The Intimate Stranger On Your Couch

AN ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATION, PRESENTATION AND TRUST THROUGH COUCHSURFING

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Abstract

CouchSurfing, an online hospitality exchange service with a fast growing number of registered members, represents a new trend in global tourism. CouchSurfing members stay with other members during their travels and host others by offering their couches in their own homes. The online-offline interactions are mainly based on the CouchSurfers’ presentations on the system, especially through their Social Networking Profiles (SNPs). This research tries to analyse CouchSurfers’ motivations and how motivation influences how they present themselves, and how the placement of trust is related to such motivations and the reading of the profile presentations. The research is based on a multimethod qualitative approach. Interviews with 14 CouchSurfers with different levels of experience form the main data for the analysis. The information on members’ CouchSurfing profiles, as well as the researcher’s observation from participation is also used as material for the analysis. The research discovers that it is the CouchSurfers’ individual needs - practical, cultural and emotional, as well as the anticipation of their future involvement - that motivates them to participate in CouchSurfing. While motivation is found to be utility-oriented, their presentations tend to emphasize only the emotional aspects, which confirm their identification with unspoken rules of “CouchSurfing”. CouchSurfers consider external evaluation as more important than one’s own description on the profiles when evaluating potential hosts or surfers. The reference system is regarded as the most crucial for many users. Nevertheless, many are reluctant to leave negative references. They take risks because of specific individual motivations in each situation, as well as because of the motivation to manage their social capital in the CouchSurfing network in the long run.

Keywords: CouchSurfing, online presentation, motivation, intimate tourism, hospitality exchange, trust behaviour, online community.
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1 Introduction

Nowadays, people’s capacity for being connected to remote places has been dramatically strengthened, both in terms of obtaining information and the actual ability of being physically mobile, thanks to advancements in information technology and transportation. Global tourism is becoming a growing trend. Remote parts of the world are now more easily accessible than ever before. With the help of the Internet, millions of people are engaged in hospitality exchange, which offers an alternative way of travelling compared to traditional tourism. CouchSurfing, with more than 3.5 million registered members to date (CouchSurfing Statistics, 2011), is one of the most popular hospitality networks, where members (surfers) stay with other members (hosts) and create personalized experiences (hosting/surfing) instead of going to sightseeing attractions and sleeping in hotels. With the vision to, “change the world one couch at a time”, it claims to offer members more than just free accommodation, but also meaningful relationships, cultural exchange and self-development.

CouchSurfing as an emerging trend is a new form of tourism as well as a lifestyle for some members. The increasingly interconnected tourists are more informed about remote locations, and are faced with more choices compared to traditional tourism. The exploration of the phenomenon of CouchSurfing can provide new angles for an investigation into the modern shift in people’s lifestyles. Why and how are people motivated to go mobile and connect to the world, is a question reflecting the psychology of people in circumstances of globalization.

At the same time, CouchSurfing as a Social Networking Site (SNS) is essentially a system that provides structure to the members’ interactions. The nature of an online network and virtual community to some extent shapes people’s ways of communicating. Compared with many other SNSs, CouchSurfing is characterized by its role in connecting the members of the online community and in creating real-life interactions. CouchSurfers, through presentations online, construct their digital images of self, while reading others’ presentations
as the basis of trusting each other in their offline interactions. It becomes an interesting topic to analyse how the CouchSurfer’s network and own goals influence their online presentations, as well as the other members (both as members of the virtual community and as potential trustees) in real life interactions.

This thesis aims to explore the dynamics of CouchSurfers’ motivations, presentations and trust behaviour. Starting from the setting of globalization, the theory part explains the above themes in relation to online networks. CouchSurfing is seen as (1) a system, the technical platform that enables virtual interactions online; (2) a phenomenon of internet-initialled alternative travelling and lifestyle; and (3) a network or community that connects people with mutual goals and provides a collective identity based on their membership and activities.

The research is conducted through a multimethod qualitative approach. The researchers own participation and 14 interviews are used as the main data, while additional information from the system and other users’ profiles are also used for content analysis.
2 Background and objectives

There has been a growing trend in the range of tourism activities available. Increasingly informed with a huge amount of information, people are more attracted to go travelling more than ever before. At the same time, more alternative ways for traditional tourism have emerged with the new possibilities that technology brings. The phenomenon of online hospitality networks, where people’s contacts online are aiming to have physical meetings is one of the rapidly growing practices. Bob Luitweiler established the first hospitality network, called Servas Open Doors, in 1949 as a non-profit and volunteer-run organization that aimed at promoting peace across borders (Bialski, 2007, p. 6). While Servas had only a few hundred members worldwide, the Internet in the 1990s paved the way for a number of other hospitality exchange services. CouchSurfing is the biggest hospitality exchange service to date in terms of geographical scale, the number of members, and the activities it offers (Pietilä, 2011).

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have become increasingly popular in cyberspace in recent years, empowering netizens to reach remote parts of the world not only by providing information with links and hyperlinks, but also by enabling netizens to extend their physical reach. While certain SNSs are oriented more towards specific online interactions (such as LinkedIn for careers and professional contacts, and YouTube for video sharing), CouchSurfing focuses on building connections through the Internet, which further leads to real world interactions. The members do not receive as much intensive background information about other members, because information regarding the physical settings is less concrete and intense in this internet-based network, and members do not usually share geographical adjacency due to the nature of tourism. However, the practical goals of meeting each other in reality makes it necessary to place trust in each other despite the difficulty in gathering information about others through direct or indirect interactions. Therefore, the information (textual, graphic, and contextual) contained on a Social Networking Profile (SNP) plays a specific role in displaying a person’s desired way of presenting their self image, and also in assisting others’ perceptions and judgments of this person.
SNSs have already come into the spotlight of many researchers, with various aspects being investigated within Sociology, Communication, Anthropology, Psychology, Technology, Marketing and so on. There have been various discussions (e.g., Kiesler et al., 1985; Hafner, 2001; McKenna, 1999; Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Preece, 2000; Pugh, 2010) regarding human interactions in online communities, and relationships in cyberspace, as well as self-presentations through the Internet. At the same time, as a specific prototype of a SNS, CouchSurfing has already been the topic of a few research investigations. While the mainstream of the research (e.g., Bialski, 2009; Gasser & Simun, 2010; Jeong, 2005) has been conducted from the perspective of tourism, others (e.g., Rosen et al., 2011; Lauterbach et al., 2011; Teng et al., 2010) talk about the topic of trust regarding the reference system and social capital, and so on. CouchSurfing as a phenomenon of global tourism reflects a kind of lifestyle created in the process of globalisation. The rapid growth of the online community can be seen from the soaring number of memberships. What drives the millions of people to join CouchSurfing? Why do they choose to travel via CouchSurfing rather than through other travelling methods? Do they actually form a collective identity as members of the CouchSurfing community? If so, what is the demography and self-image of the CouchSurfers? How strong are the ties between the members in the virtual community?

In addition, as some other researchers have also discussed (e.g., Lauterbach et al., 2011), in actual situations when CouchSurfers need to place trust on whether or not to meet other members whom they have not had face-to-face interactions with before, it leads to the question of how trust is generated in the virtual community. This is different to a regular question regarding trust on the Internet, because CouchSurfing brings online encounters into offline experiences. It is not difficult to picture the potential risks one might face, when the uncertainties online are brought into physical settings. For instance, travelling to a new place with a stranger can put one’s safety or general quality of experience at risk if the host does not fulfil his/her promise or has bad intentions. Also, hosting means to have someone unknown in one’s home, and this can lead to the intervention of one’s own life and put one’s property at threat. When most, if not all of the information about other members can only be accessed from the CouchSurfing site, especially the profiles, how do users rationally read the online
presentations and base their decisions to take offline risks based on the presentations online? What are the variables that influence their decisions?

