THE ECOTOURISM HUB

A joint cross-border marketing strategy for peripheral islands

[Received December 12th 2020; accepted May 16th 2021 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.124]

Karl Agius

University of Malta <karl.agius.05@um.edu.mt>

ABSTRACT: Notwithstanding their ecotourism potential, small peripheral islands have been closely associated with the enjoyment of sun, sea and sand (3S) as their major tourism product. Fieldwork was conducted in a group of islands/archipelagos collectively known as the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago to identify marketing challenges. Interviews were held with stakeholders to assess their views on the use of a joint cross-border marketing strategy to overcome such challenges. Marketing challenges identified included limited promotion, mostly conducted indirectly, and spearheaded by 3S tourism operators owing to the limited resources of ecotourism operators. Results indicate that several joint marketing and cross-border initiatives are already in place and others are being developed. This approach has the potential to avoid a scenario where small islands are overshadowed by bigger islands and reduces futile competition. By pooling resources, islands will be in a better position to determine their brand, reach more markets and showcase their distinctiveness. Furthermore, products that promote cross-border island hopping increase the competitiveness of small peripheral islands and archipelagos which have experienced habitat fragmentation or islands which are too small to serve as an ecotourism destination on their own.

KEYWORDS: archipelagos, central Mediterranean, ecotourism, joint-marketing, cross-border

'Warm water' islands are subject to consistent branding exercises presenting themselves or finding themselves presented by insiders and outsiders as 'typical tropical' (Baldacchino, 2020). This explains why Sun, Sea and Sand (3S) tourism, which takes place over the summer months, is a leading attribute for island destinations in the Mediterranean (Alipour et al., 2020). Ecotourism, a type of tourism that takes place in natural settings and involves interpretation and embraces sustainability (Weaver & Lawton, 2007), has been proposed in Mediterranean islands as an alternative to mass tourism. This is due to its capacity to mitigate the impact of mass tourism on the environment as well as seasonality (Said, 2017). Furthermore, ecotourism development can respond to the latest tourism trends such as rising awareness on sustainability among tourists (UNWTO, 2019). Market research also suggests that post-COVID-19, people will seek out natural spaces and quality experiences (GEF, 2020).

Notwithstanding their association with 3S, islands in the central Mediterranean can serve as ecotourism destinations due to their extensive protected areas (both terrestrial and marine) and rich biodiversity (Agius et al., 2018). This is especially the case for peripheral

islands, which tend to be naturally richer (Agius et al., 2019; Halpenny, 2001) leading to what Weaver (1993) refers to as regional ecotourism. Furthermore, peripherality and remoteness are nowadays considered a marketing opportunity to create destination distinctiveness (Chaperon & Theuma, 2015; MTA, 2021). As a result, the negative connotations associated with the periphery are challenged and the periphery becomes an experiential core and a centre for tourism based on ecological and cultural distinctiveness (Weaver, 2017). While at face value such islands have enormous opportunities for ecotourism development, literature shows that little has changed since Diamantis (2000) stated that ecotourism in the Mediterranean region is in its "infancy stage". This can be attributed to a combination of factors, a number of which are related to marketing deficiencies.

Whilst several islands are grouped together forming archipelagos, they face fragmentation when it comes to promotional efforts (Cannas & Giudici, 2015) especially when they are separated not only geographically but also in terms of governance (Johnson, 2015). In most cases this is due to attempts by islands to challenge their competitors and lure tourists to their space in what has been considered as a 'zero-sum' game (Baldacchino, 2015a). Apart from individual initiatives, there have been other approaches to market islands, including joint marketing strategies (Royle, 2015). In such cases, the marketing message is that to enjoy the full experience of the archipelago, visiting the whole archipelago is a must and the islands are depicted as diverse, attractive and complimentary destinations. This promotes island-hopping (Baldacchino, 2015a). In this approach, cooperation is considered to be more beneficial than competition in promotion of peripheral islands (Zhang, 2010). This is also beneficial for the archipelago as it creates a diverse touristic experience giving a group of islands an advantage over single islands, particularly if they are small (Sheldon, 2005). Brand consolidation has also been supported on the basis that some islands might have no particular attraction that differentiate them from larger, more central islands and thus such islands would rather collaborate for the benefit of the archipelago (Connell, 2015).

This joint marketing approach has also been promoted in the case of regions which encompass a number of archipelagos as these are much better marketed and branded in their totality than in their peculiarity (Cannas & Giudici, 2015; Stratford et al., 2011). In such circumstances, it has been argued that the exploitation of the different characteristics of islands must include a simple and effective marketing strategy that puts focus on the region and which places the smaller archipelagos as part of this strategy leading to a multiple tourism product (Karampela et al., 2015). In supporting this argument, Karampela et al. (2015) argue that satellite islands tend to gain as they would receive some of the tourists even for day trips. However, this is not necessarily the form of tourism that the islands need and that the local communities expect for their livelihood (e.g., D'Anna et al., 2016).

In fact, joint marketing strategies are not a panacea for marketing and tourism problems faced by islands and myriad challenges have been outlined. In the case of archipelagos promoted through joint marketing strategies, all islands within the territory tend to be gathered under the umbrella of a single image (Fathimat, 2015) and not all islands are featured prominently (Baldacchino & Ferreira, 2013). Smaller islands can get overshadowed by larger islands. This is because tourism marketing related policies are normally decided on the bigger islands where the government or responsible tourism authority is stationed (Chaperon & Theuma, 2015). This not only leads to core-periphery relations (Chaperon & Bramwell, 2013) but also affects which secondary islands are promoted or not (Connell,

2015) and leads to inter-island rivalry (Agius, 2018). Johnson (2015) argues that while island hopping may offer a degree of attraction to an archipelago, in the case of archipelagos which are divided into different jurisdictions, each with their own tourism industry, a sense of competition may unfold. Furthermore, representation of 'diversity within unity' of an archipelago through brand consolidation has its risks and might either showcase diversity or portray a skewed image of the archipelago (Baldacchino & Ferreira, 2015). In addition, joint marketing strategies face inertia as peripheral islands are not only more difficult to reach and depart from (especially in case of bad weather) adding to travel inconvenience, but fares may be more expensive thus discouraging island hopping (Agius et al., 2021).

In fact, stakeholders from smaller islands may disagree with such an approach since they cannot miss out on tourism which is considered the solution to their economic misfortunes (Baldacchino, 2020). Tourism on islands may account for 10% to 50% of their total employment (European Commission, 2020) making the arrival of tourists key for the livelihood of local communities. As a result, communities of peripheral islands might recommend promotion of peripheral islands as a separate destination (Chaperon & Bramwell, 2011). The consideration that all small islands could have their own distinctive and unique image is perhaps impossible (Baldacchino & Ferreira, 2013). Considering these different scenarios, it becomes clear that specific versus generic island branding and marketing strategies have been quite controversial and are in fact said to "bedevil island tourism" (Butler, 2015, p. xxiii). In the case of joint marketing strategies involving islands and archipelagos with different jurisdictions, these challenges can be augmented. However, islands in each territory may also market themselves against each other and at the same time embrace island hopping as an additional means to attract tourists to islands (Johnson, 2015).

