

# DESTINATION MARKETING:

## WHY DO TOURISTS LIKE A DESTINATION?

### A research in eTourism and Argumentation

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#### Executive summary

Which reasons do make a destination worth to be visited? Is there a correspondence between how tourists perceive a destination and how the Destination Management Organization (DMO) promotes it?

The main purpose of this research is to identify which are the reasons that make a destination — in this case, the Republic of Malta — worth a visit from the tourists' perspective. The study aims on one side, at recognizing and analyzing the main arguments used by tourists — the demand side — when reporting on their experiences on a specific destination, and on the other side to compare the found arguments with those used by the DMO — the supply side — to promote itself.

The arguments have been identified through an argumentative analysis of the User Generated Contents about the destination, they were retrieved from the Travel fora of Trip Advisor. Afterwards the arguments used by Malta's DMO to promote the destination have been analyzed and then compared with those used by the demand side to verify the correspondence between them.

The results make it possible to identify strengths and weaknesses of the destination, and additionally to get information on what the DMO should focus on to improve its performances.

The understanding of opinions, preferences and perceptions of tourists is a valuable starting point for the development of more effective online marketing strategies by DMOs: before speaking they need to listen carefully to their visitors!

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# INTRODUCTION

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Where to go on holiday? This is the first question which arises when planning a trip. The answer to this question can influence positively or negatively the performance of that "couple of weeks" that are considered sacred by so many workers around the world.

Today, most of the travellers who have Internet access look for online information and tourist services, frequently asking for help and suggestions to travellers who have already been in a destination.

Recent studies have highlighted that travellers, before choosing a destination or tourist service like a hotel, prefer to receive recommendations from those who have already experienced that destination or hotel. They tend to check more and more online comments and opinions that can help them to make the right choice, trusting more the **word-of-mouth** by people having their same "status" of travellers than suggestions by professionals. Besides this trustworthiness, another reason of preference is that such information is cheaper and faster.

Because of the personal relation involved, **word-of-mouth is viewed as a more reliable source of accurate consumer information** than marketing information obtained through mass media (Pan, McLaurin, Crofts 2007). Travellers want to talk about their good or bad experiences and share their travel know-how on one or more social websites and blogs.

Tourism is an experience worth to be communicated, since once back from a trip, tourists are usually glad to talk about it.

Thus, it is important to know what travellers think about the destination and to understand which is its reputation on the market: if travellers share online negative or positive comments about a hotel or a destination, this can influence the decision of prospective travellers. **A trend of good or bad comments would very likely hurt or help the business.**

A study of the Internet World Stats on the European market has demonstrated that **social media activities** have overall increased and the online European usage of social networks has grown significantly in 2009: around 30% of users connect regularly with social networks, with an increase **of 18%** from 2008, and **more than 60%**

of online Europeans now engage with social media on a regular basis (a number that in some countries, such as the Netherlands, **increases up to 74%**).

These trends were initially intended as a threat for companies and Destination Management Organizations but recently they have given them the opportunity to create new marketing vehicles with significant effects on their businesses: they are starting to create their personal profiles on Trip Advisor or Facebook, answering to the posts of their customers, updating their "status" constantly, providing new stimulus to their customers for visiting them.

The **value of the information contained in the the online comment and feedback by the travellers, also called User Generated Content**, is crucial for DMOs and tourism managers because, thanks to it, they are able **to better shape marketing strategies for their products and services**, increasing their online reputation and consequently their value. Still Crofts (1999) underlines that travel fora and travel blogs "are an inexpensive means to gather rich, authentic, and unsolicited customer feedback. Information technology advances and increasingly large numbers of travel blogs facilitate travel blog monitoring as a **cost-effective method** for destination marketers to assess their service quality and improve travellers' overall experiences."

Thus, the internet plays an important role both for the travellers and the tourism industry: DMOs and Tourism Marketing Managers are increasingly understanding the importance of online marketing and they are consequently adopting new and more efficient online marketing strategies.

