact that online reviews, social media, and word of mouth have on the selection of an airline. The first question asked participants how likely they would check online reviews of an airline before booking a flight ticket. The majority, 32%, 48 out of 151 participants,

responded with 'somewhat likely'. However, this was closely tied with 'very likely', chosen by 31% of the participants.

Table 10: Checking online reviews

	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Very Unlikely	46	31
Somewhat Unlikely	31	21
Somewhat Likely	48	32
Very Likely	26	17

Participants who answered with 'somewhat likely' and 'very likely' were also asked which platform they relied on mostly to check for reviews. The majority, 43%, 53 out of 124, selected Tripadvisor as their main platform. This was followed by Google reviews, indicated by 34% as their favourite platform, while social media was the least favourite, with only 23% of participants using it to check reviews.

Next, participants were asked which factors they primarily considered in online reviews. The quality of customer service received the highest number of votes, accounting for 39% of the participants. Delays garnered 35% of the votes, while seat comfort captured a surprising 19% of participants' preferences. Lastly, the quality of in-flight entertainment obtained only 7% of the votes from participants.

Table 12: Factors searched in reviews

	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Delays	52	35
Quality of in-flight entertainment	11	7
Seat Comfort	28	19
Quality of Customer Service	57	39

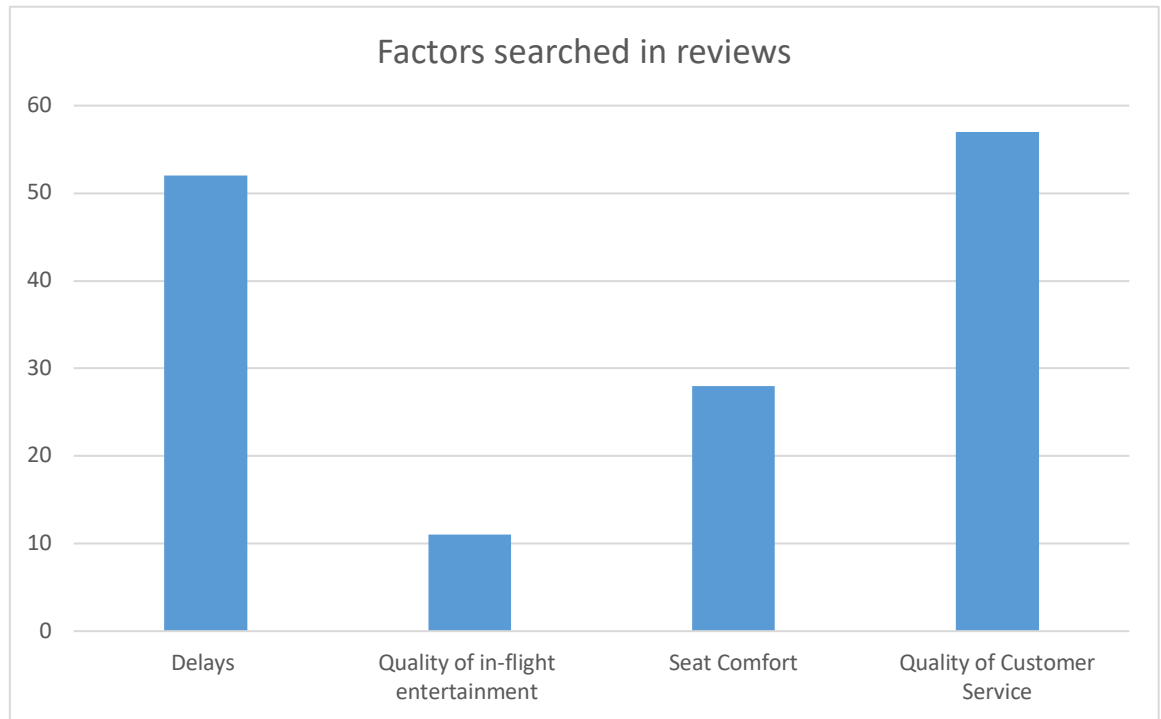


Figure 13: Factors searched in reviews

Furthermore, participants were asked whether they followed airline pages on social media. The majority, 71% of the participants, stated that they did not follow any airlines on social media, while the remaining 29% reported that they do follow airlines on these platforms. This segment was then asked what they primarily looked for on these pages; 37% mentioned that they mainly sought positive feedback, 33% opted for discounted fares, 18% chose travel recommendations, and 12% preferred negative customer feedback.

Additionally, questionnaire participants were asked whether they had ever posted a personal experience they encountered when travelling with a specific airline on social media. Most respondents, 79%, 120 out of 151 participants answered with 'no'. 14% responded with 'yes' and that the experience was a positive one, whilst 7% voted 'yes', saying their experience was negative. Moreover, when asked if they ever avoided an airline due to its negative reviews, most of the participants, 62%, responded 'yes', whereas 38% said 'no'.

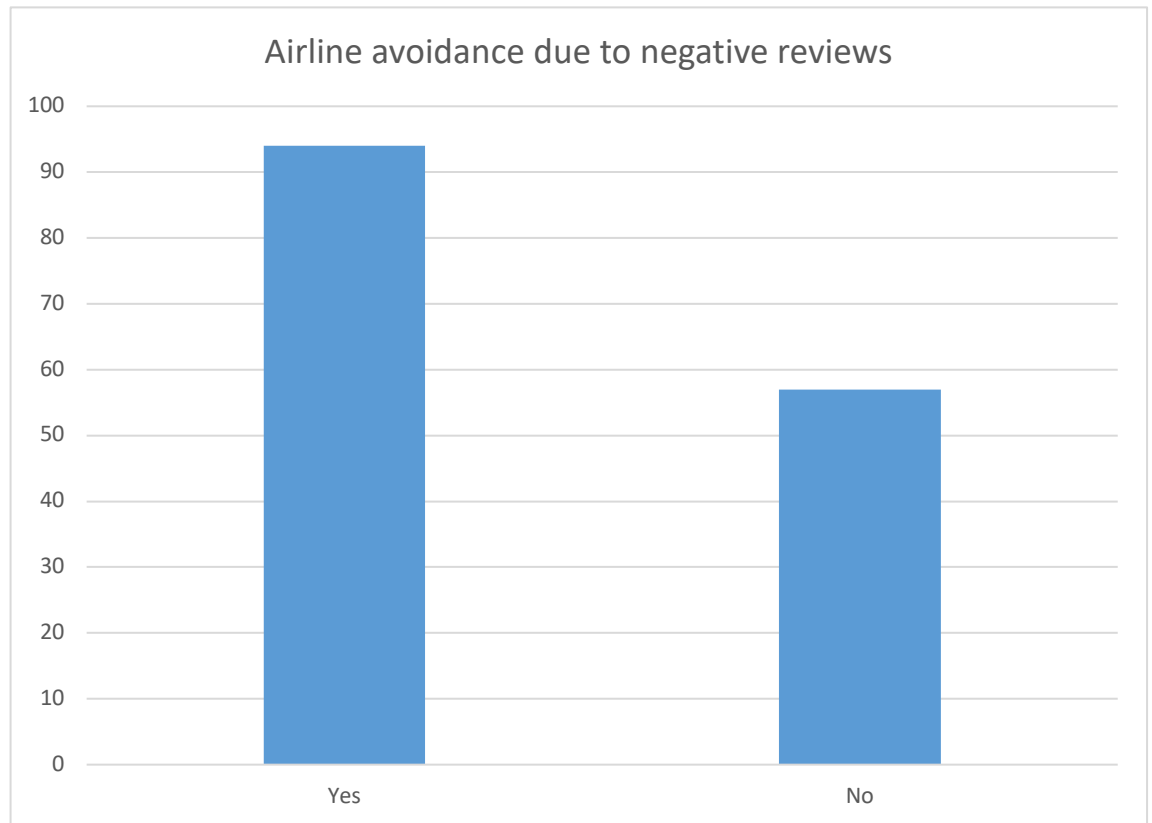


Figure 14: Airline avoidance due to negative reviews

On the Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that certain types of social media content would influence their choice of carrier. Based on the table and graph below, it can be concluded that the listed content is 'somewhat likely' to affect their decision. However, 'Influencer Endorsed' content is considered 'very unlikely' to be effective.