The situation is even more complex when it comes to promotion of ecotourism on small islands due to parallel reputational messages associated with the island itself and those that arise from the particular products and services that the island has to offer (Baldacchino, 2020). In the context of promoting an island as an ecotourism destination one should keep in mind that ecotourism operators tend to be small-scale with limited resources (Buckley, 2009). In addition, the relatively small entrepreneurial pool makes it difficult for operators to conduct promotion of the sector on their own (d'Hauteserre, 2016). However, joint marketing strategies focusing on a specific niche (Royle, 2015), which bring together ecotourism operators from various islands, are more cost-effective and enable operators to communicate more effectively with potential customers and reach a wider target audience (Page & Dowling, 2002; Wearing & Neil, 2009). This is particularly effective in vertical joint marketing where ecotourism operators offering different services such as accommodation and excursions join forces (Wearing & Neil, 2009). Such ecotourism networks across islands can boost ecotourism development (Anderson, 2009).

Few studies have analysed marketing efforts in the central Mediterranean region, in particular for small islands (see e.g., Bretero, 2014; Chaperon & Bramwell, 2013; Di Mario, 2017; Mariani et al., 2016; Sgroi, 2014), or joint marketing strategies to promote ecotourism in peripheral areas (see e.g., Agius, 2018; Garrod & Wilson, 2004). This is even more so for cross-border cooperation in tourism destination marketing (Tosun et al., 2005) which has been neglected in tourism research (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019). The aim of this study is thus twofold. First, it aims to assess existing marketing challenges, especially in promoting central Mediterranean peripheral islands as ecotourism destinations. Second, the study assesses the views of stakeholders on the use of a cross-border joint marketing strategy to overcome such challenges giving due attention to practical initiatives undertaken across

the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago. The present study furthers Johnson's (2015) and Weaver's (2017) assertions by using the core-periphery framework and joint marketing strategies across territories with different jurisdiction to analyse stakeholders' views on joint cross-border marketing strategies favouring the development of an ecotourism hub across the central Mediterranean region. In the context of this study, joint cross-border marketing in the central Mediterranean region involves cooperation whereby the core in each territory (with an already strong tourism industry and brand) acts as a gateway/supporting brand, whereas the small peripheral islands and smaller archipelagos collectively serve as a hub for ecotourism. The study shows how joint marketing strategies can help peripheral islands and archipelagos in the central Mediterranean region to be better promoted through a common brand rather than ending up being overshadowed by one another.

Such a new approach will address a challenge faced by most islands in the region, that of being unable to determine their own brand (Baldacchino, 2020). Instead, as 'typical tropical' or 3S islands, small peripheral islands are presented as ecotourism destinations with nature and the marine environment placed as a major pillar of the brand along with other supporting pillars that back ecotourism. Joint marketing strategies also encourage island hopping to peripheral islands. This increases the competitiveness of solitary islands, islands which are too small to serve as an ecodestination on their own, or islands that have experienced habitat fragmentation and which are seeking to develop a more sustainable form of tourism to respond to tourism trends and demand. Furthermore, owing to the limited resources of ecotourism operators which are small scale, and the limited pool on individual islands, joint marketing efforts enable ecotourism operators to communicate more effectively and reach out to more potential markets. This cooperation reduces tension resulting from intense competition between islands. As a result of joint marketing strategies run in parallel with other marketing initiatives, small and peripheral islands which are usually side-lined, are placed 'on the radar' and attract sustainable island tourism towards their shores, which benefits local communities while preserving the environment and local traditions.

Materials and Methods

The area of study consists of archipelagos and islands, all situated in the central Mediterranean region and which straddle the territorial boundary between two sovereign states: Italy and Malta. These are: the Pelagian Islands (comprising Lampedusa and Linosa); the Aegadian Islands (comprising Favignana, Levanzo and Marettimo); the Aeolian Islands (comprising Lipari, Vulcano, Salina, Filicudi, Alicudi, Panarea and Stromboli) the island of Pantelleria; the island of Ustica as well as the islands of Gozo and Comino (forming part of the Maltese Archipelago). Excluding Lampedusa and Pantelleria that have their own airport, all islands are reachable only by sea. As can be seen in Figure 1, Sicily serves as a gateway island for the Aegadian Islands, Ustica and the Aeolian Islands. Malta is the main access point to the Maltese archipelago as the only international airport and cruise liner terminal are both found here (Agius et al., 2021). While each standalone island and archipelago under Italian jurisdiction has their own Municipality (with the exception of the Aeolian islands that have a Municipality on Lipari and three Municipalities on Salina), they administratively belong to the Region of Sicily dominated by the biggest island - Sicily. In the case of the Maltese Islands, a small island state and member of the European Union, the central government is found on Malta but Gozo has a Ministry dedicated for Gozo affairs and thus a strong voice in the national government. The island of Comino with just 2 residents

administratively falls under the local government of Għajnsielem, Gozo. Table 1 shows different demographic characteristics of the islands in the area of study.

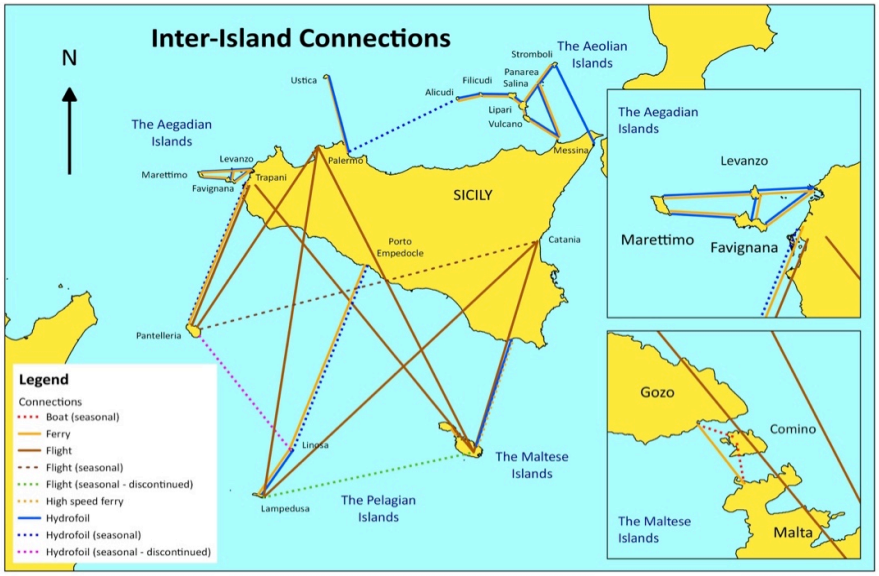

Figure 1 - The Maltese-Sicilian archipelago and connectivity services. (Map drawn for author by Andrea Pace.)

Factor	**Island/archipelago**					
	Sicily					**Malta**
Peripheral island / archipelago	Aegadian Islands	Pelagian Islands	Aeolian Islands	Pantelleria	Ustica	Gozo Comino
Inbound Tourists	207,843	253,710	132,516	151,917	15,632	92,715
Population	5,540	6,141	15,419	7,759	1,307	33,388
Area (km^2)	38	44.3	117	51.5	8	69.9
Distance from mainland (km)	13 Levanzo	167 Linosa	22 Vulcano	85	67	2 Comino

Table 1 - Characteristics of the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago.[1]

[1] Sources: ENAC, 2018; Gallia, 2012; Himes, 2007; ISTAT, February 6, 2017; ISTAT 2020; La Mesa & Vacchi, 1999; Libero Consorzio Comunale di Trapani, 2019; Nicolosi et al.,2018; NSO, 2020a; Peronaci & Luciani, 2015; Schillaci, 2016; Serio et al., 2006; Tudisca et al., 2013.