On these bases, the goal of this study is to investigate the UGC as a manifestation of individual travel experiences. This paper presents an analysis of 4,764 posts retrieved from the Malta's forum in TripAdvisor, selected in 5 different languages. By **analyzing the posts written on travel fora** by tourists, using the approach of Argumentation Theory, the study aims at highlighting aspects of travellers' opinions that are usually underestimated but hide a **strong potential for destination management.**

# METHODOLOGY

This study suggests a methodology that DMOs and Tourism Marketing Managers can use to estimate the perception that travellers have of their product, as well as their positioning in the marketplace.

The purpose of the research was **a) to improve the understanding of people's reasons for visiting a given destination**, and **b) to enhance the effectiveness of destination promotional strategy**, by suggesting a method to discover tourists' opinions, and consequently adapt the offer.

The study has been performed on the **Republic of Malta**. The country has been chosen because of its **natural physical boundaries**, proper of an island, that identify it as a defined destination and allow a circumscription of the tourism phenomenon.

In order to understand which is the perception of the destination from the tourist perspective, online comments and feedback by the travellers have been analysed.

UGC have been collected on **TripAdvisor** (TA), that is deemed to be among the most popular and complete social network websites for travel and tourism. The data collection has been performed also on TripAdvisor's sister sites in different languages, namely **English, Italian, German, French and Spanish**, having considered that, according to the last annual report of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), the main tourism markets of Malta are UK, Italy, Germany and France. The Spanish language one has been taken into consideration due to the relevant number of UGC in that language.

The collection of data has been accomplished **from the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2010 to the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2010**: all the posts written until that date in the section "Travel Forum" have been analysed.

TA Name	Threads
TripAdvisor.com	4,577
TripAdvisor.it	67
TripAdvisor.fr	29
TripAdvisor.de	7
TripAdvisor.es	84

Fig.1 — TripAdvisor Threads

Nevertheless, not all the threads (discussion among the users in the forum) have been

analysed: in fact **only posts exclusively concerning the destination** have been counted, avoiding those about transportation, accommodation or other issues. A second filtering has been done to sort out **only argumentatively relevant posts**.

TA Name	Threads	Relevant Posts	Arguments
TripAdvisor.com	4,577	1,185	201
TripAdvisor.it	67	81	41
TripAdvisor.fr	29	8	6
TripAdvisor.de	7	10	10
TripAdvisor.es	84	11	16

Fig.2 — Argumentatively relevant Threads

Posts on TripAdvisor.com have been categorized together with the label "**US+UK**". Posts on TripAdvisor.it, TripAdvisor.es, TripAdvisor.de, TripAdvisor.fr have been categorized with the label "**Europe**". Results have been divided according to these two main groups.

The **analysis of the "supply side" has been performed on the advertising brochure "Malta – Gozo – Comino"**, used by Malta's DMO; the brochure is written in English and is distributed by the destination management website.

## DATA COLLECTION

The identification of the arguments has been done thanks to an accurate argumentative content analysis. Analyzing tourism-related UGC with the lenses of argumentation theory seems to be particularly appropriate, given that this kind of texts have a strong **deliberative aim**, that is to help prospective tourists in taking a decision about their trips. UGC, in fact, cannot be considered just as online information because they don't simply aim to transmit the message from the sender to the receiver: on the contrary, they influence the receiver's attitude towards the decision, that is to say that they may give rise to a behavioural change. Therefore the argumentative analysis of tourism-related UGC, **helps to find out the main reasons why (arguments), according to tourists, a destination worth a visit**.

The discourse present in each relevant post has been deconstructed and reconstructed through

the syllogism, a kind of logical argument in which the conclusions are deduced or induced by premises. The arguments have been recognized through the identification of **argumentative keywords**, those words having the specific function of pointing and unlocking the arguments in a discourse.

The main interest was to find the reasons in support of a main claim, "**Malta is worth a visit**", that was defined at the beginning of the analysis. Only posts advancing such claim were taken into account; the analyst had to consider that many times the standpoint was formulated with a different wording (e.g. "I loved Malta", "We had a great time in Malta").