Table 13: Impact of social media content on airline selection

	Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely
Traveller Produced Content	36	43	52	20
Discounted Fares Announcements	18	21	69	43
Interactivity of Customer Service	28	35	64	24
Influencer Endorsed	76	45	24	6

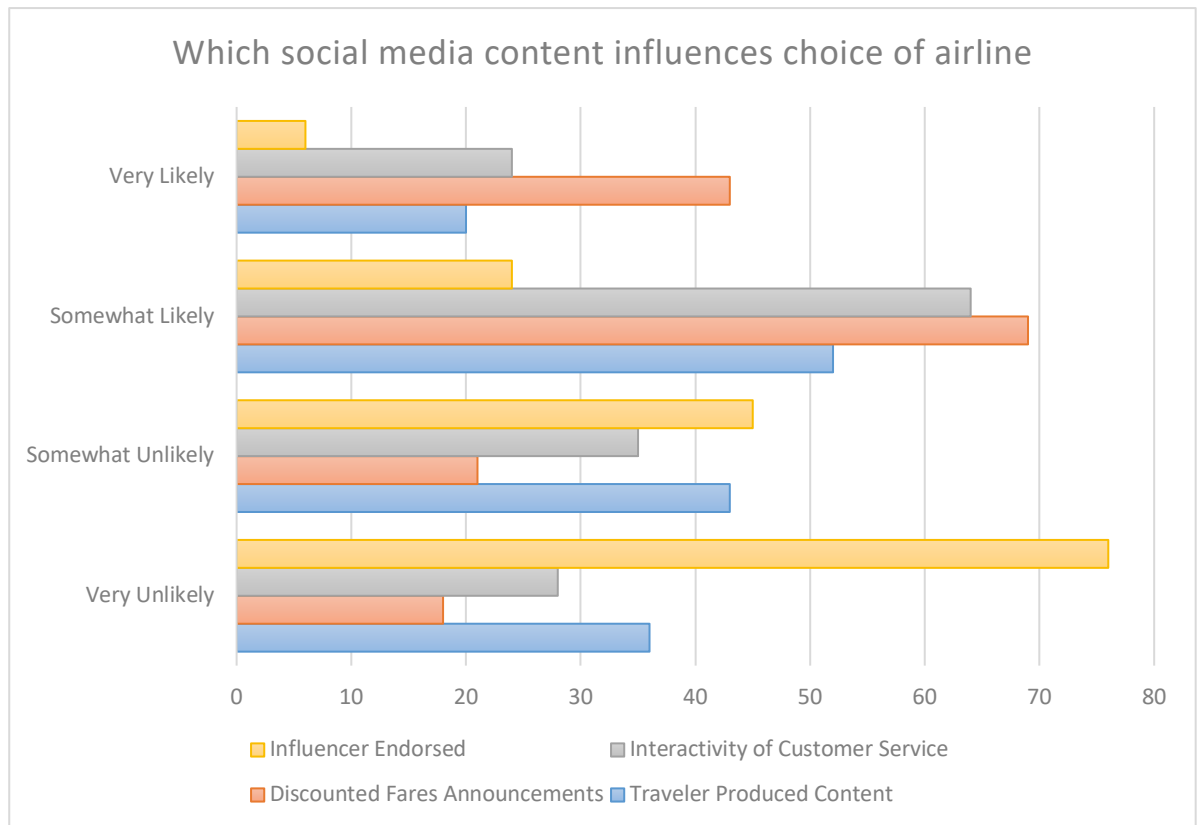


Figure 15: Impact of Social Media content on choice of airline

The next question asked participants how much they relied on friends and family for airline recommendations from 1 to 5, where 1 signifies 'no reliance' and 5 signifies 'heavily relies' on their suggestion. This aims to test the impact that word of mouth has on their selection. The average of this response resulted in 3.58, which means that a significant number of participants rely on suggestions from word of mouth.

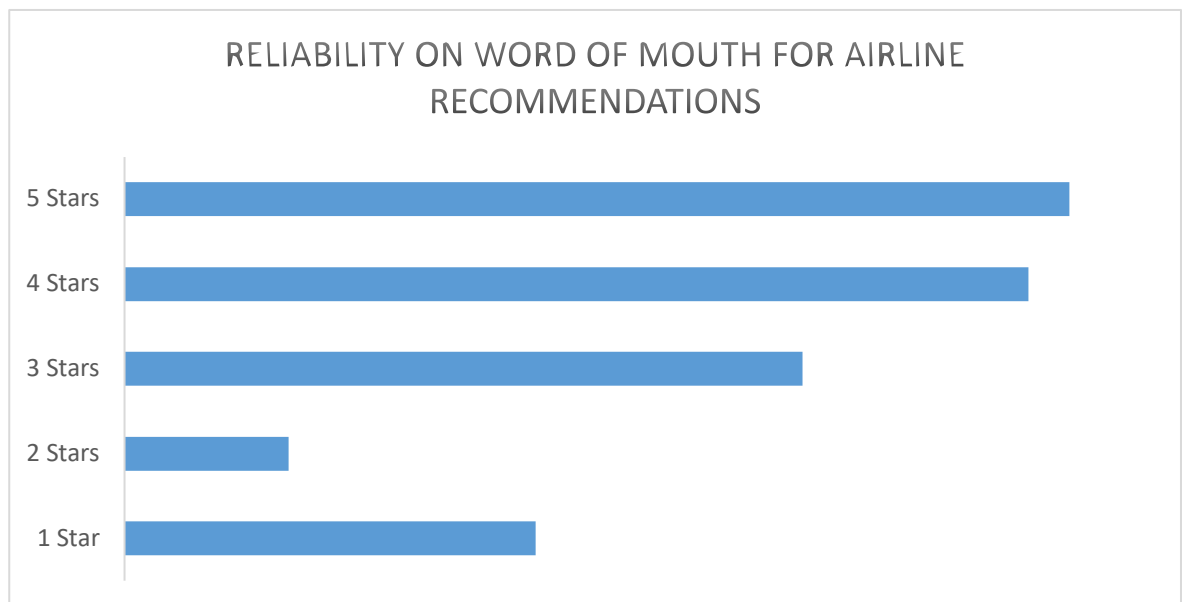


Figure 16: Reliance on friends and family recommendations

4.3.5 Brand Loyalty and Perception

Q25: Are you subscribed to any frequent flyer programmes?

in this next section, the author compiled questions intending to investigate the impact of loyalty on the passenger's airline selection and test whether there is some kind of loyalty towards the brand. Participants were first asked whether they were subscribed to a frequent flyer programme. Few participants, 32%, 48 out of 151, were subscribed to such programmes, whilst 68%, 103 out of 151, responded with 'no'.