The islands were chosen due to their location in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and their proximity to each other. This enabled the researcher to fulfil the overarching objective of the research: that of presenting islands in the central Mediterranean region as an ecotourism hub and study the potential of joint cross-border marketing of islands. This is supported by the fact that while each island has their particular attributes, the islands in the central Mediterranean region have been considered as a dynamic network – known collectively as the Sicilian archipelago (Baldacchino, 2015b) or, as referred to by Camonita (2019), the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago.

Fieldwork across the area of study was conducted between 2015 and 2018. The relatively extensive period of data collection allowed the researcher to visit and sojourn on the islands. Throughout this period, 143 interviews were held with stakeholders across the entire area of study in order to obtain their views on various aspects related to ecotourism and marketing. As per Okech (2011) and Orams (1999), ecotourism stakeholders interviewed included locals, tourism industry (including tour operators, guides, private marketing agencies, service providers such as transport services and the hospitality industry), tourists, government representatives (tourism policy makers and politicians), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics. Two sub-types of strategic informant sampling technique were used to recruit interviewees. The first is expert sampling which involves the selection of 'typical' and 'representative' individuals. The second technique used, also known as snowball sampling, involves asking an initial set of informants to propose other potential sample members (Finn et al., 2000). Table 2 shows the distribution of stakeholders with whom interviews were conducted in the area of study whereas Table 3 shows the distribution of males and females.

Interviews were held face to face, but necessary follow-ups clarifications and updates were done over the phone or via videoconference (especially in 2020 due to COVID-19) to obtain information on developments. The concurrent use of face to face and online interviews has been used in tourism research (Power et al., 2017) since the use of virtual platforms also permits valid and high quality interviews (Suryani, 2013). Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were kept semi-structured and informal. This exploratory approach allowed the researcher to obtain as much information as possible on a topic which has not received much attention in the literature.

No formal questions were prepared but a checklist of topics derived from the literature review and the research plan was kept in hand to guide the researcher throughout the interview. There is a gap in the literature not only on the marketing of islands and archipelagos in the central Mediterranean Region as ecotourism destinations but also on joint cross-border marketing strategies. Therefore, a series of topics were identified so as to respond to the research questions. Marketing issues tackled during the interviews included: (1) awareness of the islands as a destination; (2) the image used to market the islands; (3) the impact of external and internal actors on the image of islands; (4) the role of protected areas in marketing ecotourism; (5) marketing efforts in place and limitations; (6) challenges in marketing small islands; (7) the role of the archipelago in marketing efforts; (8) cross-border initiatives and (9) joint marketing strategies as a means to develop an ecotourism hub in the central Mediterranean region.

Ecodestination	Count %	Stakeholders					
		Locals	Tourists	Tourism industry	Academics	Government	NGOs
Aegadian Islands	Count	3	8	7	1	2	2
	%	13	35	30	4	9	9
Pelagian Islands	Count	2	9	5	1	1	4
	%	9	41	23	5	5	18
Pantelleria	Count	4	8	7	1	4	5
	%	14	28	24	3	14	17
Maltese Islands	Count	3	7	13	1	4	3
	%	10	23	42	3	13	10
Aeolian Islands	Count	4	7	6	1	3	1
	%	18	32	27	4.5	14	4.5
Ustica	Count	3	5	4	1	2	1
	%	19	31	25	6	13	6

Table 2 - Distribution of stakeholders with whom interviews were held in the area of study.

Ecodestination	Count %	Gender		Total interviews
		Male	Female	
Aegadian Islands	Count	19	4	23
	%	83	17	
Pelagian Islands	Count	19	3	22
	%	86	14	
Pantelleria	Count	26	3	29
	%	90	10	
Maltese Islands	Count	27	4	31
	%	87	13	
Aeolian Islands	Count	18	4	22
	%	82	18	
Ustica	Count	12	4	16
	%	75	25	

Table 3 - Proportion of males and females and number of interviews held in the area of study.

The use of a checklist ensured that a consistent range of topics was covered in each interview (Wearing et al., 2002) and allowed the researcher to ask supplementary questions or to ask the interviewee to explain the answer provided (Veal, 2006). Whilst an effort was made to discuss all aspects with the various stakeholders, this technique allowed for the flexibility required to ask stakeholders questions which were relevant to them and to focus on their expertise. As per Dooley (2002), data collection through interviews was considered to be completed when experiencing exhaustion of sources, saturation of categories and the emergence of regularities.

Once fieldwork was completed all transcripts were prepared. Data collected were analysed manually following the approach adopted by Stoffelen (2019) to analyse tourism data collected from various stakeholders in a cross-border region. Research ethics consideration was fulfilled through the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) of the University of Malta.

Results and Discussion

In islands in which tourism is a major economic activity and whereby several locals either work in the field or indirectly depend on the sector, promotion of the respective destination is a subject of major concern and interest. This section presents the major views of stakeholders interviewed. Four key themes emerged including (1) core-periphery relationships that characterise promotion of the islands/archipelagos; (2) the impact of internal and external actions on the brand of islands/archipelagos; (3) emphasis on 3S tourism and the role of natural resources is shaping the image of the islands; (4) the role of joint cross-border marketing strategies to promote islands and archipelagos in the central Mediterranean region as an ecotourism hub.

Tourism promotion in archipelagos is characterised by core-periphery relationships

The regional government of Sicily has the main responsibility to promote the respective territory. Municipalities of respective archipelagos/islands have a delegate responsible for tourism. Yet they have limited financial resources and capacity to contribute further in this area and their work is restricted to events and a few ad hoc initiatives. Tourism operators from Sicilian islands argued that the islands do not receive adequate promotion. The islands are mostly known within the regional and national territory and are thus dependent on domestic tourism which is their main market. Operators added that the islands are unpopular and some are even unknown in international markets. Supporting this argument, tourists interviewed said that few of their friends had heard about the destinations.

Owing to the importance of tourism for the economy of each island, interviews held showed that each island/archipelago expects considerable attention in terms of promotion. Notwithstanding expectations, stakeholders from peripheral islands said that promotion in the area of study is influenced by a form of hierarchy whereby bigger islands receive more attention and, in some cases, completely overshadow smaller peripheral islands. Politicians said that in the case of the Sicilian islands, promotion of the territory is challenging due to the extensive area of the region which includes not only the largest island of the Mediterranean but also three archipelagos and two other islands. Operators criticised official slogans used such as 'Sicily - your happy island' and 'Sicily - island of art' arguing that these dominate the small islands and archipelagos. When visiting the official portal of Visit Sicily, Ustica, Pantelleria as well as the Aegadian, Pelagian and Aeolian archipelagos receive scant attention. Sicily, the main island, tends to get the most prominent spots on promotional material and platforms. Forming part of a small island state with three main islands, Gozo and Comino face a similar albeit much smaller challenge than their Sicilian counterparts.

This can be explained through the core-periphery relationship whereby a peripheral island is subordinate to another island (Baldacchino, 2015a). In the case of the Maltese Islands, Malta serves as a core to the peripheral islands of Gozo and Comino (Chaperon & Theuma, 2015). In the case of the Sicilian islands, one finds a series of nested core-periphery relationships as described by Weaver (1998). This implies that Sicily serves as the outer core; Lampedusa, Favignana and Lipari (as the main island of the surrounding archipelagos) play the role of an inner core; whereas the other smaller islands of the respective archipelagos along with solitary islands such as Pantelleria and Ustica serve as the periphery (see Table 4). The more one moves to the periphery, the less attention the island tends to get in terms of promotion.