Scholars (e.g., Lauterbach et al., 2011; Rosen et al., 2011) have discussed the trust issue in CouchSurfing from the perspectives of information technology, reputation, and reciprocity. However, no research has been conducted so far regarding the behaviour of self-performance and at the same time surveillance by means of coding and decoding profile presentations on CouchSurfing.org. In this study, the researcher wants to explore the dynamics of individual motivations, profile presentations and trust mechanisms through CouchSurfing. As a hosting/surfing experience needs the mutual placement of trust, people need to both trust and to be trusted. The two parties’ perceptions and usage of profiles might be different when they create their presentations to win others’ trust, and when they analyse others’ profiles to determine if they are to have trust placed on them or not. How important is the role of one’s presentation style in the decision process, compared with the practical needs, and the risks such as safety and privacy? To what extent does one’s profile presentation influence the others’ decision of placing trust in them, and what are the other factors that also exert influence in trust behaviours? How does it work when it comes to the individual’s presentations of self? It could be an interesting point to look at to see how one’s motivations influence the patterns of perceiving the SNPs and creating their own SNPs, as it could offer insights into people’s behaviour and psychology in computer mediated communication.

Regarding the above questions, previous studies (e.g., Snijders, 1996; Sproull, 1996; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Buskens, 2002; Lea & Spears, 1995; Whitty & Joinson, 2009) have touched on individual topics such as the role of expectation and temptation, and other factors related to motivation in “trust behaviours”, “self-presentation through the Internet”, and “trust in cyberspace”. Such research provides inspiration for this research, which tries to link these previous academic investigations in order to analyse trust behaviour on CouchSurfing from an interdisciplinary perspective. CouchSurfing itself has many facets that reflect different aspects of online/offline interactions, and the linking of the different theoretical perspectives can provide an enlarged view of these interactions. Theories from different disciplines could
provide new insights for the understanding of CouchSurfing, which is not a single-faceted phenomenon, but a complex concept comprised of various factors interrelated to each other. The CouchSurfing network as the object of this research, represents a fast growing activity that people participate in within the modern context of an increasingly globalized world where mediated interactions and real world experiences are linked through geography based SNSs. The unique characters of CouchSurfing can provide insights for the mechanisms of trust in online-offline interactions, within the context of online networks. In addition, the post-tourism practices of CouchSurfing involve individual behaviours as well as psychologies and activities on a systematic level. This research also aims to provide inspiration for research on the relationships between individual acts through online networks, which are driven by users’ offline activities and identification. This research also has potential value for the understanding of people’s identity management behaviours, as well as for more practical issues like safety on SNSs. It can also be inspiring for future studies in the realms of trade and tourism in the context of the information age.
3 Theoretical tools

3.1 Transformation of place and online/offline relationships

3.1.1 Globalization and changing concepts of place

Globalization has been a frequently mentioned concept, with the advancement of technology and people's increased understanding of the world as a whole (Robertson, 1992). Defined as “the intensification of world-wide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1991b, p. 64), the term “globalization” infers intensified and diversified communication practices through interconnected networks across the globe. In this context, social relations are increasingly becoming interconnected on a global scale, and the interdependence and interactions with geographically remote people and events are growing every day (Giddens, 1991b; Thompson, 1995). In circumstances of high-modernity, Giddens (1991b) argues that the concept of globalization can be better perceived as an expression of the distanciation of “time” and “place”. People’s activities are no longer necessarily centrally connected to physical locations. The Internet, the most prominent communication channel with the capacity to reach global audiences, eliminates the distance of time and location. Different forms of relationships are generated and certain communities are formed out of online interactions regardless of the physical locations of the participants. Real-life relationships, at the same time, are never completely separated from online interactions, though anonymous interactions are possible in cyberspace. With mediated communication more integrated into people’s lives, real-life communities employ online tools in various ways to spread information and enhance existing connections, while online groups can also sometimes breed offline interactions.

Starting from the angle of capitalism, Harvey (1989) proposes a different concept, “time-space compression”. The capitalist machine constantly seeks new markets and profits,
and believes that the shrinking world as a result of improved technology essentially reflects the capitalists’ work to reduce the costs related to distance. Globalization in this sense reflects the compressed time and space that is the result of the expansion of capitalism.

Place is one of the basic concepts when human behaviours are analysed. Place, as Harvey (1989) points out, is important for the shaping of identities, as it is a fundamental means through which people perceive the world and conduct actions. Despite general words such as “milieu”, “location”, “territory”, there are other words such as “city”, “town”, and “state” that can be used to refer to certain kinds of places in a more solid sense. People as agents can give meanings to the surrounding physical environment, so too can the environment shape people’s subjectivity (Lupton, 1998, p. 152). Essentially, “place” is socially constructed, containing a wide range of “metaphorical meanings” through which we express norms and define “otherness” (Harvey, 1989, pp. 4-5).

The question of the changing concept of place has been most directly addressed by Giddens (e.g., 1988; 1991b) in his social theories related to modernity. It is argued that one of the most dynamic aspects of modern social life is the possibility of the separation of time and place, whereas time and space were linked by the “situatedness of place” (Giddens, 1991a, p. 17). Such separation then leads to the disembedding of social institutions, creating abstract systems where standard values are carried by symbolic tokens. Time and space are connected when expert systems independent of the practitioners are used (Giddens, 1991a, pp. 17-19).

The concept and symbolic implications of “place” has changed radically, together with shifting systems of time in the modern era of technology. With the introduction of mechanical timing devices, for instance, people’s perceptions of time transformed from a flow (an intangible feeling), to the abstract numbers indicated on their clocks or computers. In contrast, in traditional societies, one cannot estimate time without referring to the particularities of a certain locality of interactions. Simultaneously with the emptying of time, space therefore is also being emptied. It is increasingly related to a person’s tasks, and more separated from geographical place. As Giddens (1991a) presents, in the context of modernity, time and space are distanciated from place, allowing interactions with “absent others”. Modern organizations
simultaneously make time and space re-integrated, creating the dynamic mode of life experiences. Instead of seeing time and space as essential to the context, some argue that they should be viewed as “the produced and producing, as contested and determined and as symbolically represented and structurally organized” (Urry, 1995, p. 160). In contrast to traditional settings, modern modes of life have become segmental, and no longer limited to stable settings and physical adjacency People’s overall activities are sliced into pieces of time-space segments, “lifestyle pieces”, which are not solely attached to physical settings (Giddens, 1991b, p. 81).

Space, compared to place, “is amorphous and intangible and not an entity that can be directly described and analysed”, “it seems that space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places” (Relph, 1976, p. 8). Space is where agencies carry out their actions emptied out from localities. Like place, the meaning of certain instances of space is also socially constructed. Social space to some extent is a kind of controlled identity; its meaning is given by individuals in order to have control over a situation (White, 1992). The time people spend in public and private spaces exert influence on interpersonal relationships (Bialski, 2006, p. 57). With the transformation from cosmopolis to “omnipolis” (Virilio, 1997, p. 84), technological developments are re-shaping the patterns of social interactions. Social activities are increasingly discussed with an emphasis on space instead of locality in circumstances of modernity. De-located actions and relations still employ spatial metaphors as it is the importance of actions and meanings, rather than the geographical locations, which are underlined.

3.1.2 Authenticity of places and mediated relationships

According to Relph (1976), with the modern development of technology and production, places are destroyed, and the authenticity of place needs to be carefully questioned. As place is fundamental for man’s sense of existence, and is also a source of security and identity, Relph (1989:27) emphasizes that the experiences of place is essentially “time-deepened and memory-qualified”. The authenticity of place is established via living experiences and actual
encounters. The crisis of place rises from the fact that markets and other media are carrying and delivering meanings that people have not really experienced. He insists authentic communities ought to be based in certain places, materially and physically, instead of being constructed through discourse. The concepts of “placeless” (Relph, 1976), and “non-place” (Auge, 1995) address the modern phenomena in which individuals are connected in a uniform manner, and the way life is constructed has no attachment to local history.