Table 14: Frequent flyer subscribers

	No. of Participants	Percentage (%)
Yes	48	32%
No	103	68%

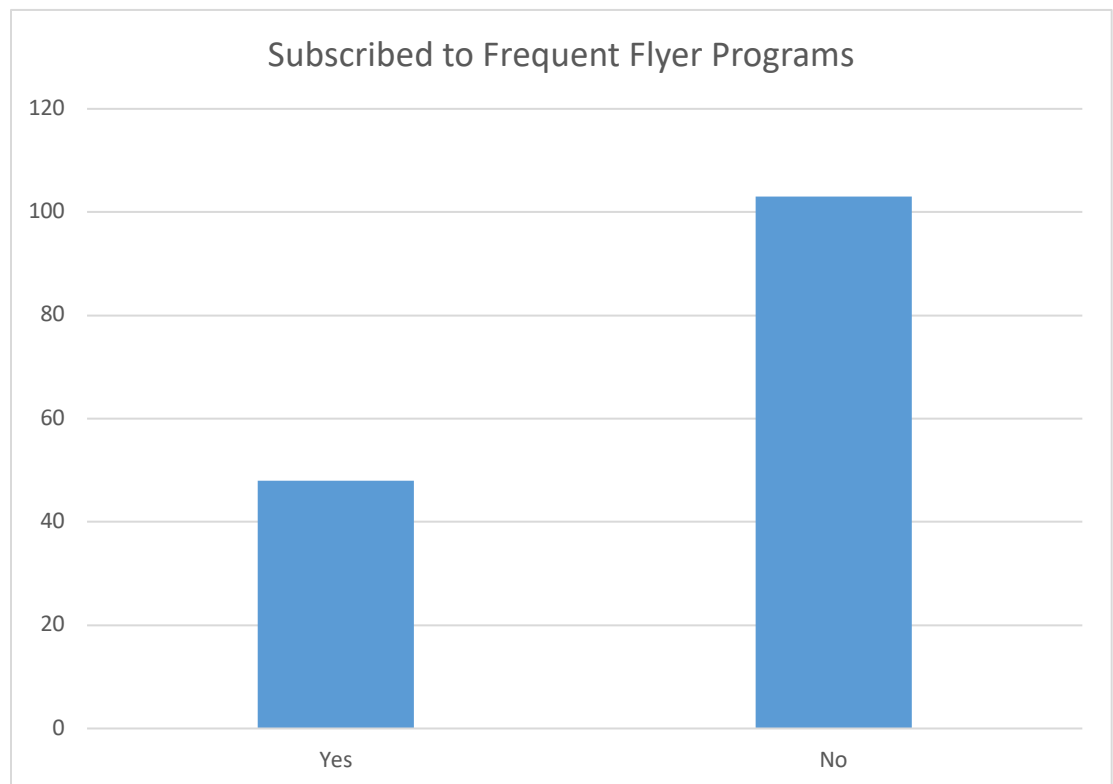


Figure 17: Frequent flyer

The previous data collected shows that participants who answered 'yes' to the above question had all booked their flight through the airline which offered a frequent flyer programme. Therefore, it seems that an airline offering such a programme was preferred. The reasons that convinced them to book this airline showed that not all were related to price; however, some also considered cabin comfort, the reputation of the airline, and flight schedules.

Participants were also asked whether they considered themselves loyal to the airline they chose from London to Malta. 45% responded with 'no', 36% considered themselves loyal, whilst 19% were not sure. To confirm their loyalty, they were asked whether they would recommend the same airline to others. 66% of participants would recommend it to others; however, 10% would not. The remaining 24% were not sure about recommending it. Furthermore, they were asked if they would use the service of the same airline again after a positive experience; 38% said they would travel again using the same airline, 40% were unsure, whereas 22% would not.

Finally, the following figure shows the factors why participants would switch airlines. The results show that 'increase in prices' is the most significant factor which would drive passengers to change airlines. This is then followed by poor customer service, reduced flexibility in flight schedules, an increase in negative reviews, and other reasons which were not disclosed.

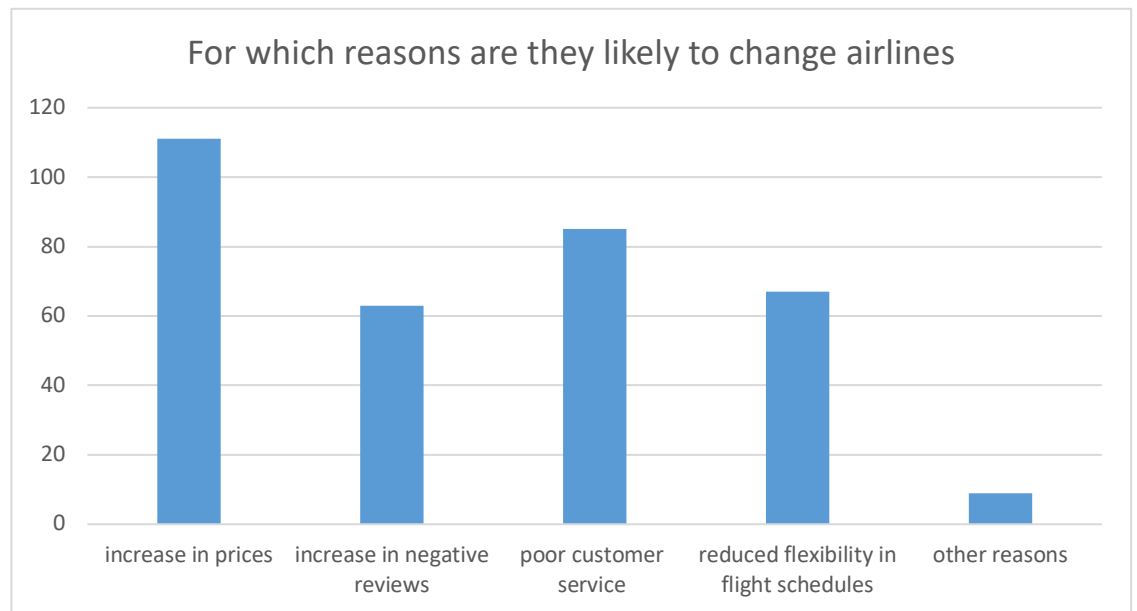


Figure 18: Reason to change

4.4 Author Reflection

From the results of the interviews and questionnaires, the author notes several points which will be discussed in the following sections.

4.4.1 Social Media

Both interviewed airlines view social media as a crucial element when it comes to shaping customer perceptions of their brand. However, findings from the questionnaire results indicate that 79% of participants do not follow any airlines on social media. This suggests a misalignment between the airlines' perception of social media and actual customer engagement with social media content. This means that organic content is less likely to reach this population segment, unless the content is strategically published as a paid promotion. Moreover, participants were asked which platform they relied on for airline reviews and again, social media platforms were the least voted platform, with only 22% of participants relying on social media. Contrastingly, the most voted platform was Tripadvisor, receiving a total of 53 votes, accounting for 42% of participants who answered that question.

4.4.2 Marketing and Seasonality

Airline A mentioned that throughout the year, the company managed to maintain the same flight schedule to safeguard its slots for the summer period. To achieve this, the company must remain profitable, and to ensure this, the airline adjusts its messaging for the off-peak season. This change in messaging includes more promotional activities, thereby offering cheaper fares to potential passengers. Analysing the data collected from questionnaires, it appears to support Airline A's efforts to generate more bookings through sale periods. This alignment is illustrated in Table 8, which shows that discounts and price were the second most selected factors convincing passengers to choose the airline for their flight from London to Malta. The most influential factor was reputation; however, there was only a slight difference between the two. Furthermore, this assertion is further supported by Table 6, which outlines the main factors passengers consider when it comes to airline travel. For this question, price emerged as the primary convincing factor.

4.4.3 Loyalty Programme

Both Airlines A and B consider customer retention as their main priority. To retain customers, both implement a loyalty programme in their strategy. Although the structure of the programme is significantly different from one another, the scope remains the retention of customers. However, the data collected in Table 4 and Figure 13 shows that only a small percentage of the participants are subscribed to airlines' frequent flyer programmes. This shows that passengers do not engage as much with these programmes, yet they would still use the same airline again after a positive experience. Therefore, there seems to be a gap between the importance given to frequent flyer programmes by airlines and how much customers recognise these programmes.

4.4.4 Strategy Differentiation Between Leisure and Business Travellers

The interviews with both airlines revealed that their strategies are mostly directed towards leisure travellers rather than the business segment. However, to attract business travellers, they would emphasise their premium services in their messaging, as this segment actively seeks such offerings when travelling. These services range from business class to free premium luggage. The effort made to attract leisure travellers is sustained in the data collected from the questionnaires, where most participants pertained to this segment. In Table 4, results show that only 12% of the population were business travellers.

4.4 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter highlight two perspectives. The interviews conducted with airline representatives reveal the strategies used during the off-peak season to maintain profitability. Contrastingly, the questionnaires focus on passengers' perspectives when selecting an airline for travel between London and Malta. The data collected from the questionnaires suggest that participants are more influenced by practical factors such as price, flight schedules, and their perception of the airline's reputation rather than the broader marketing strategies implemented by the carriers. Further investigation into this subject could provide airline carriers with actionable recommendations to enhance marketing, pricing, and service delivery within a concentrated market.

5. Final Arguments

In this chapter, the author examines whether the study's objectives have been achieved. This final chapter encompasses evaluating the validity and reliability of the data collected, the implications of the results, study limitations, and future recommendations.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The methodology and study presented have achieved the study's main aim and objectives, which focused on investigating the influence of key factors on the travellers' decision-making for their travels from London airports to Malta. The objectives of this research required the author to identify which branding factors influenced travellers' airline selection from London to Malta most. The study examined the impact of factors such as service quality, price sensitivity, airline safety, and reputation on this selection. The research also assessed how factors such as online reviews, social media, and word of mouth affected passengers' perception of the airline and their loyalty towards the brand. Lastly, it examined how important in-flight services, cabin comfort, and customer service are for a positive perception of the brand and customer satisfaction.