Outer core	Sicily					Malta
Inner core	Favignana	Lampedusa	Lipari			
Periphery	Levanzo Marettimo	Linosa	Vulcano Salina Stromboli Filicudi Alicudi Panarea Stromboli	Pantelleria	Ustica	Gozo Comino

Table 4 - Core-periphery relationships in the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago.

Due to the limited attention given to small archipelagos, operators interviewed said that the private sector on Sicilian islands pooled resources forming consortia that developed portals and initiatives promoting specific archipelagos or islands. Politicians said that municipalities have participated in fairs to promote the respective island/archipelago. These campaigns have, in several cases, run in parallel with regional promotional efforts (during the same fair) to ensure that the archipelago/island receives concrete attention.

A politician from the Aegadian Islands emphasised that promotion revolves around the archipelago, while considering the differentiation of islands. However, operators from small peripheral islands claimed that promotional efforts tend to exclude smaller islands so as to keep as much tourism flows on the gateway or main island. As a result, smaller islands in each archipelago which tend to have more pristine environments and which at times earn them a higher level of protection tend to receive even less attention notwithstanding their ecotourism potential (Agius et al., 2019; Agius & Chaperon, 2021). Operators interviewed on Levanzo and Marettimo claimed that most promotional efforts revolve around the island of Favignana. Therefore, such islands are not only overshadowed by the main island of Sicily but also by the bigger island of their archipelago. The higher flow of tourists to the main island (which some believe to be a matter of better connectivity services, shorter distance and cheaper price rather than favourable promotion) leads to rivalry between islands within the same archipelago. Some have seen this as an advantage as less promotion means that less tourists visit the smaller islands thus indirectly protecting the pristine and fragile environment which is key for ecotourism. This niche is considered to be more appropriate for small islands rather than mass tourism that characterises main islands such as Lampedusa and Favignana throughout summer. However, locals from peripheral islands see this differently and argue that this challenge can be mitigated through adequate promotion of the islands which goes beyond the 3S image.

While the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) is responsible for promoting the Maltese archipelago through the brand Visit Malta, the Ministry for Gozo has a tourism directorate which promotes the island as a distinct destination. Similar to small Sicilian islands, the island of Gozo has an association of tourism operators, which has lobbied over the span of

two decades for Gozo to be promoted as an all-year-round distinct tourist destination. Furthermore, Gozo has used its power to address core-periphery challenges in promotion (see e.g., Chaperon & Bramwell, 2013). Politicians said that in recent years Gozo has been promoted as a destination in itself through the portal Visit Gozo. The peripheral island not only promotes itself on the main island of the archipelago to attract some of the over 2.8 million tourists that visit Malta (NSO, 2020b) and the local population but also participates in international fairs. Gozo received specific individual promotion in international markets (UK, Italy, France and Germany) through online portals, television spots and publications and has been marketed as 'a unique destination for all'. However, inbound tourists visiting only Gozo and Comino region amounted to 92 715 in 2019, domestic tourism accounted for 245 477 in 2018 while same-day visitors accounted for 88.2 per cent of the total inbound visitors to Gozo and Comino in 2019 (NSO, 2020a). Furthermore, the islands still experience seasonality (GTA, 2020). Therefore, marketing Gozo as a sole destination may not necessarily be the ideal strategy for tourism on the island and to address seasonality.

Islands are unable to determine their brand

Owing to the limited attention received from the regional government in Sicily and limited resources of operators and Municipalities, locals and operators from the Sicilian islands said that the islands get most of their promotion indirectly through popular personalities including artists, fashion house owners and politicians. Whenever personalities visit the islands for a holiday or buy a property on the islands (e.g., Prada on Levanzo, Armani on Pantelleria and Berlusconi on Lampedusa), the islands receive various media mentions. Similarly, the Aeolian islands, especially Panarea, have been put under the spotlight when international artists holiday on the islands (see e.g., Guida Sicilia, 2019). The fact that several celebrities choose the islands for their summer holidays is used by operators to lobby travel agents, lure potential customers or even to impress occasional travel journalists invited to the islands. While the natural beauty of such islands and the sea serve as a background to introduce the islands to readers, most of this marketing revolves around celebrities. The islands are portrayed as sea-side tourism destinations with emphasis made on the quality of the sea, or presented as a paradise to the extent that even celebrities choose these destinations for their summer vacation.

In other circumstances, islands receive media attention because of a crisis (Agius, 2021). Lampedusa has received extensive promotion through the media indirectly because of the constant migration crisis (Melotti et al., 2018). To some operators, the constant reference to migration has served as bad marketing for tourism on the island. Other operators believe that media mentions and the visits by various personalities, including the Prime Minister, the President of the Republic and the Pope, to express solidarity on the constant crisis has helped to put the island on the map. This argument has been supported by the fact that tourism on the islands has continued to increase over the past decade (Surico, 2020). Similarly, the Aeolian islands are mentioned in the news due to the eruption of volcanoes, evacuations of people and safety concerns (see, e.g. Euronews, 2019; Natanson, 2019). Forty years after an aviation disaster close to the island, Ustica still hits the headlines because of it (see, e.g. The Brussels Times, 2020; Monteleone, 2020). Yet, after such sporadic mentions, islands soon revert back to invisibility experiencing a complete media blackout. On the other hand, islands receive promotion through popular documentaries broadcast on Italian television stations normally focusing on the natural environment and cultural heritage of the islands, their people and their traditions related to fisheries, agriculture and gastronomy.

The limited promotion given to islands and the dependence on media mentions implies that islands have not always been able to present their own image. Instead, this has been mostly decided by outsiders. In fact, in some cases, tourists interviewed argued that the image portrayed in the press did not reflect the real scenario on the island. Whilst islands are considered seaside tourism destinations (Baldacchino, 2020), existing media coverage based on the visits of celebrities throughout the summer season has further strengthened this image. In addition, most media coverage and programmes target domestic markets. As further discussed below, these factors have failed to support efforts promoting the islands as all-year-round ecotourism destinations in international markets.

Emphasis on 3S camouflaging ecotourism potential of islands

Stakeholders interviewed across the area of study said that it is not only the media that portray the islands as 3S destinations. Initiatives taken by responsible authorities have not always been effective in portraying the right image of the islands. Furthermore, the private sector has at times opted to focus on 3S tourism that is easy to target. In fact, major actors form the private sector involved in promotion come from the hotel industry situated on major islands. In most cases these have a specific interest in 3S tourism owing to their proximity to beaches or sea-side resorts. A case in point is the island of Lampedusa which has been described by local tourism operators as "the Caribbean island in the Mediterranean". Ecotourism operators expressed disappointment that the islands remain associated with seaside tourism and 3S which revolves exclusively around the summer season and is concentrated in mid-August (known as *Ferragosto* in the Sicilian Islands and the *Santa Marija weekend* in the Maltese Islands). This is because such forms of tourism lead to seasonality in tourism flows, instability in employment and a negative environmental impact due to intense pressure on resources over a short period of time. On the other hand, alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism, which can address such trends, do not receive adequate attention. As a result, few tourists visit the islands off season. This leads to a vicious circle as ecotourism operators have less funds to invest in marketing efforts. Furthermore, owing to direct and indirect attention given to 3S and the limited attention given to ecotourism, the islands in the area of study experience problems faced by other archipelagos whereby visitors become aware of the possibility of ecotourism excursions only when they reach the islands (see e.g., Pires et al., 2016).