According to Giddens (1991b, p. 23), all human experiences are essentially mediated through socialization. For example, language in particular, is essentially a manifestation of time-space distanciation. In political theories, the concept of community tends to deny the distanciation of time and space, while insisting on physical interactions among members, though there is no substantial proof to consider such interactions more authentic or pure than mediated ones (Young, 1990). The ideal of face-to-face community is suggested as being replaced by an “unoppressive city” or openness to unassimilated otherness, where different experiences of mediated relations are negotiated and embraced. In the light of a postmodernist way of thinking, identity construction and place can hardly be associated with the expression of territory or physical location. However, as Anderson (1983) argues, the only way to distinguish communities and places should not be via so-called genuineness, but via why and how they are imagined.

Despite a discussion within the framework of modernity, where the authenticity of places is doubted, places are “transformed into spaces and become spaces of communication” (Rantanen, 2004). Space, a “practiced place” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 117) is an abstract concept, but at the same time is still related to place, which in contrast is concrete and stable.

The traditional concept of place is also challenged in the growingly dynamic realm of discourse through online interactions. The conventional tie between physical settings and social situations are weakened with the possibilities of media development. Communities are constructed through such mediated social activities; overcoming boundaries between settings which had been previously separated (Meyrowitz, 1985). Spatial metaphors from the physical world are vastly used in the virtual world (net, space, chat, etc.). The meaning of time, place,
and space are becoming independent of each other, and can be separated and connected in different situations.

Theories (e.g., Giddens, 1991a; Thompson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1994) tend to cast a pessimistic light on the process of globalization intensified by interconnectivity, which leads to distanciation, quasi-interaction and homological mass-mediated experiences. Thompson and Tomlinson regard mediated interactions through technology, especially relationships formed through such technologies, as essentially different from real, non-mediated experiences, which are more location-oriented, rather than mass-communicating, homological tendencies on larger scales. Their doubts on communication through mediated interactions however, overlook the fact that mediated interactions to some extent are just other facets of interactions of existing social relationships.

Though physical presence is not as important in online relations, people are still inclined to associate the participants with their physical cues and backgrounds behind the screens, such as appearance, educational history, ethnicity, profession and so on. By the same token, the sense of place still exerts a certain impact on people’s perceptions of other participants and their interactions. For instance, there has been an emergent trend of “geotagging” in SNSs that fosters a sense of location for users. Geotagging “contributes to the building of a place–based folksonomy” and thus adds an interesting dimensions of cyberspace and physical space to the extended infrastructure of the Internet (Pultar & Raubal, 2009). This connects the abstract cyberspace to the concrete geographical place.

### 3.1.3 Online/offline relationships

#### 3.1.3.1 Are there real relationships and communities online?

Online relationships, as a kind of mediated relationship, are developed on the Internet, which is fundamentally also an abstract system in Giddens’ sense. It does not prerequisite the sharing of a common physical place. At the same time, such a system empties the notion of time, when one’s speech can reach another person within seconds despite the different time
zones, and speech can also be left in “cyberspace” for a long time and reach audiences across the “internet”.

The concept of structure could offer a perspective to understand human relations online, as the Internet is essentially a medium, a systematic tool with which people apply to create interactions. Structure is created through human agents’ activities (Giddens, 1989, p. 256). Giddens deeply reformulated the notions of structure and agency, emphasizing that “action, which has strongly routinized aspects, is both conditioned by existing cultural structures and also creates and recreates those structures through the enactment process” (Walsham, 1993, p. 34). Although societies and social systems’ properties are real, they do not have a physical shape (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). In this sense, interactions and relations in cyberspace are framed by the characteristics of the Internet, and are constantly defining and redefining the patterns of socialization online. Physical absence does not lead to the conclusion of non-existence of relationships.

Relationships developed through Internet interactions have long been a controversial topic. Some scholars see such relationships as impersonal, superficial, and illusionary (e.g., Heim, 1992). A number of researches on Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) tend to address the unavailability of certain social-emotional cues online (e.g., Kiesler et al., 1984; Rice & Love, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), which makes it less possible to build real and strong relationships. Those on the other side of the debate view CMC as liberating, enabling relationships to be generated out of genuine personal relations in spite of the physical distance (e.g., Pool, 1983; Rheingold, 1993).

Despite the different viewpoints, social life in the 21st century has witnessed the dramatically growing usage of the Internet. At the same time, interactions online do generate and maintain relationships. There is an abundance of literature providing evidence that personal relationships are forming online (e.g., Rheingold, 1993; Wright, 1993). There are also plenty of researches placing an interest specifically on online communities (e.g., Brennan et al., 1992; Ogan, 1993). In the eyes of the participants, obviously the relations are as real as offline ones.
Castells (1996) asserts that in the network society, the new communication technologies are not creating “virtual reality”, but rather “real virtuality” and “real” is defined as “actually existing” (p. 372). He claims that reality is perceived, framed and mediated through symbols. Real virtuality is a system where the technology of communication is not only the media, but also the experience itself that becomes reality. There is no separation of virtual presentation and reality. When people navigate through the hypertext that structures their symbolic environments, “the virtuality of this text is in fact our reality, the symbols from which we live and communicate (p. 403)”. Following this thought, online interactions do create real-world consequences in people’s lives, and the exchanges of symbols through different communication interfaces do make up people’s experiences.

3.1.3.2 Relationships moving from online to offline

The discussion on online and offline interactions has been going on for decades. Some theorists (e.g., Lockard, 1997) argue that online participation has seduced users away from the reality they are living in physically, and there emerges the phenomenon of the “virtualization of everyday life” (Doheny-Farina, 1996, p. xiii), when people interact with their physical friends through mediated communication. Putman (2001) argues that offline communities are being destroyed as the consumption and interaction of new media increases.

Empirical evidence (e.g., Valkenburg, 2007; Coyle & Vaughn, 2008) proves that the usage of mediated communication can in fact enhance real-life relationships. It is often observed that people interact with others who they already know in real life. The communication tools of the Internet in many ways help people manage their offline contacts, though the pattern of interactions can be totally different and do not necessarily reflect the real psychological closeness between people. The interactions through SNSs can serve as an illustration. People’s usage of SNSs is among the most dominating activities on the Internet today (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The relationships through SNSs are generally flattened in terms of connection technology- a teacher’s voice does not sounds louder than a random connection on Twitter, and a close friend on Facebook is listed in your profile the same way
as any remote contacts from the other side of the globe. People’s relationships on SNSs can last forever, as long as they don’t delete the connections and the others’ accounts are still valid, even if the owners of the accounts are dead. Relationships online can exhibit very different patterns of interactions, depending on the focus and forms of the service provided. Apart from that, there is no denying that people are empowered by the ability to manage their networks through the Internet regardless of geographical and temporal differences.

It is not uncommon that people who may have originally met online develop offline relationships. The most fitting example is probably the mechanism of online dating sites where people seek romance through online interactions. It is argued that those people who choose to present their “true self” online tend to be better equipped for when these relationships are moved offline (Whitty & Joinson, 2009, p. 26). As relationships naturally develop with increased knowledge about the other party and increased intimacy over time, revealing too much about oneself, or rushing self-disclosure in the early stages of relationships might trigger negative effects in terms of trust and affection (Lawsen & Leck, 2006). A typical pattern of relationships moving from online to offline is whereby individuals exchange private online contact after an initial interest for each other through more general presentations and interactions in public cyberspace. They usually move on to emails, instant messages and other tools for further private contact. When they are psychologically and geographically close, and they have the willingness and capacity to meet up, they finally move on to face-to-face interactions. Not all online relationships move offline, and whether the relationships remain “virtual” or not depend on the possibilities of offline-relations, the anticipation of the users, and their actual experiences (Whitty & Joinson, 2009, pp. 26-27).