From the data collected, it can be concluded that airline companies put extensive effort into ensuring their brand is visible and attractive for potential travellers. These efforts go beyond the traditional branding elements and include flying to major airports in London, thus providing better connectivity between London and Malta. They also implement a competitive pricing strategy targeting the price-sensitive segment of travellers during low-peak season. The results gathered from the questionnaire demonstrate that participants find flight availability, airport location, price and the airline's reputation as the most influential factors leading to their choice of airline. These findings address the central research question of the study, which was **'How do marketing strategies and brand reputation impact airline selection?'** as they suggest that although brand reputation is significant, it is the airline's practical strategies which have the greatest impact on the choice of airline during this period.

Furthermore, the research assesses **'The influence of online reviews, social media, and word of mouth in shaping airline brand perception'**. The results show that the majority of participants do not refer to online reviews or follow airlines on any social media platforms, suggesting that these have minimal impact on brand perception. Findings

indicate that such perception is built from personal experiences or experiences shared by friends and family. This highlights that word of mouth is a more influential source than online reviews and social media, and indicates that brand perception is shaped by trusted experiences rather than the online reputation of the brand in this scenario.

Lastly, the research investigates whether **'In-flight services, cabin comfort, and customer service significantly impact perception and loyalty towards the brand'**. The results show that these factors have some impact on the shaping of brand perception and brand loyalty. However, they were not decisive factors in airline choice. This finding suggests that these factors have minimal impact on brand loyalty for short routes such as the London to Malta route.

Therefore, the research's objectives have been achieved, and all research questions were answered. The sample taken for the interview participants represents half of the airlines which offer a London to Malta route during low-peak season. This was perceived as a good sample. However, due to the number of participants in the questionnaires, the results gathered cannot be generalised to all travellers flying via this route.

5.3 Implications

The results presented in this thesis study hold significant implications for airline companies. From the generated results, it can be suggested that airlines maintain a competitive pricing strategy which attracts more price-conscious travellers during this period, and thus, sell out perishable seats. Although branding elements did not result in being driving factors for airline selection, these are still useful to reinforce trust between first-time travellers and the airline brand itself.

5.4 Limitations

Whilst conducting this study, several limitations were encountered. The first limitation was that the study was specific to one route, the London to Malta route. Therefore, the results acquired cannot be generalised across all other routes. The other limitation was the sample size, with 150 participants for the questionnaires. Although these were enough to explore various insights, they may not represent a larger population of visitors.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Following the completion of this research, there remains considerable scope for further investigation. Future research may compare analyses between low-peak and peak seasons to investigate if there are any changes in travellers' priorities. Moreover, a different and longer route may be examined by comparing the impacts of the mentioned factors on a short-distance flight versus a long-distance flight.

5.6 Validity and Reliability

Prior to starting the data collection, the researcher assured adequate and consistent planning towards executing semi-structured interviews with marketing personnel from airlines and the closed-ended questionnaires with incoming travellers from London airports. Validity was achieved through the use of correct tools during the process of data collection and academic literature. The questions asked during the interviews were designed carefully, ensuring alignment with the research topic. Both interviews were uniform to support comparability at a later stage. Moreover, all data was obtained and reviewed chronologically to minimise bias. Furthermore, reliability was maintained through structural formats and questions and the inclusion of themes during the study. Additionally, the author cannot be one hundred per cent sure that what was stated in both interviews and questionnaires is true.

5.7 Concluding Statement

The findings show that airline selection for this specific route is influenced by practical factors: price and schedule availability. Therefore, travellers flying from London to Malta during low-peak season are more attracted to lower prices than to loyalty to a brand. This highlights the need for airlines to align their strategies with customer expectations and thus enhance their travel experience for this route while remaining competitive.

6. References

- Ahmed, A. Z. & Rodriguez-Diaz, M., 2020. Analyzing the Online Reputation and Positioning of Airlines. *Sustainability*, 12(3), pp. 1-27. Doi: 10.3390/su12031184
- Albalate, D. & Fageda, X., 2023. Getting Closer To Your Destination: The Role of Available Surface Connections on the Supply of Low-Cost Carriers in Secondary European Tourist Airports.. *Research in Transportation Business & Management*, 4(100899), pp. 1-12. Doi: 10.1016/j.rtbm.2022.100899
- Ali, H., Guleria, Y., Alam, S. & Schultz, M., 2019. A Passenger-Centric Model for Reducing Missed Connections at Low Cost Airports With Gates Reassignment. *IEEE Access*, Volume 4, pp. 1-18. Doi: 10.1109/ACCESS.2019.2953769
- Andrews, E., 2023. Unveiling the Secrets Behind Airline Marketing and Branding. [Online] Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/unveiling-secrets-behind-airline-marketing-branding-andrews/> [Accessed August 2024].
- Andrivet, M., (2024). The Branding Journal. [Online] Available at: <https://www.thebrandingjournal.com/2015/10/what-is-branding-definition/> [Accessed July 2024].
- Batarliene, N. & Slavinskaite, N., (2023). Assessment of Factors Determining Airline Consumer Loyalty: Case Study in Lithuania. *Sustainability*, 15(2), pp. 1-15. Doi: 10.3390/su15021320
- Changhyun, J., MoonSun, Y. & JungYong, L., 2019. The influence of brand color identity on brand association and loyalty. *The Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 28(1), pp. 50-62. Doi: 10.1108/JPBM-09-2017-1587
- Chavan, H., (2023). Taking Flight: How Branding and Upper Funnel Marketing Can Help Airlines Soar Above the Competition. [Online] Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/taking-flight-how-branding-upper-funnel-marketing-can-chavan/> [Accessed July 2024].
- Christidis, P., 2015. Four shades of Open Skies: European Union and four main external partners. *Journal of Transport Geography*, Volume 50, pp. 105-114. Doi: 10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2015.04.005
- Chonsalasin, D., Jomnonkwao, S. & Ratanavaraha, V., 2020. Key Determinants of Airline Loyalty Modeling in Thailand. *Sustainability*, 12(10), pp. 1-17. Doi: 10.3390/su12104165
- Cipriani, E., Crescenzi, L. & Nigro, M., (2015). Behavioural Models for the Estimation of The Air Transport Demand: The Case Study of Rome-London Flight Connection. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Volume 111, pp. 78-87. Doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.040
- Eugenio-Martin, J. L. & Perez-Granja, U., 2021. Have Low-Cost Carriers Crowded Out Full Services and Charter Carriers in Tourism Destinations? A Trivariate Structural Time Series Analysis. *Journal of Travel Research*, 60(4), pp. 810-832. Doi: 10.1177/0047287520910801

- Fleischer, A., Tchetchik, A. & Toledo, T., 2012. The Impact Of Fear of Flying on Travelers' Flight Choice: Choice Model With Latent Variables. *Journal of Travel Research*, 51(5), pp. 653-663. Doi: 10.1177/0047287512437856
- Fleischer, A., Tchetchik, A. & Toledo, T., 2015. Does it Pay To Reveal Safety Information? The Effect Of Safety Information On Flight Choice. *Transportation Research Part C*, Volume 56, pp. 210-220.
- Gartlan, D., 2023. 4 Essential Brand Components. [Online] Available at: <https://stevens-tate.com/articles/4-essential-brand-components/> [Accessed September 2024].
- Gorkem, O. & Yagci, K., (2016). Evaluation of Airline Passengers' Perceptions of In-Cabin Services: Turkish Airlines Example. *Journal of Business Research – Turk*, 8 (1). Doi: 10.20491/isader.2016.152
- Grace, L., 2024. When to visit Malta for hikes, festivals and (yes) sun. [Online] Available at: <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/best-time-to-visit-malta> [Accessed March 2025].
- Graham, A., 2013. Understanding the low cost carrier and airport relationship: A critical analysis of the salient issues. *Tourism Management*, 36(1), pp. 66-76. Doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2012.11.011
- Hassan, T. H. & Salem, A. E., 2022. Impact of Service Quality of Low-Cost Carriers on Airline Image and Consumers' Satisfaction and Loyalty During the COVID-19 Outbreak. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(83). Doi: 10.3390/ijerph19010083
- Hecker, J. & Kalpokas , N., 2024. The Guide to Thematic Analysis. [Online] Available at: <https://atlasti.com/guides/thematic-analysis/thematic-analysis-surveys> [Accessed November 2024].
- Hernandez, M. R. & Vazquez Sacristan, I., 2024. TikTok, The New Social Platform For Luxury Brands. *International Visual Culture Review*, 16(3), pp. 197-211.
- Hock, A. J., 2018. How American Airlines is Leveraging Social & Digital to Impact the Customer Experience. [Online] Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-american-airlines-leveraging-social-digital-impact-antonia-hock/> [Accessed November 2024].
- Huang, Y.-C. & Liu, C.-H., 2020. Buffering Effects of Brand Perception to Behavioural Intention - Evidence of China Airlines. *Research in Transportation Business & Management*, 37(100468). Doi: 10.1016/j.rtbm.2020.100468
- Hyman, M. & Sierra, J., 2016. Open- Versus Closed-Ended Survey Questions. *Business Outlook*, 14(2), pp. 1-5.
- Kekes-Szabo, B., 2024. 11 Global Brands Nailing Brand Loyalty - And Their Secret. [Online] Available at: <https://antavo.com/blog/brand-loyalty/> [Accessed October 2024].