The following are example posts containing a main claim "Most of us love Malta", supported by arguments:

**Example 1** (from www.tripadvisor.com)

"Malta - trip report - Sep 16, 2008, 3:58 PM"

Hi, welcome to the Malta forum, so glad to hear you had a lovely holiday. **Most of us love Malta** and go back year after year. **There is always a lot to see** and **do** and **the locals are very friendly**. Many people make friends there and go back to see them too."

**Example 2** (from www.tripadvisor.com)

"Visiting Malta" - May 12, 2009, 4:44 PM"

Hey travelingmac, I've recently returned from a holiday to Malta [...]. Other than that **Malta is a safe destination** to choose because crime is low and **very 'see-able'** on your own.

In the first case there are three arguments such as: "(in Malta) there is always a lot to see", "(in Malta there is always a lot to) do", "(in Malta) locals are very friendly". The three arguments give deliberative information about the destination, pointing at the fact that "*Malta is worth a visit*" for three independent reasons. In the second example there are two main arguments in favour of visiting Malta: "Malta is safe (because crime is low)" and "Malta is very see-able".

## FINDINGS

All the arguments found in the posts have been classified according to **10 argument heads** defined by considering their frequencies in the

corpus of data



Fig.4 — Argument Heads

The **Atmosphere** head contains all those arguments, which refer to the aesthetic quality, the emotional and intellectual attitude, especially distinctive and pleasing, of the destination. The **Beach** head comprehends the arguments that classify the destination as the typical "sun and sea" resort. In the **Culture** one are the arguments referring to the uses and costumes, the traditions and ways of living of the inhabitants. The **Dimensions** head refers to the distances among the hot spots of the destination and the perceived dimensions of the island. In **History** are considered those arguments which refer to the historical heritage in terms of architecture and works of art. The **Landscape** head, comprehends the morphological aspects and the panorama, while **Nightlife** comprehends clubbing and entertainment activities. **Quality of life** consists in all those arguments that refer to the standard of living in the destination, while **Sightseeing and Exploration** refers to all those activities made by tourist to see and discover the destination.

Finally under the head **Variety of Activities**, are inserted those arguments that refer to the activities made by tourists to entertain themselves while at the destination.

The following map shows all the argumentative keywords with the respective arguments found

during the analysis of the posts in TripAdvisor.com (including the UK and the US markets). It

shows all the Argument Heads and the relative percentages of arguments.



## The “demand side” results

The results have been divided according to two main groups, depending on the linguistic and cultural similarities within TripAdvisor's sister sites. In **TripAdvisor.com**, comprehending the UK and US sister sites, the most frequent argument heads were: ‘Culture’ (22%), ‘Atmosphere’ (16%), ‘Variety of activities’ (13%), and ‘History’ (10%). This result can be interpreted as a preference of British and Americans to choose Malta for their holiday because they appreciate customs and popular traditions as well as its historic heritage, its pleasant atmosphere and the offer of entertainment activities.

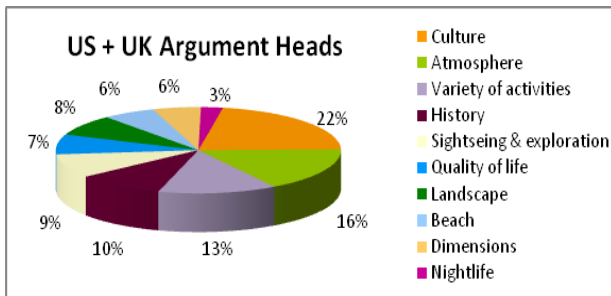


Fig.5— TripAdvisor US+UK Arguments

**British and Americans**, appreciated particularly **the friendly attitude of the locals** (37% of the arguments classified the ‘Culture’ head), **the sense of safety** of the island (16% of the arguments classified ‘Quality of Life’ head), its **beautiful natural views** (15% of the arguments classified ‘Sightseeing and Exploration’), and the authenticity, **not touristy taste of the destination** (13% of the arguments classified ‘Atmosphere’).