3.1.3.3 Social networks online

There has been a growth in social media in recent years and the phenomena of social networking sites and social network sites are among the most popular kind of web site. The two terms, “Social Networking Sites” and “Social Network Sites”, both referred to as SNSs, are frequently used in discussions about web 2.0, where the technology is generally related to
web applications that facilitate interaction, collaboration, user-generated content and the sharing of information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Despite the fact that both “Social Networking Sites” and “Social Network Sites” are often used interchangeably, boyd and Ellison (2008) differentiate the two by the patterns of users’ relationships. According to their definition, “Social Networking Sites” emphasises the initiation of relationships, while “Social Network Sites” plays an important role in the articulation and maintenance of the existing relationships of the users. Moreover, “Social Networking Sites” are also “integrated platforms” (Fuchs, 2009, p. 9) where different media and service applications are combined in the interactions. The functions of instant messaging, online forums, and web pages for instance, are integrated, while the sites themselves can be connected. Looked at from this perspective, CouchSurfing is better described as a “Social Networking Site”, as the primary functions of the service are to build connections between strangers and create new relationships. Via the profile search, messages are exchanged regarding potential real-life encounters and relationships are generated through the interactions of people who do not have previous experiences with each other in real life. There is no denying that the maintenance of existing relationships is also a part of the possibilities facilitated by CouchSurfing. However, due to the fact that most CouchSurfers are looking for hosts/surfers in different locations, the importance of relationship initiation should be higher than relationship maintenance. The nature of travel partly determines the fact that the physically distant users have fewer tendencies to maintain interactions, especially when the site is used fundamentally as a pragmatic tool when the travellers have special needs for a specific temporary goal.

3.1.3.4 Motivation and participation

Habermas (1984) differentiates between four kinds of social actions: teleological action, normatively regulated action, dramaturgical action, and communicative action. According to him, communicative action is individual action that aims at mutual understanding and cooperation, instead of purely concerning one’s own goals. The concept of communication
action by definition is in contrast to teleological action, where actors ultimately take into account solely private goals. Habermas admits that all actions contain the “teleological” aspect, as actors pursue their particular goals for themselves. However, the differences rest on the notion of coordination. In contrast to the egocentric concern of utility in teleological actions, the focus of “social agreement” in normative action, and dramaturgical action’s aim to influence the public’s understanding of the player, the concept of coordination in communicative action lies more in the cooperative process, which requires the effort to reach mutual understanding. Habermas suggests that people’s actions are guided through knowledge based on two kinds of rationality: cognitive-instrumental rationality and communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984, pp. 8-22; 168-85). Cognitive-instrumental rationality conducts actions that are either instrumental or strategic, whereas communicative rationality stresses mutual understanding that overcomes the individual actors’ merely subjective views.

Extending the theory to cyberspace, people’s motivations for their online interactions can also be categorized into cognitive-instrumental rationalities, and communicative rationalities. People’s online activities can involve both rationalities, depending on the context. In terms of online networks, the nature of communities can also influence the users’ activities, although the communities are less tangible than the ones in the physical world. Despite one’s individual motivations in each specific situation, the fact that individual activities are visible, searchable and recordable as a part of the wealth of the network makes it necessary to take into account the community aspect of one’s considerations. Kollock (1999) states that anticipated reciprocity, sense of efficacy, and attachment/commitment, are possible factors that motivate people to contribute to online communities. Anticipated reciprocity refers to one’s expectation that one could get support and help in the future from the community. This is associated with clearly defined group boundaries, and attribution of traceable contributions to the community. Other community members avoid those who never interact nor contribute to the community. One would contribute information to an online community out of a sense of efficacy and the prospect that such contributions could help to develop the person’s self-image in the community as efficacious. When a person’s individual and group goals are united and balanced, the attachment or commitment to the online community also drives one to make
contributions. Kollock (1999) also proposes that the expectation to gain prestige is also a key motivation of a person’s community contribution behaviours.

3.2 Self-presentation through Social Network Profiles

3.2.1 Identity

In the context of modernity as described by Giddens (1991b, p. 5), self-identity is reflexive and continuously revised in a consistent way. Self-identity is created and understood through the reflexive activities of the individual. Continuity plays an essential role in creating a consistent idea of self. With the distanciation of time and space, the self is increasingly related to the environment on a larger scale. The structure of self-identity is filtered through expert knowledge in abstract systems. At the same time, reflexivity, which is also a character of modernity, becomes key to the perception of self (Giddens, 1991b, p. 32).

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) states that by means of impression management, a person manipulates the identity displayed in certain situations in order that the audience responds accordingly towards the desired direction of the identity performer. Nevertheless, this works only if other people’s ways of accepting and understanding the intended information is the same as that of the identity performer. Thus the structures, norms or rules of communication function as the framework. Essentially, individuals must find their identities amid the strategies and options provided by abstract systems. So, an abstract system can be a multitude of processes involving the entire system (Bialski, 2006). With unprecedentedly diverse possibilities in modern lifestyles, one’s identity can be fragmented and multi-layered. It constantly changes according to the reading of the audience as well. Faced with increased lifestyle choices in high modernity, people are not only following, but also impelled to follow lifestyles, a series of practices one chooses to embrace that materialize one’s narrative of self-identity. Giddens (1991b, p. 81) points out that when people are increasingly faced with plural choices in life, lifestyles have less diverse choices in daily life; strategic decisions in the long run are still limited. For Giddens (1991b, p.
81), the more “post-traditional” the settings people embrace, the more central the lifestyle becomes in the process of the construction and reconstruction of their self-identities. In other words, one’s identity is entangled in the social context where one lives, with reference to the environment where social actors contribute to the formation of identity, while their identities are negotiated during the process. With the multiple layers of modern life, one is constantly faced with “self-dialogues” that one’s identity is negotiated within, attempting to fit oneself into the categories in the surroundings. The private self is largely shaped by outer forces; and its changes, as a result of outside influences, will immediately be publicly visible (Bialski, 2006, p. 75).

3.2.2 Online identity management

The management of identity is essentially an effort to make one perceived by others and oneself in a way that one expects. This process makes prerequisite the activities of self-portrayal. In modern life, autobiography or the narratives of one’s interpretative self-history, is considered to be at the centre of self-identity (Giddens, 1991b, p. 76). Elements of one’s personal history and roles one has in society are selectively presented to others, to establish a version of identity.

As self-identity is to be exhibited and presented to others to construct social relations, one inevitably gets involved in activities of self-disclosure, “the process of making the self known to others” (Jorard & Lasakow, 1958, p. 91). This can include demographical and physical information about oneself like age, ethnicity and appearance, as well as behavioural and emotional information such as daily routine, political reviews, and attitude towards certain social groups, etc. By self-disclosure, people can increase mutual understandings (Laurenceau et al., 1998), and gain trust by placing the discloser in a vulnerable situation (Rubin, 1975). Depending on the content and recipients, one’s styles of disclosure vary. As recipients’ reactions are hardly predictable and can lead to further chain reactions in the longer run, people try to control such encounters in every possible way. As disclosure through a “leaner medium”, “ones with fewer cues, less opportunities to be overheard and a reduction
in the impact of rejection” (Whitty & Joinson, 2009, p. 10) can be one means to manage one’s identity and CMC to some extent can provide more space for identity manipulation (Lea & Spears, 1995).

Despite the larger room for identity play online, the possibility of expressing the self without worrying about physical threats or real-life risks relieves the actors from many boundaries. Linking to McLuhan’s ideas of “medium theory” (McLuhan, 1964), Meyrowitz (1994) puts forward the concept that “patterns of information flow” influence the situation geography of social life, arguing that information systems serve to define the situation and the context of an interaction. Therefore, the dynamics of identity management online exhibit specific patterns in accordance to the features of cyberspace.

Social Identity and Deindividuation (SIDE) research (Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes et al., 1998; Spears et al., 1990) suggests that people are less inclined to adjust their views towards a group practice when the environment is more reminiscent of individual identities instead of collective identities. It is also argued that "disinhibition" is more likely to happen in virtual interactions when people are not reminded of their group identities; people might make more abusive comments than they would have done in the physical world (Kiesler et al, 1984; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). At the same time, in cyberspace, where physical cues are hidden and the social context behind participants is not always accessible, one could be inclined to take more effort in question-asking and answering, to manage one’s identity shown to others. Researchers (e.g., Park & Floyd, 1996) have found that people tend to disclose more about themselves online than they do in encounters in real life. Generally, online actors are also more willing to reveal information about themselves, which could have been too sensitive in face-to-face situations (Tourangeau, 2004). Tidwell and Walter (2002) proposed that the desire to reduce uncertainty might be the reason behind heightened self-disclosure online.