- Keller, K. L. (2001) Building Customer-Based Brand Equity. *Marketing Management*, 10(2), pp. 14-19.
- Klophaus, R. & Fichert, F., 2019. From Low-cost Carriers to Network Carriers without Legacy? Evolving Airline Business Models in Europe. In: *Airline Economics in Europe*. s.l.:s.n., pp. 57-75. Doi: 10.1108/S2212-160920190000008003
- Kucukaltan, B. & Topcu, I., 2019. Assessment of Key Airline Selection Indicators in A Strategic Decision Model: Passengers Perspective. *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, 32(4), pp. 646-667. Doi: 10.1108/JEIM-08-2018-0178
- Landis-Eigsti, J., 2020. Brand Image vs Brand Identity - With Examples & Explanation. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/brand-image-vs-identity-with-examples-explanation-landis-eigsti/> [Accessed September 2024].
- Lasys, A., 2023. Tourism in Malta Least Impacted by Seasonality in EU. [Online]
Available at: <https://businessnow.mt/tourism-in-malta-least-impacted-by-seasonality-in-eu/> [Accessed May 2025].
- Lim, J. & Lee, H. C., 2019. Comparisons of Service Quality Perceptions Between Full Service Carriers and Low Cost Carriers in Airline Travel. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(10), pp. 1261-1276. Doi: 10.1080/13683500.2019.1604638
- Mcleod, S., 2023. Qualitative VS Quantitative Research Methods & Data Analysis. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/qualitative-quantitative.html> [Accessed November 2024].
- Mitchell, A. A. & Olson, J. C., 1981. Are Product Attribute Beliefs the Only Mediator of Advertising Effects on Brand Attitude. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18(3), pp. 318-332. Doi: 10.1177/002224378101800306
- Molin, E., Blange, J., Cats, O. & Chorus, C., 2017. Willingness to Pay for Safety Improvements in Passenger Air Travel. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, Volume 62, pp. 165-175. Doi: 10.1016/j.jairtraman.2017.04.002
- Munusamy, J., Chelliah, S. & Pandian, S., 2011. Customer Satisfaction Delivery in Airline Industry in Malaysia: A Case of Low Cost Carrier. *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 5(11), pp. 718-723.
- Naeem, M. & Okafor, S., 2019. User-Generated Content and Consumer Brand Engagement. In: G. Bowen & W. Ozuem, eds. *Leveraging Computer-Mediated Marketing Environments*. London: IGI Global, pp. 193-220. Doi: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7344-9.ch009
- Nguyen, L. T. C. & Mai, K. N., 2023. Investigating brand image and brand trust in airline service: Evidence of Korean Air. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing*, 9(2), pp. 55-65. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.10539739
- Pandagre, R., Pandey, A., Verma, T. L. & Dongre, N., 2021. Impact of Marketing Strategies On Consumer Behaviour: A Study of Bhopal City. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 9(6), pp. 375-389.

- Petrosyan, A., 2024. Number of Internet and Social Media Users Worldwide as of October 2024. [Online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/> [Accessed November 2024].
- Picardo, E., 2024. An Economic Analysis of The Low-Cost Airline Industry. [Online] Available at: <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/022916/economic-analysis-lowcost-airline-industry-luvdal.asp> [Accessed November 2024].
- Regoniel, P., 2023. Exploring Phenomena: A Brief Guide to Conducting Descriptive Qualitative Research. [Online] Available at: <https://simplyeducate.me/2023/04/10/descriptive-qualitative-research/#key-features-of-the-descriptive-qualitative-research> [Accessed November 2024].
- Sahin, H., Kusakci, A. O. & Mbowe, B., 2021. The Effects of Frequent Flyer Programs In The Airline Industry On Customer Loyalty. *Heritage and Sustainable Development*, 3(2), pp. 130-147. Doi: 10.37868/hsd.v3i2.69
- Sarilgan, A. E., Akan, S., Bakir, M. & Sulec, H., 2022. The Impact of Advertising Creativity on Purchase Intention in the Airline Industry: A stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) Perspective. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 30(3014), pp. 1-21. Doi: 10.54055/ejtr.v30i.2169
- Sellas, B. B., 2024. How Social Media Impacts Brand Perception and Customer Loyalty. [Online] Available at: <https://bsquared.media/social-media-impacts-brand-perception-customer-loyalty/> [Accessed November 2024].
- Shiva, N., 2005. An exploration of the Brand Identity-brand Image linkage: A communications perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 12(4), pp. 264-278. Doi: 10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540222
- SITA, 2024. The Global Baggage Report. [Online] Available at: <https://www.sita.aero/resources/surveys-reports/sita-baggage-it-insights-2024/> [Accessed April 2025].
- Soti, R., 2022. The Impact of Advertising on Consumer Behaviour. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 14(3), pp. 706-711.
- Terblanch, N. S., 2015. Customers' Perceived Benefits of A Frequent-Flyer Program. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 32(3), pp. 199-210. Doi: 10.1080/10548408.2014.895694
- Tu, T. N., 2024. Factors Affecting The Decision To Choose an Airline For Travel Of Individual Vietnamese Customers. *Transportation Research Procedia*, Volume 80, pp. 170-177. Doi: 10.1016/j.trpro.2024.09.022
- Whyte, R. & Prideaux, B., 2008. The Growth in Low-Cost Carrier Services in Queensland: Implications for Regional Tourism Destinations. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 33(1), pp. 59-66. Doi: 10.1080/02508281.2008.11081290
- Yang, L., Poon, W. C. & Tjiptono, F., 2016. Examining Consumers' Tendency of Airline Avoidance after Accidents. Newcastle, Academy of Marketing Conference 2016.

Ying, T. et al., 2024. Oops, The Price changed! Examining Tourists' Attribution Patterns And Blame Towards Pricing Dynamics. *Tourism Management*, 103(104890), pp. 1-11. Doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2024.104890

Yolci, V., 2024. The Rise of Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs) in The Airline Industry. [Online] Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/rise-low-cost-carriers-lccs-airline-industry-volkan-yolci-jni3f/> [Accessed November 2024].

Zeren, D. & Kara, A., 2021. Effects of Brand Heritage on Intentions to Buy of Airline Services: The Mediating Roles of Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty. *Sustainability*, 13(1), p. 303. Doi: 10.3390/su13010303

Appendix 1: Interview Transcripts

Airline A Transcript

Section 1: Branding & Marketing

Q1: Key Strategies in differentiating the airline from its competitors? Especially from low-cost carriers.

- No difference in strategy, but it's more in the way they sell it.
- Invest more money in sky scanner or paid search to sell the route but this is more seen as acquisition and making sales rather than strategic differentiation.
- [REDACTED] position themselves as a low-cost carrier which is a mid-point between Ryanair and [REDACTED] low-cost carrier and legacy airlines.
- They strive to improve travellers' experience compared to the ULC airlines but not quite to the same level of legacy airlines.