On the other hand, mass tourism can facilitate investment in sustainable tourism infrastructure, which allows ecotourism to flourish. This is especially the case of soft-ecotourism which is said to overlap with mass tourism. The overlap between ecotourism and 3S tourism has been supported by the argument that there are ecotourism activities that play a role as a form of mass tourism (Johnson, 2006; Weaver, 2008). A case in point are ecotourism excursions practised in marine settings and considered to be important components of mass tourism. For instance, marine activities such as SCUBA diving and snorkelling are related to 3S tourism but provided that they are carried out in a sustainable manner, one cannot find any reason not to consider them as ecotourism activities as they involve learning about the marine environment and are carried out in a natural setting (Johnson, 2006). However, the overlap between (soft) ecotourism and conventional mass tourism is ambiguous and a matter of contention (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

The presence of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) – spatially-delimited areas of the marine environment that are managed, at least in part, for conservation of biodiversity (Edgar et al., 2007), Natura 2000 sites, national parks and nature reserves as well as other related ecotourism attractions, such as turtle rehabilitation centres and interpretation centres, are

considered by ecotourism operators to be tools that self-promote the islands to attract ecotourists and to counteract the lack of emphasis made on the natural attractions of the islands. Sightings of wildlife such as the endangered monk seal in the Aegadian islands, dolphins around Pantelleria, whales off the cliffs of Gozo as well as turtles and sharks in the Pelagian islands and respective reports online have also contributed to promote the islands among ecotourists. Several agri- and rural-tourism initiatives, especially on Gozo are considered to have the potential to support this sector.

While Destination Market Organisations (DMOs) and authorities responsible for tourism promotion refer to the natural aspects of the islands, it is the sea, coasts and beaches that are given major attention in promotional efforts. While some islands such as Pantelleria have increased their emphasis on nature-based tourism, they have not managed to disassociate themselves from the typical tropical image that islands tend to have. Other islands such as Lampedusa have instead strengthened this notion owing to the quality of the sea (due to the presence of MPAs) which is used to further promote sea-side tourism rather than ecotourism activities. This implies that marketing efforts across the area of study have failed to target tourists to visit islands off season and for ecotourism purposes. Operators need to shift their focus from the summer season and overdependence on domestic markets. In this regard, adequate connectivity and organised ecotourism packages all year round are the key for the islands to attract ecotourists.

A cross-border marketing strategy for the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago

Various stakeholders including policy makers, operators and academics, have appealed for brand consolidation and the need to promote archipelagos rather than individual islands as each island had something different to offer which could prove to be added value for tourists to visit the archipelago. Meanwhile differentiation in islands of the same archipelago is not always fully exploited. For example, Lampedusa is sedimentary whilst Linosa is a volcanic island, offering different landscapes and different ecotourism experiences, but promotional efforts have not always capitalised on such aspects. This is vital considering that reaching the most peripheral islands includes further inconvenience and additional travel expenses. The concept of 'island hopping' has been promoted within archipelagos as an opportunity to experience the different characteristics of the islands and to counteract the aforementioned lack of attention given to peripheral islands. In this regard, it should be noted that island hopping featured as one of the most enjoyed activities by tourists interviewed and as a factor that motivated tourists to visit the islands. Similarly, island hopping was found to be the most favourite product in a study on ecotourism on islands (Weaver, 2017). Therefore, islands must seek to capitalise more on this experience.

The idea to extend island hopping to islands in the central Mediterranean region was raised by several stakeholders. This is because while islands in the area of study are similar to some extent, they are all unique in terms of biodiversity (including through endemicity), landscapes, and geology, giving the possibility to practise myriad ecotourism activities. Policy makers and academics interviewed remarked that promoting the various islands forming part of the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago would entail a joint-marketing strategy.

Stakeholders identified several marketing efforts and initiatives which already involve various islands from the central Mediterranean region. The Municipalities of Pantelleria and the Aegadian islands have supported co-marketing strategies to promote fights to

Trapani airport (a vital airport for the islands) on the website of a low-cost airline to increase tourism flow to the islands. In a particular case, a licensed ecoguide working with an ecotourism operator on Pantelleria explained how one of the products on sale was an ecotour taking pace on Pantelleria and the neighbouring Aegadian Islands. More recently, a DMO has been set up by tourism associations from each archipelago to promote all islands forming part of the Sicilian archipelago under the name "Islands of Sicily". The DMO is offering a product known as 'the grand tour' which involves island hopping over a fortnight to visit each island and experience different ecotourism excursions. Nature is used as one of the major pillars for marketing this product. A representative of the DMO said:

> *The Aegadian Islands have the biggest MPA in Italy and among the biggest in the Mediterranean and in Europe; Ustica has the first MPA instituted in Italy; Pantelleria has the only National Park in the Region of Sicily covering most of the island; the Pelagian Islands have nature reserves and an MPA whilst the Aeolian Islands have been named as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Not to mention the presence of endemic species and the vast range of ecotourism activities that can be practised on the islands. This is the image of the islands and there is all it takes for ecotourism activity to flourish through a product encompassing all small islands.*

Plans have also been made to expand the group of islands through a direct connection between islands of the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago. The initial idea was to introduce the use of seaplanes with Malta serving as a major aviation hub (Spiteri, 2016). However, according to stakeholders, this was abandoned due to changes in administration. Recently a tender was issued for the construction of a sea plane slipway (Transport Malta, 2021) which may revive plans. Private operators have also successfully run for two consecutive years a direct link between the Pelagian Islands and the Maltese islands thus giving one the opportunity to develop ecotourism products and island hopping across borders. An operator from Lampedusa said, "this brings added value to both the Maltese islands and the Pelagian islands as tourists visiting either archipelago can extend their stay on neighbouring islands".

Academics outlined other initiatives linking peripheral islands and which support ecotourism development. These include projects funded by the European Regional Development Fund with the involvement of MPAs from peripheral islands in both territories. This led to the development of education centres on marine life in Lampedusa and Gozo (Deidun, 2011), which are key for this niche since interpretation is a major pillar of ecotourism (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). More recently, the Aegadian islands as well as the islands of Gozo, Comino and Ustica have collaborated together on a project integrating management of MPAs and artisanal fishing (Comune di Favignana, 2020) further embracing sustainability – a core component of ecotourism.

Several advantages have been associated with joint cross border marketing strategies by stakeholders. Considering the small size of each island, island hopping across a wider area would give operators the possibility to organise ecotours with different durations ranging from few days to even a fortnight and help to fulfil the different expectations of the ecotourists. In the case of solitary islands such as Pantelleria and Ustica, such an approach would increase their competitiveness, facilitating island hopping to other islands and longer ecotours as in the case of other islands forming part of archipelagos. Joint marketing also helps solitary islands to gain visibility by giving those visiting other islands, and interested in extended ecotours, the possibility to incorporate them into the experience.

Therefore, this is considered a symbiotic relationship since solitary islands are promoted while enriching the ecotourism package through additional stopovers, making the tour more competitive.

A respondent (academic from Malta) said that whilst the Maltese islands have been heavily impacted by development and mass tourism, the archipelago could still benefit from this marketing effort in terms of ecotourism especially if emphasis is made on the peripheral islands: Gozo and Comino. This is because the islands have only a few small and fragmented terrestrial patches which are relatively wild and ideal for ecotourism. Therefore, it may be difficult to attract ecotourists, in particular the real specialists to the archipelago. On the other hand, by extending the experience to other islands this would increase the competitiveness of the ecotourism product being offered (Agius, 2018; Agius et al., 2019). Furthermore, whilst Gozo is promoted as a destination in itself, the island still experiences extensive seasonality. Therefore, joint marketing initiatives in the field of ecotourism can help to address this challenge.