3.2.3 Social Network Profile

In addition to the general patterns of interaction through the Internet, each of the applications, websites, tools and interfaces create unique dynamics shaped by their “structure”.
Taking into account an influence from the varied features of each site, how one presents oneself in cyberspace partly affects one’s success in relationships online (Whitty & Joinson, 2009, p. 26). The design of certain sites lead to a focus on one’s textual conversations, such as online forums and news groups, whereas other sites, such as dating services, can be based more heavily on pictures, especially in initial interactions.

There are several common structures or systems that people follow in order to present themselves and understand both the self and the other in SNSs. Such presented identities vary in different degrees depending on the personalities of the individual users as well as what they wish to depict and obtain from their virtual presence. Social Network Profile (SNP) is one of the possibilities provided by SNSs where the user constructs and controls one’s image and identity through selected elements of one’s life. The self-stated interests, experiences and personal philosophies, together with the images, activities, and networks chosen to be displayed to exhibit certain aspects of a person’s personality and social involvements, are presentations chosen to direct people’s perception of the user. SNSs usually have more of a focus on networking for social or practical purposes based on certain aspects of the users’ real-world identities. The extended networks make the users’ background information less readily available, but the users’ aims for social connections lead to the need to have clues about certain aspects of others in real life. Thus, the context of each user’s profile is more important compared to many other CMC forms such as newsgroups, where information is at the centre. The back settings vary in how concrete and detailed they are because of the different purposes of each SNS. One person’s SNP can be different on different SNSs, due to the varied purposes in usage, the quality and nature of connections, as well as systematic possibilities.

While SNSs are relatively new, one’s effort to perform in order to manage one’s public image is not essentially different from physical forms of performances in real life, where one needs to be “aware of the impression they foster” and be able to pass unofficial tests from the audiences (Goffman, 1959, p. 144). In the context of the aforementioned notion of geo-based SNSs like CouchSurfing, although the methods of sharing information are similar to other
SNSs, the patterns of presentation are different. Due to the prospect of visiting the person in his/her current geographical location (regardless of whether the person or the location is at the core of the purpose of the visit), the rules for sharing profile information has changed. The construction of one’s identity through SNPs needs to include the characteristics of the location itself, which goes beyond bodily presence (Pultar & Raubal, 2009). In this sense, where the users are located does not matter very much in how they interact with others, but rather, the place has transformed from the location into a part of the identity which one refers to, to define the context of the interactions. By the same token, one’s other real-life identities associated with profession, activities, education, physical appearance, and so on, if selected to be presented in the SNPs, help construct the images that the user chooses to display in front of others, for specific purposes of networking.

3.3 Risk, trust and control

3.3.1 Trust

Modernity is a culture where society is organized in such a way that risk has become a fundamental concept, with increased options, opportunities, and uncertainties within it. Trust is an essential medium of interaction with the abstract systems through which people achieve a sense of security under the modern mechanism of disembedding (Giddens, 1991). Trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712). Simply put, it is one’s willingness to be vulnerable with positive expectations of actions taken by the other party. The action of trust entails a leap into an uncertain experience, while calling for a preparedness of potential loss (Giddens, 1991, p. 41). This means that at the same time as expecting benefits of honoured trust, the trustor would face a potential loss if the trust placed is abused. There is always a time lag between a trusting behaviour and the action of the trustee (Coleman, 1990). Trust lies between legislated contracts and moral order. It is anticipated cooperation. Trust is lost when expectations of coherence, continuity and
dependability are violated (Giddens 1991, p. 66). While some choices of trust are made based upon past experiences, what makes it sufficient for a trusting relationship is an irreducible process of commitment. Commitment as a special kind of trust is a premise of pure-relationships in which criteria outside the relationships themselves, such as kinship and duty, are dissolved. Trust can only reside in the relationships themselves and are facilitated by mutual disclosure.

Some theorists (e.g., Parsons, 1937; Luhmann, 1988) explain the function of trust in the social systems. Parsons (1937) argues that in normative systems, system-level trust acts as a key source to maintain social order. Luhmann (1988) holds that in an increasingly complex and modern society, people are less certain about the consequences of their decisions, and trust can reduce the complexity in the process. Luhmann (1988) asserts that this brings benefits for the functioning of the social system. In social psychological contexts, trust acts as a part of the reciprocation of one person’s self-disclosure (Rubin, 1975). This mechanism might partly have its root from the norm of reciprocity in a more general sense (Gouldner, 1960). Other approaches to trust lead to more individualistic aspects of trust, and many (e.g., Coleman, 1990) base their theories on rational choice perspectives. In trusting behaviours, the trustors analyse information about the trustee’s trustworthiness, and control the situation in a certain way (Buskens, 2002). Bhattacherjee (2002) identifies ability, integrity and benevolence as three fundamental dimensions of trust. It means that a trustor believes in the trustee’s ability to carry out the expected outcome, and that the trustee acts in a reliable manner with good intentions towards the trustor. There are indicators of trust between the parties involved in bilateral trust relations. In cases when trust is lacking, formal arrangements and contracts are used to assure the transaction. The continuity of relations can also indicate the level of trust. In the context of modernity, our daily activities are filtered and thus intruded by expert knowledge. The practice of trust is thus deskilled and mediated, through the faithfulness in the systems around (Giddens, 1991). Empirical studies from both business and ethnographic perspectives have shown that previous success in trust transactions generally predicts higher possibilities for longer relations with decreased formality in trust situations, indicating higher levels of trust (Buskens, 2002, p. 12).
3.3.2 Trust games and control

Some researchers (e.g., Buskens, 2002; Snijders, 1996) analyse trust with a focus on business transactions and are measured by monetary payoffs, as trust behaviour is important in business contexts. It is also a common angle for researches investigating online trust behaviours in electronic business. People choose to trust the other party only if the expected benefit is preferred over the anticipated loss of not placing trust (Buskens, 2002). Both parties will benefit from successful transactions (Burt & Knez, 1995). It is costly for both parties in a trust situation if no trust is placed; no transactions will be made. The loss of a trustor will result in not gaining the expected outcome and the subsequent need to look for alternatives, while the trustee can lose potential benefits from an honoured trust, such as the possibility for further transactions and economic or social recognition. The cost depends on the capacity of the trustor to carry out the result, and the opportunities to gain alternative trustees (Buskens, 2002, p. 18). When one has done several transactions with one partner, there can be additional investments in the relationship that make the exit more costly (Williamson, 1979). Some transactions are isolated encounters, while others can be repeated in the future (Buskens, 2002).

Snijders (1996) analyses trust in isolated encounters, and concludes that payoffs are important factors that influence people’s judgments of trustworthiness/trustfulness. At the same time, the importance of trustworthiness decreases when the temptations from the trustees are high. In terms of trustfulness, the tendency to place trust also increases when there is less monetary risk from the trustor. This means that trust behaviours are more likely to happen when the ratio of “difference between the expected loss of trust-abuse and the loss of not placing trust (P1-S1)” compared with “the difference between the gain of an honoured trust and not placing trust (R1-S1)” is small, and when the trustee’s temptation of abuse (T2-R2) is relatively small (Snijders, 1996, session 2.4). This model is reflected in Figure 1.

In repeated transactions, however, the actors consider more factors rather than the pure gain from a single transaction. A trustor’s expectation about a trustee can be adjusted and
controlled over time, depending on past experiences and the analysis of environment. The mechanism of learning and control can be observed in the trust behaviours in repeated transactions (Buskens, 2002, pp 10-11). Trustors may place more trust in the people who they have had positive experiences with and there will be a greater tendency to repeat the trust behaviour in the future (Coleman, 1990, pp. 102-104). The trustees’ performance will also be influenced by their anticipation of building longer relationships (Buskens, 2002, p. 11). Withholding further opportunities for transactions can be a punishment of abusing trust, thus if long-term transactions are regarded as more important, there is a lower tendency for the trustee to abuse trust. However, as there’s always uncertainty regarding the future, the interplay of constant learning and control is needed for the trustors (Buskens, 2002, p. 11). Trust increases when past experiences are positive, and recent experiences are more important parameters for trustors than experiences gained longer ago (Gautschi, 2002).