Q2: During shoulder periods, how do you position the brand to appeal to travellers?

- During this period, the airline maintains the same schedule as that of summer to keep its' slots.
- Therefore, the position is the same. The message is what changes. During this period there are more sales such as the January sales, black Friday etc... and many travellers use this opportunity to book their holiday.
- The brand places heavy marketing of both [REDACTED] holidays and flight offers with loads of promotions to fill up seats during this period.
- During this slow period, the airline focuses on promoting mainly city breaks or winter sun to push interested travellers.

Q3: How to ensure to remain consistent across various marketing channels?

- Research with scientific institute Ehrenberg Bass about distinctive background attributes.
- Use the colour [REDACTED] which dominates within the airline category that even when you remove the logo, most people will associate it with [REDACTED] even the font and other small details.
- This is done since one of the company's pillars is to stand out from their competitors and engage emotionally with customers so that they think of [REDACTED] or their travels.
- Before going live with their strategies, these are tested to ensure whether these are good enough to deliver short-term sales? What is the likelihood of delivering long-term sales? Does it emotionally engage with people? With a system called system one.

Q4: Do you use any ads which are specifically targeted for businesses or leisure travellers?

- 80% of what we do is leisure so that means selling beaches, city breaks etc... however, we also have around 15-20% who are business customers.

- We don't necessarily have a different product but sometimes we tell people we have this offer where they can pay £249 and it would include free luggage, advanced seat booking and speedy boarding.
- From our database we try to establish who looks like a business customer so that we can target them with products and offers which are likely to appeal more to them and enhance their experience.
- Other than that there is no specific business proposition other than the option to purchase a block of 10 [REDACTED] and can be distributed to people within the organisation.

Section 2: Brand Perception and Reputation.

Q5: Do you think your social media and marketing campaign strategy are crucial in shaping the perception of the brand?

- [REDACTED] Holidays which were launched in 2019 has become one of the fastest growing holiday companies.
- Traffic is coming to this website since primarily we are a leisure airline and we fly to places such as Corfu, Spain etc... So naturally, people who will be going to such destinations are probably going to need accommodation as well. Therefore, when we see people booking flights to these destinations we try to also sell them an [REDACTED] holiday package since they seem to be in the market for that based on the selected destination.
- Of course there will be people who look at routes such as London to Belfast and for such routes we do not promote [REDACTED] holiday since it is a domestic flight and traveller is likely to be a business traveller.
- The reason why we became such a fast-growing brand in the holiday space is because we had such a strong brand.
- Over the years the brand was running quite risky ads that were challenging within the industry since we were offering travellers the possibility to go to Spain for the price of jeans when back in the day travel was more accessible for people who had more money, and therefore, we made it possible for everyone to be able to get a cheap flight.
- So yes, that is the branding, and the way we have presented ourselves, the brand that we built, the tone of voice, the challenges approached and to democratising travel. This is the key to the growth that we now see.

Q6: How do you respond to negative feedback and online criticism to protect the brand's reputation?

- We have a community who manage [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] holidays, so if anyone complains we will respond them with comments such as can you contact us?
- It depends on the type of complaint as well, if it's something related to delays, there isn't much that we can do about it since it's hard to influence that. However, when there are specific comments, such as haven't received my refund yet etc... these will be taken out of the social platform and comment saying contact us directly and we will help you.
- Our marketing strategy is about building positive memory structures and avoid the negativity.
- Besides marketing, we are also doing a huge amount of investment into the whole travellers' experience. Such as their experience of booking their flights on our website, their experience

at the airport (checking in their bags, getting to the gate), their boarding experience as well as disembarking. Feedback is measured from the whole end to end experience including the food on board. Then we look at the pinch points and try to fix them.

- We want to be better than ultra low-cost carriers who are just making it cheap and easy. Therefore, we want to set ourselves a standard that's much higher because we're in that middle ground. We are not going to be offering free snacks, but we are different from these ultra low-cost because we fly to primary airports, and we have also good slot times.

Q7: are there any procedures or steps to ensure that there is consistency in the brand messaging across all customer touch points?

- So yeah, we mention distinctive brand assets earlier, and that is for branding.
- Additional to that we also must make lots of content to feed the digital algorithms such as TikTok, Instagram etc...
- However we are also looking into reducing costs for these since they are expensive to produce and searched for cheaper production models. So now we are moving more towards automation and AI content generation such as copywriting.
- We template most of our stuff, so it becomes quite modular, therefore it is not only cheaper but easy to localize in local markets. And this is a core part of our strategy as we don't want to have something that is done in the UK and then adapted in French as this will likely not resonate with customers in the way that we want to. And if it does not resonate you cannot build that kind of positive memory structure.
- So we've got consistency in the way that we present our advertising campaigns, consistency in the way we apply our brand guidelines, and our advertising guidelines.
- There are lots of other things which are being made around our organization such as posters to go on board, or in the bag drop to make sure that the organization is consistently branded.

Section 3: Customer Engagement and Loyalty.

Q8: does [REDACTED] have any recognition programs or awards that help retain loyal customers and foster engagement?

- [REDACTED] but one does not earn points as it's more of a product one purchases if they are a frequent flyer because it gives you benefits.

Q9: How is the success of campaigns in generating customer engagement measured?

- So customer engagement we measure by repeat bookings and frequency. so we have campaigns that show all we're trying to sell. We've got flights and we'll see the type of customer depending on the selected destination and we'll say okay she's looking for accommodation maybe she would like an [REDACTED] holiday. So selling holidays to the airline customer base will aid in generating a dialogue with customers who are in the holiday space.
- A flight is quite transactional cause one is paying to go from point A to point B and that is it. Whereas a holiday, the organization is important as it oversees a crucial moment in people's lives, especially since this is a very thought-out purchase.

- So we also put in place contact strategies, where we contact people who have just come back from their holiday and since they are loyal customers, so we offer them a discount on their next holiday. Sometimes we also send emails to the customers to get them excited about the things they can do in their chosen destination.
- Like any other companies we also look at revenue delivered by a number of bookings.

Section 4: Travel preferences and behaviour

Q10: Do you have insights available on the preference of travellers flying via the London to Malta route?

- Specifically for that route no, but what we have is a marketing strategy for every single market.
- So it's not specifically for Malta because we want our marketing to be really localized. So we'll say what do the British people want. Or what is it that French people want?
- So for example the French are a bit price conscious, and therefore they might prefer to go to Venice Treviso by Ryanair just because it is cheaper than going directly to Venice. And since they are travelling often with Ryanair maybe they don't see what experience is different and worth paying a bit more.
- In the UK it is more about capturing everybody's interest in package holidays.

Q11: How do you adapt marketing strategies to seasonal fluctuations in traveller behaviour, particularly during this period?

- We have a promotional calendar, and it is different for each market and is made up of things that the trading team want us to promote to help with their sale targets.
- E.g., it could be a big moment for Italian people during this period, and therefore it is a good moment for us to have a promotion so that we can capture some of that interest in travel that's happening in the moment.
- Therefore, we flex these strategies into the months which we know that they bring us the biggest revenue. There's January for example where we have one of our biggest sale known as [REDACTED] which travellers can benefit from 20% off flights and £400 off from their holiday.
- But our whole year goes up and down like that based on when we put the spend into market based on when we put the spend into market based on when we've got trading moments and promotions that we need to support.

Airline B Transcript

Section 1: Branding and Marketing Strategy

Q1: Do you use any key strategies to differentiate your airline from competitors on the London-to-Malta route? And what differentiates these from low-cost carriers?