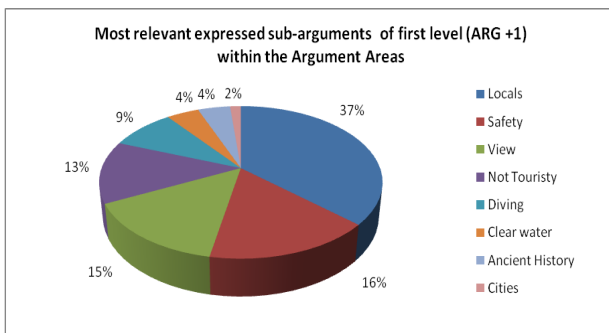


Fig.6— US+UK Sub-Arguments

Differently from TripAdvisor.com, in TripAdvisor EU (comprehending TripAdvisor.it, -.fr, -.de and -.es) the most frequent argument heads are “Atmosphere” (20%), “Beach” (20%) and

“Culture” (18%). Also “Variety of Activities” (11%) “Landscape” (10%) and “Sightseeing” (10%) have high scores. This could mean that people coming from **continental Europe are more interested in such characteristics**. It is relevant to mention that **“Beach” is important especially for Italians**. In addition, the Spanish public is formed specifically by young people, which look for friendship while at the destination.

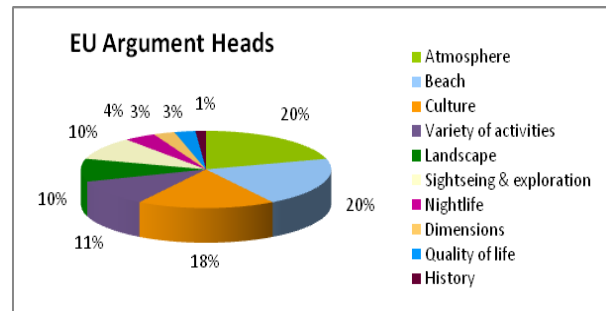


Fig.7— TripAdvisor EU Arguments

Arguments were usually put forward in a very general form, without adding details or evidence to further support the standpoint (e.g. “Meglio se andate di sera per godere la magica atmosfera della città silenziosa”; “Valletta è una città meravigliosa, con una storia molto interessante e unica al mondo” – “Better to go there at night to enjoy the magic atmosphere of the silent city” , “Valletta is a marvellous city, with a very interesting history, it is one of a kind”). Therefore it has not been possible to classify any sub-argument and it seems that for continental Europe tourists, Malta is a destination of interest above all for the **“relaxing atmosphere”**, the **“sandy beaches”** and the **“welcoming”** locals.

## The “supply side” results

The analysis of the supply side has been performed by using the same technique of the demand side. The promotional message used for Malta DMO focuses on arguments related to cultural and historical aspects of the island, beside presenting its numerous touristic attractions. Arguments are first put forward in very general terms – e. g. “our islands have an astonishing concentration of unique cultural and historical attractions” – and they are then supported with descriptions of peculiar attractions or aspects of the islands, which function as sub-arguments.

The main arguments used by the DMO to promote the destination can be grouped as follows:

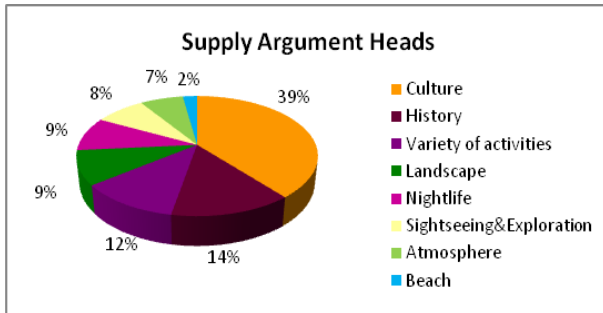


Fig.8— Malta's DMO Arguments

Not all the arguments supported by tourists are covered in the analysed promotional material. The main arguments used by the supply side are “**Culture**” and “**History**” and they are supported by a brief description of the megalithic temples, the baroque capital Valletta and the walled medieval city of Mdina. Two parts of the brochure are dedicated to present the many kinds of sport that can be practiced on the island (argument head ‘Variety of activities’), especially during Summer, and the many cultural events that are organized, both at the local (e.g. popular feasts) and the international level (e.g. music festivals) (argument heads ‘Culture’ and ‘Variety of activities’).