Control effects largely rely on a trustee’s anticipation of future endeavours with the same trustor. Seeing the potential lost in opportunities of further transactions as sanctions, the trustees are less inclined to abuse trust if the long-term benefits of transactions are bigger than the gains from a single transaction (Buskens, 2002, p. 11). The threats of sanctions by the trustors prevent the trustees from trust-abuse if future transactions are intended. At the same time, the principles of cooperation are influenced by the other players’ reciprocity (Gouldner,
1960); one cooperates more if the other player behaves cooperatively. One’s negative responses are likely to be triggered if the other player has conditions and reasons for cooperation (Taylor, 1987).

The withholding of trust as a means of sanction can be costly for both parties. Besides the loss for the trustee, the trustor needs to seek alternatives as well as face the cost of exit due to investments from the previous relationship.

### 3.3.3 Trust and social capital in networks

Although trust behaviours are inherently interpersonal, they are hardly private, as others surround the actors and their transactions within a larger context (Burt & Knez, 1995). Trust is associated with social capital in networks. Borrowing the metaphor of monetary capital in trade, the concept of social capital indicates that actors with larger resources are a result of a better position in the network (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Social capital in essence is advantages and facilitated actions produced by structures (Coleman, 1990; Pitnam, 1993). Those who have a privileged position in the network tend to possess more social capital, which implies a better ability to gain trust. In social networks, generally those who are more embedded receive and transmit information faster from others, thus they learn faster and have better control (Buskens, 2002, p. 20).

Structuration theory provides the framework for people to understand how the agents, the actors, are created by social systems, while being the creators of the systems at the same time (Giddens, 1991, p. 204). The structure of a network itself also influences social capital. In discussing social capital in networks in business firms, Burt (2000) states that closure of networks affects social capital in terms of access to information, and it facilitates punishment, reducing the trust between actors. He also argues brokerage across structural holes, weaker connections between groups (Burt, 1992), can also be seen as social capital because redundancy of information is reduced and additive perspectives are added (Burt, 2000). There are different kinds of connections that one has in a network. Whereas those who have dense networks tend to receive similar and redundant information, ones whose contacts are diverse
and spread out can help reach different resources. In such contexts, a social network can be seen as “social capital” (Coleman, 1990) that helps one to reach his or her goals.

With an increase in the constraints, density and hierarchy in networks, social capital based on closure tends to increase, while social capital gained from the span of structural holes tends to decrease (Burt, 2000, pp. 373-375). A cohesive structure of social groups usually borders on trust for some social researchers (e.g., Gellner, 1988), and the presence in the group is almost equal to the presence of trust. The new members’ trust is based on learning and imitation, while control within the group where sanctions such as expulsion from membership and social isolation, makes such trust more stable (Buskens, 2002, p. 21).

Inherence in the network indicates a level of social capital. Intra-group communication is seen to be more intense and frequent than in inter-group communication. Because of the homogeneity of opinions in dense networks, similar views regarding “proper” values and practices are repeated and reaffirmed by members, and become tacit knowledge taken for granted by in-group members (Burt & Knez, 1995; Burt, 2008).

While bilateral relations can be regulated through formal agreements when the level of trust is low, the actors in a network can seek to institutionalize mechanisms to exert social control (Buskens, 2002, p. 25). Information centres, for example, which have frequent contacts among network members, can transmit information easily, and the sanction against trust abuse can be more extensive and costs more in the system. Such control also requires members to have transactions within the community, otherwise they will face exclusion themselves, meaning a greater loss in long-term opportunities (Greif, 1989). The accusations can be more convincing when one trustor describes the trust abuse of an actor to other trustors.

Stuart and Robinson (2001) underline the importance of reputation in networks, which is based on past transactions and sanctioning opportunities in the future. Core variables identified are the former alliance experiences between the players, the centrality of the players in the network, and the status of previous partners of the trustee. In virtual organizations,
increased connections are made, especially with new acquaintances. This indicates a strengthened network with regards to brokerage, closure and senior opinion (Burt, 2000). The sense of a virtual network is enhanced since increased connections create more recognition as a group. Reputations develop for the active members and senior opinion is valued.

The roles third parties can play in trust behaviours include acting to mediate relationships, perform sanctions, and offer alternatives (Buskens, 2002, p. 15). Learning is crucial in explaining the continuous existence of trust in extensive networks, especially as newcomers seldom have access to negative information about the network. Control on the other hand, is important in order to maintain trust within a network at a stable level. In dense networks strong trust and strong distrust emerge because of the reduced incentives in abusing trust, and the intensive information people can obtain from the networks (Burt & Knez, 1995).

By analysing information about the past behaviour of a trustee from third parties or other trustors, one can judge new situations before making the decision to place trust. In dense networks, actors tend to confirm each other’s existing opinions, rather than finding out the detailed context of an action or presenting disagreements. Following a self-confirming tendency, extreme judgments about the trustworthiness of others are formed (Burt, 2001). In addition to the control effect in separate encounters, the control in social networks where third parties exert influence can affect the trustees’ behaviours by imposing more extensive long-term consequences on the network. Rational trustors would place more trust with increased opportunities for sanctions through third parties (Buskens, 2002, p. 17). Sometimes sanctions can go beyond the termination of transactions. It is argued that it can be preferred by both actors that the cost of abusing trust is high, which usually leads to more cooperative performances.

However, Buskens (2002, p. 18) argues that a trustor does not necessarily value opinions, especially negative feedback from other trustors. The credibility or reliance on third-party opinions depends on the relationship types, the network authority of the actors, the nature of interests involved, as well as the content and format of the accusations. Third-party accusations matter less in circumstances such as when problems cannot be verified, previous
personal experiences are positive, products produced are not homogeneous, and actors representing a large organization change from time to time.

There are problems with third-party sanctions in the control effect as well. Third parties might be reluctant to perform sanctions, because of the possible costs of imposing such sanctions (Lorenz, 1988). The possibility of damaged reputations and being labelled as a troublemaker can result in the reluctance to report trust abuse, making the threat of sanctioning less credible (Buskens, 2002, pp. 18-20).

3.3.4 Trust in online interactions

With the absence of the physical presence of the other party, the mechanism of trust decisions online has some distinct characteristics. Scholars (e.g., Whitty & Joinson, 2009) have compared online interactions with Thibaut and Kelley’s “stranger-on-the-train” phenomenon in Social Exchange Theory (1959) and have found that people tend to be more relaxed about disclosing intimate aspects of themselves to people they never expect to meet again. People tend to be more open and honest in such one-time experiences, as well as in online interactions when the audiences seem to be remote. Relationships can be developed through such mechanisms in online interactions, with less fear of opening-up and its future consequences in real life. However, in the context of SNSs, one communicates with partners who are not necessarily strangers as there is the possibility of interacting again in the future. SNSs can be seen as virtual networks where one can interact with connections that already have an established relationship in the real world, while the possibility of creating new relationships via loose connections is still open. At the same time, the previously discussed possibility of the distanciation effect of time-space separation also implies an increased chance that “passers-by” could be connected again in new encounters in the virtual world where physical distance does not result in a reduced chance of further interactions any longer. Moreover, past messages and interaction records remain longer in cyberspace, making it easier for people to track and search for another’s history of activities. Hence, even the actors might have no intention to have any further interactions, and their experiences can serve as
third-party information for later encounters.

The pattern of interactions in cyberspace, or more specifically on SNSs, can vary greatly. It goes in accordance with the structure of the networks in respect to size, density, hierarchy and so on. The systematic features also influence the actual pattern of communication. The case of social hospitality network contains characteristics of trust situations in both individual encounters and repeated encounters in business models discussed in previous sessions. Within the network, each actor’s individual experience can also function as eternal information for future endeavours for the parties involved, and potential actors in the future.