- So London is one of our biggest markets and our most popular route. We travel to both Heathrow and Gatwick with Heathrow being the most popular one because it's obviously closer to the centre with easier access to trains etc...
- We specifically choose these airports because they are the main hubs and are closer to the city centre and help us with connecting flights. So we have partner airlines such as British Airways, Qatar, Lufthansa, and KLM where we are sort of their airline provider for flights to Malta, and they are our providers for flights into other destinations.
- This really helps with how we sell our seats, because through this culture agreement we can also be included in the long-haul destinations.
- This is why we chose those airports and have benefitted us as we fly every day to these airports sometimes twice in a day as well.
- In comparison to low-cost competitors then, such as [REDACTED], they go to Stansted and Luton which are airports that are further away from the centre. People who want cheaper flights can opt for these. However, [REDACTED] manages to offer cheaper prices because they have deals with airports, they go for smaller, and less popular airports and they don't pay for taxes and charges where we obviously must pay these since we use the popular airports.
- We are not Qatar or Emirates; however, we are not Ryanair either, therefore, strategically we position ourselves in-between. We have partnerships with Emirates so obviously we still have a high-end standard which needs to be upheld. So we offer two cabin types being economy and business. With business class, travellers can benefit from more space and comfort since the middle seat is left vacant, they also have the full-on meal and free flowing drinks and a more personalized service including priority boarding. This is something which obviously [REDACTED] do not offer.
- British Airways also offer flights from London to Malta however, they are not as frequent as [REDACTED] hence why it is one of our popular routes especially since London is a popular destination for shopping etc...

Q2: During shoulder periods how do you position the brand to appeal to travellers?

- Just to give you a bit of a background, our passengers come from either codeshares, which means they have booked their flight with another airline company and they use our airline for one of the flight segments, then we have those who book directly from our website who are normally travelling point to point, and then we also have flights booked through travel agents normally these are group bookings.
- Maybe for the younger generation is not as common, however, these agents are still popular especially with the British markets. So this is a major part of how we also push out shoulder season to be full.
- We have multiple different initiatives to make sure to keep up sort of relationships with travel agencies, and make sure to maybe give incentives to travel agencies e.g the travel agency which sells the most flights during this period will receive a flight ticket for free for example. That's the way we kind of push forward sales obviously.

- We also work with MTA, they have representations in the UK market, therefore we work a lot with them.
- We also use Fam trips to benefit use where we bring people or journalists to visit Malta and write about it.
- Marketing is such a broad aspect, as anything you can do to promote the brand you do it. It's not only about posting on social media and thinking you can get away with that. It's more about the experience and showing the Maltese culture and heritage.
- We obviously still use Google ads SEO and Search Engine Marketing especially in the winter months.
- We also incentivise aggregators such as Skyscanner and other distribution channels which we try to sort of push and promote our airline.
- Flight prices are also normally lower in winter, and this serves as an incentive to book during winter, however, obviously people come to Malta for summer, so it is kind of expected that in the winter months we'll have a lower seat factor.

Q3: How do you ensure to remain consistent on various marketing channels?

- Obviously, we have a brand to follow, and any communication needs to be approved by me and my team.
- These are things we I kind of have no control on but anything that comes out in terms that it comes from the Airline, it goes through me and through my CCO as well. So that is how we kind of control the narrative. There is still some training involved internally where we share what the brand is and we try to sort of use certain images that are approved from our end, rather than just everyone doing their own thing.
- We are friendly; however, we are the national airline, so we still have that kind of identity.

Q4: Do you use ads which are targeted specifically for business and leisure travellers? If yes, how do you structure these?

- We haven't had a campaign which is separate for the two types of travellers.
- Being a new airline, we had a lot of other things which we needed to focus on such as the rebranding of the company going from ██████████ to ██████████ and also launching it. Now we are at a place where we are building the strategic plan moving forward.
- Doing so certain questions arise such as if we want to business class, and if there are certain media mediums which we can use to target a higher end type of customer. So instead of promoting economy, we push more on business class where we use images of the food, cabin crew etc... whereas when it comes to more generic marketing, we use visuals of Malta and our aircraft.
- We also offer the possibility to people who have booked an economy flight to upgrade to business by sending promotional emails and allowing them to bid on a business class seat. There is obviously a minimum amount set, however one can bid let's say €150 for both flights.
- Although our business class does not include reclining chairs and beds since our longest flight is to London and that is 3 ½ hours max, however it's about the premium food which is prepared by our master chef ██████████

Section 2: Brand Perception and Reputation

Q5: Do you think your social media and marketing campaign strategy are crucial in shaping brand perception?

- Yes 100%. I think it's one of the main ways that you can create a brand. Obviously, there's the service itself, so once you go to the airport, the check-in experience, security going up etc... although these are factors which are not controlled by the airline company, they are still perceived as being part of the airline. Then there is also the service on board.
- So I think it's two-fold, there's the experience and there is also what we communicate out there cause for experience there are too many people involved, and one person can either ruin the traveller's experience and the whole airline is tainted or make it a great experience.
- Of course there will always be complaints, and people have really high expectations without understanding how many things the airline goes through for them to be able to sort of fly from one destination to another.
- But yes, social media is a big part of in. In this period it would have been a bit difficult to sort of make our brand known without it.

Q6: How do you respond to negative feedback and online criticism to protect the brand's reputation?

- Ok so it depends on what the negative feedback is. If it's something that is either out of our control like flight cancellations due to a strike example, sometimes people might not understand what the fair conditions are, but we would say that these are clearly stated on our website during the booking process.
- Sometimes they complain because their bag wasn't taken on board, but we question whether they had a bag which could have been taken on board.
- So it depends, some comments we decide not to answer because there is not much that can be done really.
- Some comments we reply to even the ones on Facebook group [REDACTED] and we ask them to contact us on private message, since most of the times before getting in contact with us directly with an issue, they go directly on social media.
- We also must control what is being posted on our socials especially there are a lot of scams. This has resulted in an increase in daily monitoring since it is not something we can control.
- We sometimes also receive comments regards [REDACTED] which was the previous brand however, we tend to hide those comments since we are now a different airline, and we don't wish to be associated with the other airline.
- Obviously, we are not going to delete complaints just because we made a mistake, but we try to control the narrative as much as we can. We try to apologies for the mistake and try to figure out what went wrong in the situation as we can never blame the client.
- Following the change in brand we have experienced an influx of these complaints because people were used to [REDACTED] for 50 years which had to deal with a change in fares which took time for them to get used to.

Q7: I'm not sure if you used to take care as well of the marketing campaigns or whatever, but do you think there's been a difference in how people are engaging with the marketing content from 1 airline to another?

- Since [REDACTED] was there for almost 50 years, I think the way we strategically positioned [REDACTED] we did it so that the engagement will be different for our old model.
- With [REDACTED] there was more of an emotional connection to it rather than the actual service. And that's not how a commercially viable airline should be run.
- So with the new airline, the way we position it is more international, because we are an international company, we are not here solely for the Maltese market, and so we are more international than Maltese. In the sense that, we are not going to take away from our Maltese heritage, or our culture because that is what makes us [REDACTED] airlines as well and what makes us ultimately a national airline. However, we wanted to go into the rebranding with a fresher narrative about our look.
- Even the people that we are collaborating with, we are trying to build relationships with the younger generations. Even though their buying power is very price sensitive, however, youngsters nowadays like travel. If they want to go for business class, they are likely to purchase it for the selfie's kind of thing.

Q8: Are there any procedures or steps to ensure there is consistency in brand messaging across all customer touchpoints? If yes, what are these steps?

- These is obviously the tone of voice, the brand and the brand guide.
- It is mainly controlled by me (marketing manager) so that it is not multiple people doing their thing as it pleases them.
- We are still in the beginning, so we are still trying to understand where we stand, however I think that we are going out of that phase. At a point we were viewed as [REDACTED] ugly sister, however, people moved away a little bit from that mindset.
- We are also focusing more in the international markets so that we can gain more traction there.

Section 3: Customer Engagement and Loyalty

Q9: Do the [REDACTED] help in maintaining engagement within the customer base and retaining loyal customers?

- Yes 100%, that is the main reason that we have a loyalty program and currently we have around 25,000 customers signed up, which is not bad considering that we have just started, and we have not even launched it in the very beginning.
- For [REDACTED] the loyalty program this time is different as it is more gamified. We have an app which will soon be launched, and this will allow the user to log into their accounts and sort of see the balance of how many [REDACTED] they have available which are earned from purchases on flights and other ancillary services. These bucks is the coin which can be spent basically.
- Then we will also have the status points which will help in reaching different membership tier levels. So when creating an account, one will reach an amount of status points and reach the

- level, when you gain more status points you can move to the next level which is [REDACTED], and finally there is the final tier which is that of [REDACTED]
- So this is like gamifying the process and motivating the customer to remain active since status points will expire. However, the more status points you have will result in more benefits as well.
- It's about incentivising the customers, and it creates a sense of loyalty.
- Again we are a point-to-point airline so we will not see a lot of foreigners regularly unless they travel to Malta regularly apply for our loyalty program.
- However, the next phase of the loyalty which is yet to be announced will allow users to spend their sky bucks with [REDACTED] partners rather than only being able to use it solely by flying with us.
- This allows us to make things work for our passengers and community and benefits mutually the company and the passenger as we don't just want to gain, gain, gain sort of.