Joint marketing can also help islands such as the Sicilian islands which, owing to limited resources, are promoted mainly in national fairs, to increase resources and target international markets. Through the joint marketing initiatives "Islands of Sicily", the islands have been promoted in various international fairs including London, Berlin, Monaco, Rimini and Milan. While the brand of Sicily is now being used to their advantage, islands are being put directly under the spotlight. Joint marketing efforts will thus help to address core-periphery relationships in archipelagos and competition between the various archipelagos. Furthermore, through this initiative, operators will have more say how to position and brand the islands in a distinctive manner other than 'typical tropical'.

Most local ecotourism companies tend to be small family-run businesses located in remote settings with insufficient promotion and distribution resources limiting their presence in tourism publication and fairs (McGahey, 2012). This applies to ecotourism operators in the area of study, which are mostly located in peripheral islands. Similar joint marketing initiatives to the "Islands of Sicily" extended across the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago will give ecotourism operators the opportunity to pool resources and team up with other tourism operators to promote their services. This will, target ecotourists, address seasonality whilst making tourism more sustainable through the influence of ecotourism operators. Islands and archipelagos in the area of study will thus be less over dependent on domestic tourism.

Several islands, especially Linosa, Gozo, Levanzo and some of the Aeolian islands, currently experience a high number of day trippers. Local communities have categorically expressed their disapproval for such excursions especially when organised by operators offering all-inclusive packages. In fact, it has been described as a 'hit and run' activity due to the negative impact left on respective islands and limited benefit experienced by the local communities. Respondents believe that joint marketing efforts supported by operators providing accommodation services for ecotours taking place across all islands, will address this challenge and ensure through their packages that tourists stay for a number of nights on various islands depending on the duration of the tour. Cross-border marketing efforts are also supported by the fact that the islands forming part of the ecotourism hub being proposed are not only relatively well connected but are also close to each other. Since the distance to travel from one island to another is relatively short, what is considered one of the greatest impacts of ecotourism, the carbon footprint in terms of travel, is also reduced.

While, according to the literature, islands have at times been keen to promote themselves individually, recent initiatives and claims made by operators and politicians during interviews have shown a new drive that is in favour of collaboration and that extends beyond individual archipelagos. Sicily and Malta will play a dual role in joint marketing efforts and resulting ecotourism products. First, through their established brands, Malta and Sicily will help to promote the less popular peripheral islands/archipelagos. The main islands will also play an important role to connect the different destinations as they are gateways to islands and archipelagos. Peripherality, which is considered a disadvantage, is used as an opportunity to lure tourists willing to experience ecotourism activities, avoid crowds and immerse in islands which still have pristine environments.

Joint cross-border marketing efforts by ecotourism operators may run in parallel with other promotional campaigns as suggested by Johnson (2015). Development of products with activities that can be practised off-season and reorganisation of services to cater for ecotourists all year round is key. This is especially the case for islands that have been linked with only one ecotourism activity such as diving in the case of Ustica. Ecotourism has played an important role to introduce ecocertification in the Maltese islands (Agius et al., 2017). Such ecocertification across the area of study can play an important role in marketing. Last but not least, such efforts need to be well structured to avoid being hindered by changes in administrations or bodies responsible for key decisions on promotion of the islands.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess existing marketing challenges, especially in promoting central Mediterranean islands as ecotourism destinations. Whilst Malta and Sicily have extensive differences in dimension, population size and governance, they both dominate promotional efforts and the brand of the respective territory. The other islands or archipelagos are overshadowed by the core. Nested core-periphery relationships have further penalised peripheral islands in archipelagos. Islands which are overshadowed tend to be more familiar within national markets and in fact are characterised by domestic tourism. Notwithstanding the ecotourism potential and their geography, islands are considered, in the eyes of potential visitors, to be sea-side destinations. This is galvanised by media mentions of islands related to 3S and limited efforts of tourism operators that either brand themselves as 3S destinations or seek to benefit from the short summer breaks of domestic tourists. Municipalities and operators from small Sicilian islands/archipelagos have limited resources to promote the islands on their own and on their own terms. Initiatives taken by archipelagos to promote themselves have failed to extend the tourism season whilst the promotion of Gozo as a distinct destination did not tackle the seasonality issue effectively, even experiencing a drop in the number of visitors (NSO, 2020a). The Gozo Tourism Association (GTA) confirmed that "the seasonality issue has not been surmounted fully" (GTA, 2020, p. 13).

Taking into account the pristine environment and higher level of protection, peripheral islands are better suited to attract ecotourism and addresses marketing and tourism challenges including seasonality. This entails positioning peripheral islands at the core of the ecotourism experience (Weaver, 2017) by applying Weaver's (1993) regional ecotourism proposal across a group of islands with different jurisdictions (Johnson, 2015). An innovative idea that has gained support among stakeholders in the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago is to capitalise on the popularity of the two main islands, Malta and Sicily

whilst developing a distinctive brand that embraces unpopular peripheral islands that raise curiosity and interest in international markets as novel destinations. In the case of the Maltese-Sicilian archipelago, a cross-border region with islands that, in political terms, belong to different states, this distinctiveness can be found in the rich natural attractions as well as local traditions and cultural aspects that complement each other. Joint marketing efforts can avoid futile competition, help operators to better promote such distinctiveness and reach more potential markets while giving islands the possibility to master their brand. Therefore, peripherality becomes an opportunity and a strength rather than just a threat and a weakness (Weaver, 2018).

The fact that the islands are close to each other and relatively well connected gives the possibility to build on existing initiatives and to develop a product that embraces all peripheral islands and archipelagos benefitting from the specific opportunities offered by each island. This promotes island hopping and presents the islands in the Central Mediterranean as an ecotourism hub. Such idea is supported by new travel trends as well as policies favouring sustainable tourism. To be successful, cross-border promotional efforts need to be coupled with improved connectivity to small islands, development of eco-certified ecotourism packages for various seasons, availability of ecotourism services all year round, upskilling of personnel (including overcoming language barrier in the Sicilian islands) and better coordination between the public (regional and local) and private sector in terms of promotion. The repositioning of peripheral islands in the central Mediterranean region as an ecotourism hub comes at a key moment when tourism stakeholders on islands are seeking to rethink and reimagine their tourism marketing strategies, respond to the demand for open and safe places and develop new itineraries as they prepare to bounce back from the coronavirus crisis.

REFERENCES

Agius, K. (2018). *Assessing the ecotourism potential of central Mediterranean islands with a case study on marine ecotourism* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture, University of Malta.

Agius, K. (in press). Doorway to Europe: Migration and its impact on island tourism. *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*.

Agius, K., Theuma, N., Deidun, A., & Zammit-Mangion, M. (2017, October 31 - November 4). The state of ecotourism development in the Maltese archipelago [Paper presentation]. In E. Özhan (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Thirteenth International MEDCOAST Congress on Coastal and Marine Sciences, Engineering, Management and Conservation* (pp. 315-326). Mediterranean Coastal Foundation.

Agius, K., Theuma, N., & Deidun, A. (2018). Does absence of charismatic species impact the ecotourism potential of Central Mediterranean islands? *Xjenza Online*, *6*, 153–164.

Agius, K., Theuma, N., Deidun, A., & Camilleri, L. (2019). Small islands as ecotourism destinations: A central Mediterranean perspective. *Island Studies Journal*, *14*(2), 115-136.

Agius, K., Theuma, N., & Deidun, A., (2021). So close yet so far: Island connectivity and ecotourism development in central Mediterranean islands. *Case Studies on Transport Policy*, *9*(1), 149-160.