CouchSurfing, at the junction of online-offline interactions, takes on characteristics from both kinds of relationship. On one hand, people do interact with strangers who are physically far away and who may never exert an influence on their life in the future. Each individual trip though CouchSurfing can be seen as an isolated encounter as in trust games. Empirically it is not hard to imagine that a traveller tends to discover new destinations rather than going to a single place many times. At the same time, with the assumption that CouchSurfing’s unique attraction for its members is its ability to provide people with opportunities to meet new people and explore fresh experiences from their hosts and surfers, it is reasonable to deduce that a surfer will stay with different hosts and a host will prefer to host different travellers. A surfer gambles one’s level of travel pleasure, cost, fulfilment of the travel purpose, and even personal safety when placing trust in a host; and a host faces uncertainty when it comes to the worthiness of the sacrifice of leisure time, personal space and property. The chance of repeated surfing/hosting between CouchSurfers is relatively small, due to the travellers’ mobile nature. However, as a social networking community, CouchSurfing is at the same time a steady system where people’s feedback from previous experiences can transfer to an accumulation of information regarding one member’s trustworthiness for other community members. An individual person’s isolated encounters add to the information that others can view concerning certain CouchSurfers, and can also add to the basis for the overall evaluation of the CouchSurfing system as a whole.

To take control in trust situations on the Internet, people tend to ask direct questions to
reduce uncertainty and they refer to linguistic cues to judge the other party’s trustworthiness (Whitty & Joinson, 2009, p. 100). Reputation systems, commonly used in online shopping sites, are also important markers for users’ trustworthiness (Resnick et al., 2000). There are also different levels of trust. In CouchSurfing, the action of placing trust might relate to the trust of the site in general, trusting the person contacted, or simply the faith in the single one act they plan to do together.

3.4 CouchSurfing: a new model of global tourism

3.4.1 Time, space and place in tourism

Tourism, the idea of which is fundamentally related to time-space distanciation or separation, is missing in Giddens’ discussions (Urry, 1995, p. 168). Naturally, there are notions such as “saving time”, and exploring a new “place”, in travelling experiences. To travel essentially involves mobility, meaning that one gets out of the locality where they used to be (even for frequent movers like nomads or vagabonds) and locates oneself somewhere else.

Technological developments have empowered people with an increased capacity in mobility, and at the same time have given more angles to analyse the experiences of travelling. Imagine a 14-hour flight from Amsterdam to Sao Paulo during the Christmas period. One departs on a winter morning in Amsterdam, experiencing a long day on the plane and arrives into Sao Paulo on a summer afternoon. Has the traveller gained any extra time as the clock shows or it is just the same time as everyone else has spent, but experienced in a different way? Leaving the snow behind, the traveller escapes from the routine life and patterns of behaviour, carrying the space with him during the change of time and place.

From a practical perspective, especially in task-oriented situations such as in business contexts, the importance of place has decreased, as cross-spatial interactions by means of technology are increasingly capable of achieving goals that would have been impossible to reach before. Nevertheless, the idea of place is still crucial when it comes to the emotional
aspects of human life. Crang (1998) argues that places create a harbour of shared experiences between people and continuity. People are bonded together via places, creating communities through the lived connection, a past and a future. Place is consumed in societies visually and literally, by serving as consumption centres, as well as manifestations of certain histories and lifestyles, where visitors and locals absorb elements of life and identity (Urry, 1995, p. 2).

In the case of CouchSurfing, the notion of place still plays a role since it is the mobility of travellers that has been the foundation of CouchSurfing as an SNS and online community. The initial idea, though it may not be the goal of all CouchSurfing members, is to connect travellers to potential hosts in another place. Here “place” refers to a certain locale, labelled under a whole hierarchy of levels of territories, such as “Fourth ring-road, Chaoyang district, Beijing, People’s Republic of China”, or “Jerez de la Frontera, Andalusia, Spain”. Moreover, what the hosts provide are not only a place, but also a “dwelling”, which according to Heidegger (1971), is the premise for people to gain rootedness and spiritual unity between humans and the things around them. As CouchSurfers are “surfing: in someone else’s “home”, or more specifically, a couch, a bed, a mattress, or a tent, the experiences inevitably involve sharing “dwellings”, which essentially is a kind of personal territory.

There are different motivations for tourism. The term itself is prerequisite to the change of place, as well as the fulfilment of certain physical, social or emotional needs through consumption. With the intensification of globalization and increased options in plural lifestyles, tourism has also developed more alternatives other than the traditional model of guidebooks, sites of interests and hotels, which has been a product in mass industrial production. CouchSurfing as compared to traditional tourism encloses more emotional consumptions, forming a new kind of ‘intimate tourism’, or ‘emotional tourism’ as termed by Bialski (2006), the concept of which will be elaborated on in the next section. Despite the ritual of visiting the “must-sees” and the sightseeing sites or tourist attractions, people regard their CouchSurfing travels more as a learning and self-discovering experience. Surfing someone’s couch denotes a shift from “gazing onto an object, to a human-to-human experience locked in emotion” (Bialski, 2006, p. 33). Taking a step back to the framework of
time, place and space, one’s previous experiences formed through lived times and places, are sealed into bubbles of space that they bring along with them during their travels. The visitors knock at the doors of the hosts, unload their bubbles in the new locality, and excitedly breathe in the strange bubbles of the hosts’ space. Also noticeable is the fact that the space they share is not any space of socialization, but the home of the host, which is the personal territory solidified into a place, with furniture and decorations arranged in specific ways embedded with personal meanings.

Traditional tourism used to be a privilege among the rich that emphasized the exploration of new places and the sensory experiences locked up in the “touchable”, whereas post-tourism underlines the mechanisms of globalization and the experience of “the local”. The desire to explore new “things” through a touristic “gaze” is shifting towards various emotions attached to the places and interactions with local life (Bialska, 2006, p. 23). Global mobility and connectivity provide people with possibilities to see, hear, and interact with others. Mechanisms of globalization, especially the Internet, enable more alternatives to tourism. “Home time” and “vacation time” are no longer separate as people can choose to keep mobile and take life-long vacations as a lifestyle. Here the concept of “choice” is central; one chooses to do virtual visits, chooses to avoid fancy touristic facilities, and chooses to stay with locals, or keep being a vagabond (Bialska, 2006, p. 22). The motivations for virtual travel communities (including the ones aiming for information sharing, finding travel companions, and utilizing local resources of members like on CouchSurfing) are identified as psychological motives (e.g., belonging and recognition), functional motives (e.g., finance and information), and social motives (e.g., relations and social norms) (Jeong, 2005).

3.4.2 CouchSurfing and Intimate Tourism

Under a mechanism of hospitality exchange such as CouchSurfing, people go through a special travel experience with intimate interactions with the locals, instead of standardized traditional touristic visits to objects. Usually under a very limited amount of time, the hosts and guests develop an intensive relationship characterized by opening up on disclosing
personal emotions, through the sharing of a private space. This mechanism is referred to as “Intimate Tourism” by Bialski (2006), a Polish social scientist who is also a CouchSurfing member herself. Her papers on CouchSurfing are some of the earliest influential works on the subject. Defined as a “system of exchange” where one experiences intimacy physically and psychologically with others, intimate tourism is observed through, but not restricted to, hospitality networks (Bialski, 2006, pp. 85-86).

Bialski joined CouchSurfing in 2004 and has personally travelled and hosted CouchSurfers including the co-founder of CouchSurfing when he and his friends travelled to Warsaw and slept for three days in her living room. Besides claiming to be a participatory researcher, she has conducted in-depth interviews with about 20 CouchSurfers during a two-month CouchSurfing gathering in Montreal, while attaching a survey on her CouchSurfing profile, which received over 3000 responses. Bialski’s study is concerned with the relationships built through the network, focusing on the new form of tourism where the concept of consumption has shifted towards the experience of people. According to her research, CouchSurfers in a stereotypical sense are motivated to go on CouchSurfing because of their needs to share and learn, for the purpose of self-development. The need for intensive relationships makes them attracted to being on the move. In her opinion, they are utopian, indulging in their dream of pursuing exciting insights through new encounters, finding people with similar mind-sets who hope to “save the world” by opening up to the unknown and who value cultural understanding. They are “a class of choice” and a group of escapees (Bialski, 2006, pp. 71-72) from their immediate proximity, consuming the stories from interesting strangers from other environments to meet their needs for intimate interactions and personal growth. Bialski (2006) thinks CouchSurfing for members is an online community with utility. The community virtually exists, through Internet connections, and a collective identity emerges with the individual users’ imagination. An average user uses it more as a tool, a search engine to find interesting couches that fit with their expectations.