## CONCLUSIONS

As seen above, the brochure of the DMO focuses above all on two factors: “Culture” and “History”. Nevertheless, from the analysis of the demand side came out that tourists are also interested in other aspects of the destination (depending on the nationality), while they do not mention at all some other aspects of the destination that are advertised by the DMO, such as events or sport activities.

Comparing the results between the demand and the supply, it emerges that the historical side of the destination is felt as less important than other aspects to tourists: in fact, “History” got a fourth position in TripAdvisor.com and the tenth one in TripAdvisor.EU. In addition, only few times the demand side argues about sport and

Cultural events. On the contrary, “Culture” results to be very important, getting respectively the first position in TripAdvisor.com and the second in TripAdvisor EU. Particularly appreciated were the “**attitude of the locals**”, the “**food experience**” and the “**language**”.

Both for The analysis shows that there is only a **partial match between the perception of the destination and the way the DMO advertises it.**

In conclusion, the study gives useful information about tourists' preferences: the results gathered could be complementary to the data already obtained by Malta's DMO with different studies, and could be useful for creating new marketing strategies focused on product differentiation according to the nationality of the tourists. Moreover, by knowing the preferences of the target markets, the DMO could better identify its weaknesses and strengthens, shaping its image and reputation focusing on the customers' perception.



## AUTHORS



**Prof. Lorenzo Cantoni** is scientific director of [webatelier.net](http://webatelier.net), professor and Dean of the faculty of communication sciences at the Università della Svizzera italiana (Lugano, Switzerland). He graduated in Philosophy and holds a PhD in Education and Linguistics. He is also director of the laboratories [webatelier.net](http://webatelier.net), NewMinE Lab (New Media in Education Lab) and of eLab (eLearning Lab). His research interests range from eTourism to eLearning, up to eGovernment and Usability.

Lorenzo Cantoni is overall chair of the ENTER2011—18th International Conference for Information Technology and Travel & Tourism—, that brings together international experts in all aspects of Information and Communication Technologies in Travel and Tourism.



**Sara Fedele**, is a Research Assistant at [webatelier.net](http://webatelier.net). Her research activities deal with online destination marketing and communication, web 2.0, argumentation theory applied to the online tourism domain, specifically to UGC. She

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**Silvia De Ascaniis**, is a PhD candidate in the doctoral school Red-Ink, funded by the Swiss National Research Fund. Her research topic sets at the crossroads of argumentation theory, tourism and digital technologies. Since January 2008 Silvia De

Ascaniis has been part of the staff of eLab, the laboratory for e-learning applications of USI/SUPSI, where she works as instructional designer and assists teachers and academic staff in developing and managing courses.

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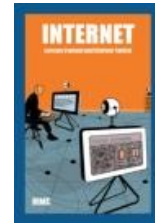
The academic laboratory [webatelier.net](http://webatelier.net) is part of the faculty of Communication Sciences at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI), based in Lugano, Switzerland. [Webatelier.net](http://webatelier.net) is specialized in research and development in the field of online communication and ICT in general, stressing the 'human side' of it. Most activities focus on analysis, design and promotion of the online communication for hotels, destinations cruise companies and other travel and tourism players. Its main field of research is nowadays New Media in Tourism Communication and it combines a strong academic background with a relevant business experience.

## PUBLICATIONS

### Selected books:

Cantoni, L., N. Di Blas, S. Rubinelli, S. Tardini (2008). *Pensare e comunicare*. Milano, Apogeo

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