Agius, K., & Chaperon, S. (2021). Stakeholder management and the imbalance of power: a central Mediterranean perspective on tourism in marine protected areas. In A. Mandić & L. Petrić (Eds.), *Mediterranean Protected Areas in the Era of Overtourism* (pp. 117-135). Springer.

Alipour, H., Olya, H. G, Maleki, P., & Dalir, S. (2020). Behavioral responses of 3S tourism visitors: Evidence from a Mediterranean island destination. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *33*, 100624.

Anderson, W. (2009). Promoting ecotourism through networks: Case studies in the Balearic Islands. *Journal of Ecotourism*, *8*(1), 51–69.

Angeloni, S. (2013). The competitiveness of Italy as a tourism destination. *Economia Aziendale Online*, *4*(2), 125-41.

Baldacchino, G. (2015a). More than island tourism: Branding, marketing and logistics. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago Tourism: Policies and Practices* (pp. 1-18). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Baldacchino, G. (2015b). Lingering colonial outlier yet miniature continent: Notes from the Sicilian archipelago. *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, *9*(2), 89-102.

Baldacchino, G. (2020). Island images and imaginations: beyond the typical tropical. In J. Riquet & M. Heusser (Eds.), *Imaging identity: text, mediality and contemporary visual culture* (pp. 301-318). Brill/Rodopi.

Baldacchino, G., & Ferreira, E. C. D. (2013). Competing notions of diversity in archipelago tourism: Transport logistics, official rhetoric and inter-island rivalry in the Azores. *Island Studies Journal*, *8*(1), 84-104.

Baldacchino, G., & Ferreira, E. C. D. (2015). Contrived complementarity: Transport logistics, official rhetoric and inter-island rivalry in the Azorean archipelago. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: Policies and practices* (pp. 85-102). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Bretero, B. (2014, December 22). *Isole Egadi: strategie per il rilancio e lo sviluppo turistico della destinazione*. Bruno Bretero Slide Share. https://www.slideshare.net/brunobertero/isole-egadi-strategie-per-il-rilancio-e-lo-sviluppo-turistico-della-destinazione

Buckley, R. (2009). *Ecotourism: Principles and practices*. CABI.

Butler, R. W. (2015). Forward archipelago tourism: Some thoughts and reactions. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: Policies and practices* (pp. xix-xxiii). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Camonita, F. M. (2019). Envisioning the Sicilian-Maltese archipelago: A Braudelian inspired triple-level analysis of a European cross-border region. *Island Studies Journal*, *14*(1), 125-146.

Cannas, R., & Giudici, E. (2015). Tourism relationships between Sardinia and its Islands: Collaborative or conflicting? In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: Policies and practices* (pp. 67-84). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Chaperon, S., & Bramwell, B. (2011). Views on the scale and types of tourism development in the rural periphery: The case of Gozo. In D. V. L Macleod & S. A. Gillespie (Eds.), *Sustainable tourism in rural Europe: Approaches to development. Advances in tourism* (pp. 151-165). Routledge / Taylor and Francis.

Chaperon, S., & Bramwell, B. (2013). Dependency and agency in peripheral tourism development. *Annals of tourism research*, *40*, 132-154.

Chaperon, S., & Theuma, N. (2015). The Malta-Gozo-Comino Story: Implication of a Malta-Gozo fixed link on tourism activity. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: policies and practices* (pp. 51-66). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Comune di Favignana. (2020, October 26). *Approvato il progetto INTERREG Italia-Malta "AMPPA"*. Parks.it. http://www.parks.it/riserva.marina.isole.egadi/dettaglio.php?id=61916

Connell, J. (2015). Competing islands? The Mamanuca and Yasawa Islands, Fiji. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: Policies and practices* (pp. 183-198). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

D'Anna, G., Fernández, T. V., Pipitone, C., Garofalo, G., & Badalamenti, F. (2016). Governance analysis in the Egadi Islands marine protected area: A Mediterranean case study. *Marine Policy*, *71*, 301-309.

d'Hauteserre, A. M. (2016). Ecotourism an option in small island destinations? *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *16*(1), 72-87.

Deidun, A. (2011). Managing Gozo's marine protected areas. *The Gozo Observer*, *25*, 8-10.

Di Mario, M. (2017). *I grandi eventi sportivi come strumento di marketing territoriale per il turismo* [Unpublished master's thesis]. LUISS.

Diamantis, D. (2000). Ecotourism and sustainability in Mediterranean islands. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *42*(4), 427-443.

Dooley, L. M. (2002). Case study research and theory building. *Advances in developing human resources*, *4*(3), 335-354.

Edgar, G. J., Russ, G. R., & Babcock, R. C. (2007). Marine protected areas. In S. D. Connell & B. M. Gillanders (Eds.), *Marine Ecology* (pp. 534-565). Oxford University Press.

ENAC. (2018). *Traffic data 2017*. https://www.enac.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/2018-Ago/ENAC_Traffic_data_2017_en.pdf

European Commission. (2020). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond*. https://ec.europa.eu/transport/news/2020-05-14-tourism-and-transport-2020-beyond_en

Fathimath, A. (2015). The potential of tourist zones in the Maldives: Obscured behind the "sunny side of life"? In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: policies and practices* (pp. 213-226). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Finn, M., Walton, M., & Elliott-White, M. (2000). *Tourism and leisure research methods: Data collection, analysis, and interpretation*. Pearson Education.

Gallia, A. (2012). La valorizzazione dei beni culturali e ambientali per lo sviluppo delle isole minori italiane. *Rivista giuridica del Mezzogiorno*. *26*(4), 929-962.

Garrod, B., & Wilson, J. C. (2004). Nature on the edge? Marine ecotourism in peripheral coastal areas. *Journal of sustainable tourism*, *12*(2), 95-120.

Global Environment Facility (GEF). (2020). White paper on a GEF COVID-19 response strategy: The complexities and imperatives of building back better. https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/council-meeting-documents/EN_GEF_C.59_Inf.14_White%20Paper%200n%20a%20GEF%20COVID-19%20Response%20Strategy_.pdf

GTA. (2020). Budget 2021. *Proposals by the Gozo Tourism Association*. https://parlament.mt/media/108597/dok-30.pdf.

Halpenny, E. A. (2001). Islands and coasts. In D. B. Weaver (Ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Ecotourism* (pp. 435-250). CAB International.

Himes, A. H. (2007). Fishermen's opinions of MPA performance in the Egadi Islands marine reserve. *Mast*, *5*(2), 55-76.

ISTAT. (2020). *Demografie in cifre*. ISTAT. http://demo.istat.it/index.html

Italy still yearns for answers, 40 years after the Ustica disaster. (2020, June 28). *The Brussels Times.* https://www.brusselstimes.com/news-contents/world/119004/italy-still-yearns-for-answers-40-years-after-the-ustica-disaster/

Italy volcano: eruption on island of Stromboli, evacuations begin. (2019, July 4). *Euronews.* https://www.euronews.com/2019/07/03/italy-volcano-eruption-on-island-of-stromboli-evacuations-begin

Johnson, D. (2006). Providing ecotourism excursions for cruise passengers. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *14*, 43-54.

Johnson, H. (2015). A tale of two Guernseys: tourism branding and island hopping in an archipelagic context. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: Policies and practices* (pp. 121-136). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Karampela, S., Kizos, T., & Papatheodorou, A. (2015). Patterns of transportation for tourists and residents in the Aegean archipelago, Greece. In G. Baldacchino (Eds,), *Archipelago tourism: Policies and practices* (pp. 35-50). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Kozak, M., & Buhalis, D. (2019). Cross–border tourism destination marketing: Prerequisites and critical success factors. *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, *14*, 100392.