Q10: How is the success of campaigns in generating customer engagement measured?

- So with our loyalty members for example when we have a sale, we usually send it to them beforehand obviously if they agree to be sent marketing emails. So we give them earlier notice for example we have a black Friday sale, and we informed our loyalty members a day before and noticed that there has been a big sort of push on that, whereas from social media came after.
- So with e-mail marketing we create stackable links, and through the system we can see how many people clicked, where they clicked.
- If it's through a promo, we can see how much revenue was generated through the use of the specific promo code.
- On social media we obviously have digital tools that sort of follow the ads through to the selling point, so we know how much was spent and how much revenue was generated. Same with google ads.
- With online marketing nowadays is very easy to sort of track, with other media then its more about brand awareness.
- Sometimes we also have promo codes outside of Malta such as screens in airports or the tube in London and we sort of see how that goes and whether there was an increase in flights throughout that period.
- So it really depends on the medium and who we are collaborating with. If it's MTA sometimes they give us the statistics themselves.

Section 4: Travel Preferences and Behaviour?

Q11: Do you have insights available on the preferences of travellers flying via this route?

- So as such no, because when booking a flight we don't really ask for details such as age. Although with the London route this is now changing as now you will need to give us your passport.
- We don't really have much information on why people travel. We know when they are travelling and where to, as well as the number of people listed on their booking, but in terms of knowing whether it's a family holiday, it's not something which you can get through a booking.
- We are working on a post-flight e-mail which is a survey based on the customer's experience which we previously had in [REDACTED] however, we are launching things slowly.

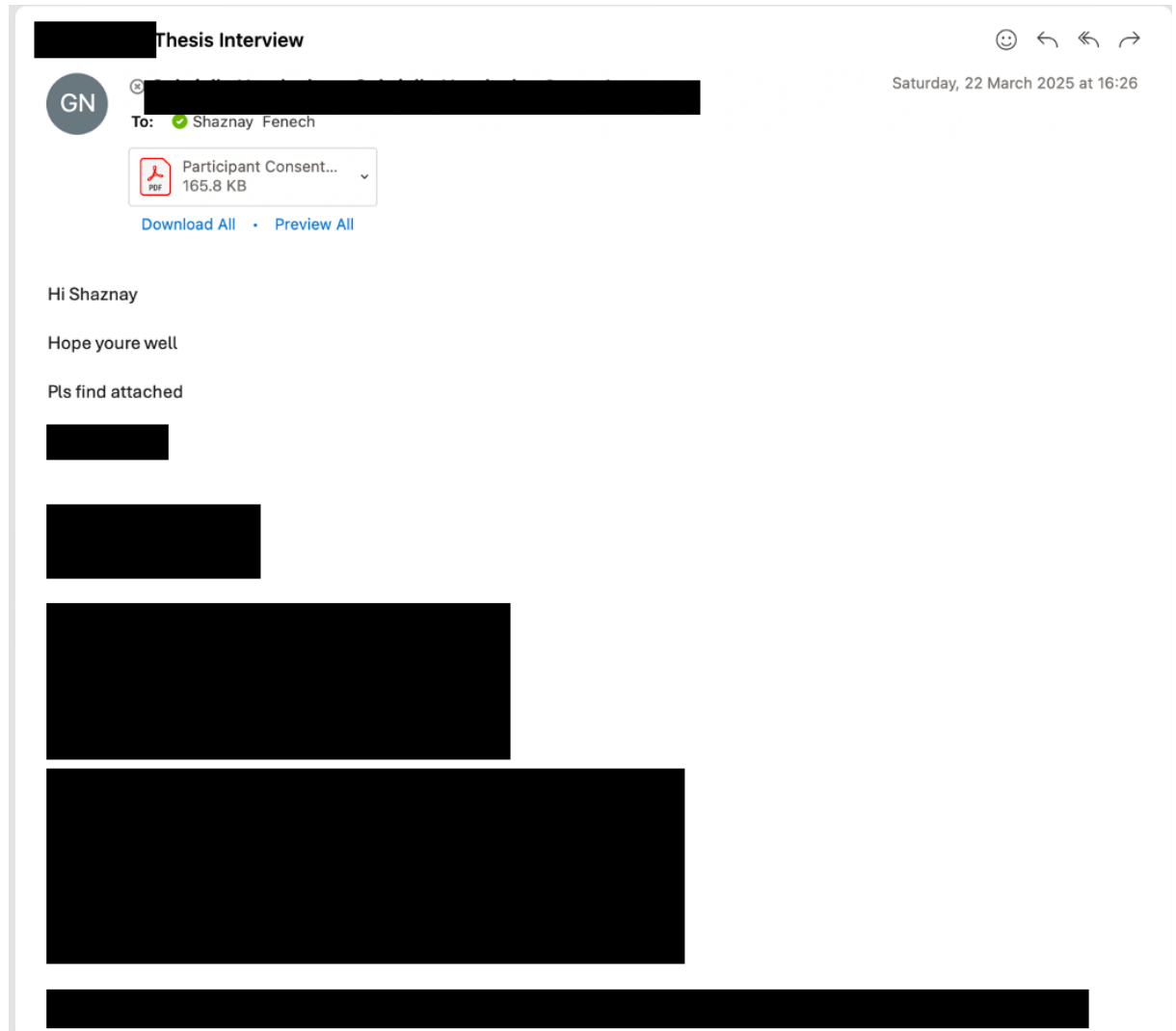
- The survey will have questions tackling whether the passenger was travelling alone, if it's a family holiday or a business holiday. We would also ask about their airport experience so that we can sort of understand whether they have bought something on-board of the aircraft or not.
- We will offer them the possibility to enter a competition to win a free flight so that sort of incentivizes them more to fill the survey.

Q12: How do you adapt marketing strategies to seasonal fluctuations in traveller behaviour, particularly during this period?

- With traveller behaviour, even with social media being so influential, if we see a trend, for example there is something happening in a particular destination. E.g. in Rome this year is the jubilee year so a lot of people will be travelling for Cardinal events.
- However, we have to be careful on how to say it because we obviously need to make sure that we carry different types of passengers. So we need to make sure that whatever we communicate is very worldly, so we don't talk about religion stuff in this case.
- Obviously when we talk about Malta, we will mention those things such as churches etc... as this is part of our history and culture.
- So we see what events are happening and we collaborate with different events like the Euro Pride that happened in Malta we collaborated with Euro Pride and created a promo code and became the official airline. So it's more about seeing what's out there and see where we can push. Even during the summer period not just during the shoulder season.

Appendix 2: Consent Forms

These are the consent forms for Airline A and Airline B. For Airline A the actual consent could not be disclosed to safeguard the interviewee's identity as signature and name could not be blurred out similar to Airline B's consent form.



Consent Form



Name and Surname of Researcher: Shaznay Fenech

ID number of researcher: 0186199M

Email address of researcher: shaznay.fenech001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: +356 77664154

Course: Bachelors in international hospitality management

Tutor name and surname: Mrs Fiorentina Darmania Jochimsen

Tutor office telephone number: +356 2379 3160

Title of the Long essay/Dissertation: Investigating the Key Factors Influencing the Travellers' Selection of Airline Prior to travelling to Malta From London

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Shaznay Fenech, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my Higher National Diploma, I am carrying out research on the above-mentioned title.

I had already sent you the information letter about my research and you had provided me with a signed information letter. If you have any further questions for clarification, please do not hesitate to ask me.

By signing this consent form, you are giving me your consent to use the data collected through the interview for the analysis of the results. I will send you a list of questions before the interview so you can prepare yourself beforehand. The questions asked will be about airline branding and passengers' airline selection.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name will not be attached to the interview and will ensure that your participation remains confidential. Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

Participant's declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my airline company, I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

 Participant's Name	 Participant's Signature	7 th Feb 2025 Date
shaznay Fenech Researcher's Name	 Researcher's Signature	7th Feb 2025 Date