La Mesa, G., & Vacchi, M. (1999). An analysis of the coastal fish assemblage of the Ustica Island marine reserve (Mediterranean Sea). *Marine Ecology*, *20*(2), 147-165.

Libero Consorzio Comunale di Trapani. (2019). TAV.4 Favignana: movimento turisito ricettivo mensile anno 2019 – dati provvisori. http://www.consorziocomunale.trapani.it/provinciatp/images/FAVIGNANA_agg2019.pdf

Mariani, M. M., Di Felice, M., & Mura, M. (2016). Facebook as a destination marketing tool: Evidence from Italian regional destination management organization. *Tourism management* 54, 321-343.

McGahey, S. (2012). The ethics, obligations, and stakeholders of ecotourism marketing. *Intelektinė ekonomika*, *6*(2), 75-88.

Monteleone, D. (2020, June 27). *Ustica, molto più che "l'isola della strage"*. Eco Internazionale. https://ecointernazionale.com/2020/06/ustica-molto-piu-che-lisola-della-strage/

MTA. (2020). *Comino*. Visit Malta. https://www.visitmalta.com/en/island-of-comino

MTA. (2021). *Recover, rethink, revitalise. Malta tourism strategy 2021-2030. Stakeholders and public consultation*. https://issuu.com/visitmalta/docs/maltatourismstrategy_2030_v7

Natanson, P. (2019, August 29). Stromboli: Another spectacular volcano eruption on the Aeolian island off Sicily. *ABC News.* https://abcnews.go.com/International/stromboli-spectacular-volcano-eruption-aeolian-islands-off-sicily/story?id=65261407

Nicolosi, A., Laganà, V. R., Cortese, L., & Privitera, D. (2018). Using the network and MCA on tourist attractions. The case of Aeolian Islands, Italy. *Sustainability*, *10*(11). 4169.

NSO. (2020a). *Regional Statistics Malta 2020 Edition*. https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Media/Salient-Points-of-Publications/Documents/2020/Regional%202020/Salient%20points.pdf

NSO. (2020b, February 5). *Inbound Tourism: December 2019* [Press Release] https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2020/02/News2020_017.pdf

Okech, R. N. (2011). Ecotourism development and challenges: A Kenyan experience. *Tourism Analysis*, *16*(1), 19-30.

Orams, M. B. (1999). Tourists getting close to whales, is it what whale-watching is all about? *Tourism Management*, *21*(6), 561–569.

Page, S. J. & Dowling, R. K. (2002). *Ecotourism*. Prentice Hall.

Peronaci, M., & Luciani, R. (2015). Anthropic pressures on Egadi Islands. *Energia Ambiente e Innovazione*, *61*(4), 9-11.

Pires, N. M., Garla, R. C., & Carvalho, A. R, (2016). The economic role of sharks in a major ecotourism archipelago in the western South Atlantic. *Marine Policy*, *72*, 31-39.

Power, S., Di Domenico, M., & Miller, G. (2017). The nature of ethical entrepreneurship in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *65*, 36-48.

Regione Siciliana. (2019). *Programma triennale di sviluppo turistico 2019/2021*. http://pti.regione.sicilia.it/portal/pls/portal/docs/148509643.PDF

Royle, S. A. (2015). Review essay: Navigating a world of islands: A 767 island odyssey. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Archipelago tourism: policies and practices* (pp. 19-31). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Said, N. (2017). From mass tourism to ecotourism: The case of the Balearic Islands, the Maltese Islands and the republic of Cyprus. *Occasional papers on islands and small states, 3*, 1-11.

Schillaci, M. L. (2016, August 7). *Boom di turisti a Ustica*. Mare Dolce. https://www.maredolce.com/2016/08/07/boom-di-turisti-a-ustica/

Serio, D., Alongi, G., Catra, M., Cormaci, M., & Furnari, G. (2006). Changes in the benthic algal flora of Linosa Island (Straits of Sicily, Mediterranean Sea). *Botanica Marina*, *49*(2), 135-144.

Sgroi, M. (2014). *Analysis of Sicily's Tourism Industry and Destination Marketing* [Unpublished bachelor's thesis]. Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

Sheldon, P. J. (2005). The challenges to sustainability in island tourism. *School of Travel Industry Management (TIM) Occasional Paper Series*, *1*, 1-12.

Spiteri, A. (2016, November 14). *Seaplane service between Malta and Gozo to resume*. TVM. https://www.tvm.com.mt/en/news/seaplane-service-between-malta-and-gozo-to-resume/

Stoffelen, A. (2019). Disentangling the tourism sector's fragmentation: A hands-on coding/post-coding guide for interview and policy document analysis in tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *22*(18), 2197-2210.

Stratford, E., Baldacchino, G., McMahon, E., Farbotko, C., & Harwood, A. (2011). Envisioning the archipelago. *Island Studies Journal*, *6*(2), 113-130.

Surico, G. (2020). *Lampedusa: dall'agricoltura, alla pesca, al turismo.* Firenze University Press.

Suryani, A. (2013). Comparing case study and ethnography as qualitative research approaches. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, *5*(1), 117-127.

Tosun, C., Timothy, D. J., Parpairis, A., & MacDonald, D. (2005). Cross-border cooperation in tourism marketing growth strategies. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *18*(1), 5-23.

Transport Malta. (2021). *Tender for the reconstruction of sea plane slipway at Triq il-Kosta Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq*. https://www.transport.gov.mt/eTender-TM043-2020-Reconstruction-of-Sea-Plane-Slipway-at-Triq-il-Kosta-Bahar-ic-Caghaq.pdf-f5989

Tudisca, S., Di Trapani, A. M., Sgroi, F., & Testa, R. (2013). Marketing strategies for Mediterranean wineries competitiveness. The case of Oantelleria. *Calitatea*, *14*(137), 101-106.

UNWTO. (2019). *International Tourism Highlights.* https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284421152

Veal, A. J. (2006). *Research methods for leisure and tourism: A practical guide*. Pearson Education.

Wearing, S., & Neil, J. (2009). *Ecotourism: Impacts, potentials and possibilities?* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Wearing, S., Cynn, S., Ponting, J., & McDonald, M. (2002). Converting environmental concern into ecotourism purchases: A qualitative evaluation of international backpackers in Australia. *Journal of Ecotourism*, *1*(2-3), 133-148.

Weaver, D. (2018). Creative periphery syndrome? Opportunities for sustainable tourism innovation in Timor-Leste, an early stage destination. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *43*(1), 118-128.

Weaver, D. B. (1993). Ecotourism in the small island Caribbean. *GeoJournal*, *31*(4), 457-465.

Weaver, D. B. (1998). Peripheries of the periphery. Tourism in Tobago and Barbuda. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *25*(2), 292-313.

Weaver, D. B. (2008). *Ecotourismo* (2nd ed.). John Wiley and Sons.
Weaver, D. B. (2017). Core–periphery relationships and the sustainability paradox of small island tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *42*(1), 11-21.
Weaver, D. B., & Lawton, L. J. (2007). Twenty years on: the state of contemporary ecotourism research. *Tourism management*, *28*(5), 1168-1179.
Zhang, J. J. (2010). Brand(ing) Kinmen: A tourism perspective. *International journal of entrepreneurship and small business*, *9*(4), 407-433.