For Bialski, CouchSurfers are consumers who desire to consume intimate interactions in order to satisfy their needs, whatever they may be (Bialski, 2006, p. 71). It reflects the
characteristics of consumerism. Like a supermarket, where fast, light and disposable products are displayed on the shelves, and one can choose the ones that satisfy certain needs, instead of shopping for long-term usage or collection (Bialska, 2006, p. 72). Bialska (2006) quotes Bauman (2001, p. 93), who sees mobile individuals as a succession of “escapees who are keen to join company with other escapees just like them.” Instead of individual journeys of learning and exploration as they claim, their moves are more like mass movements with different destinations. Their travels are neither homogeneous tours in the traditional sense, nor to explore the intimacy itself. Rather, they engage in such intimate relationships (though some people doubt if they really build relationships through such temporary transactions) based on both parties’ needs and interests. Friendship is seen as a kind of utility (Bialska, 2006, p. 44). The level of intimacy is intense, while the relationship is fleeting. In the process of familiarization, the spatial intimacy catalyses verbal intimacy, as the lack of common ground in life routines facilitates conversations around the self. This fosters the emotional closeness and then the embedding of the experience.

However, as Bialska (2006) emphasizes the intimacy of relationships that facilitate and strengthen personal learning, it is not sufficient to conclude that most CouchSurfers aim primarily at personal growth as suggested by her survey and interviews. CouchSurfers can have many motivations. For instance young people could request a couch simply because of financial reasons, and the learning process is barely a side-product, as one can learn from traditional sightseeing tours. There is also a considerable sampling bias, as all the interviewees are active and enthusiastic CouchSurfers who might not be as representative as the average user. Her 20 interviewees and 3000 survey respondents may also be from only those members who were willing to express themselves, which is consistent with the research conclusion that CouchSurfers are open minded and have a strong desire to communicate. How many of the CouchSurfers act and think similarly is unknown, while it is true that not all CouchSurfers build meaningful relationships through CouchSurfing. Many enthusiastic users are probably western travellers who have more choices to move, based on a better ability to travel, less language and cultural barriers within themselves and so on. How representative they are when it comes to the majority of users, and how the patterns of interactions for more
peripheral users can deviate from this group, are yet to be questioned.

The concept of Intimate Tourism, however, does not conclude the whole pattern of CouchSurfing. Statistically, half of the CouchSurfers started to list hosting as their only activity through CouchSurfing, and with increased experiences, more CouchSurfers engage in both surfing and hosting (Lauterbach et al., 2008). It implies the attraction of CouchSurfing is not only in its mobility, but also in the interaction itself. High levels of reciprocity are observed in activities of surfing/hosting in terms of individual connections, friendship ratings, and reputation vouching etc. in CouchSurfing (Lauterbach et al., 2008). Several scholars have touched on the issues of reciprocity and exchange (e.g., Jeong, 2005; Lauterbach et al., 2008)

3.5 Linking theories

The theories mentioned come from different schools and traditions. Thus, it is necessary to map the relationships of the theories in order to understand the logic and framework of this study. “CouchSurfing” can be interpreted in different ways. From a technological aspect, CouchSurfing.org is firstly a system that provides the opportunities for information storage and sharing, relationship building and maintaining, and making it possible for actual experiences and evaluation afterwards. Regarding its functions and interface, it is a Social Networking Site. In terms of the actual experiences and the individuals’ behaviours through this platform, each of the CouchSurfing experiences is creating a trend in tourism, where the concept of intimate tourism is introduced in the context of globalization. The collective of individual CouchSurfers, through joint experiences online and offline, develop a sense of identity and thus create an online community. Separate encounters eventually become part of the people’s long-term interactions in the community, while individual experiences help evaluate and regulate trust situations in the whole system. The researcher’s key concerns of motivation, presentation and trust guide and link the interest points of each theory.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory angle: CouchSurfing as:</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Presentation</th>
<th>Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System: CouchSurfing.org</td>
<td>Identity presentation (and the reading of presentation) through SNP</td>
<td>SNS Online/offline relationship</td>
<td>Trust (control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour: Surfing/Hosting</td>
<td>Motivations/ rationalities Globalization Intimate tourism Communicative action</td>
<td>Globalization, Intimate tourism,</td>
<td>Risk/Trust behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Self-identity Community identity</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Trust (control)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Matrix of theories for the study
4 Method

4.1 Methodology - a multimethod qualitative approach

Social scientists usually draw a line between qualitative research and quantitative research. Qualitative methods are commonly applied when situational and structural contexts are underlined, paying less attention to cross-comparison compared with the multivariate works of quantitative research. The fundamental distinction, however, lies in the way that data are analysed (Strauss, 1987, p. 2). In qualitative research, mathematical techniques do not play as central a role as in quantitative research, although they are also used in providing trends and general background. Compared to quantitative approaches where people’s reactions to a limited number of questions are able to be measured and calculated, qualitative methods enable the collection of a wealth of detailed information about a relatively smaller number of cases and people. Generalization is thus reduced, while the understanding of each single case is increased (Patton, 1990, p. 14).

The most common methods for data collection in social research include field work, survey research, experimentation and non-reactive research (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 14). Each of the approaches has their unique strengths as well as limits when it comes to the actual applications to specific research. Intuitively, evidence from two or more sources tends to be more persuasive than results drawn from one source, though the intuition is not necessarily correct as undetected sources of error can affect the results from each one of the methods equally. To analyse crime, for example, conclusions from the official reports from the police can be very different from surveys conducted among the public (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). As there is no single method that is perfect, a wisely designed combination of several methods can help minimize the deviation. Following the framework of Brewer and Hunter (1989), the method of survey research combined with non-reactive research is chosen as the main means to collect data. It is worth noting however that although survey research is usually quantitative
and conducted on a large scale, the survey in this study is a **qualitative survey** conducted through interviews. The survey is aimed at collecting individual opinions and stories of different CouchSurfers. The researchers’ field involvement and observation records serve as a supplement to the survey, adding to a new angle of data. Through the non-reactive approach, data are gathered and transformed from existing materials, whereas the survey is aimed at generating new data for analysis.

What is rudimentary to qualitative research is the qualitative analysis of the diverse materials, as compared with quantitative analysis and the actual process of data collection (Strauss, 1987, p. 1). Despite the differences in data-collecting channels, the focus, as mentioned earlier, is to interpret the data collected qualitatively. This study, though consisting of different data gathering channels, is aimed in principle to be qualitative and explanatory. As the CouchSurfing community is too big and the members are too diverse, the aim of the research is not to draw a general conclusion about the whole group, nor to categorize the users into different groups with representatives from each group. Rather, the study aims at catching individual uniqueness, as well as common patterns that we can see from the individual cases.

In qualitative studies, there is a tension between the presentation of data collected and the interpretation of it. The issues of induction, deduction and verification are often addressed. As stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the focus on theory verification can hinder researchers from detecting new areas and possibilities and can discourage the explanation of the nature of much of their work, while overemphasizing the rhetoric of verification. Nevertheless, the generation of theories usually relies upon problem formulation on the grounds of existing theories (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 62). Albeit no one can start research free from preconceptions and opinions, understanding from experiences and the literature can lead to sensitivity for emerging connotations (Strauss, 1987). In the process of this study, though existing theories provided reference with which the author frames the general concerns regarding the interplay between motivations, presentation patterns and trust behaviours, there are no specific hypotheses about the actual relationships between them. With such basic factors of interest, this study will base its analysis on an inductive approach. Instead of
starting from the paradigm of logical-positivism, where hypothetical-deductive generalizations are tested (Patton, 1990, p. 37), it emphasizes the generation of novice insights. The inductive approach enables the generation of meaning and interpretations out of the facts and data gathered, rather than starting from specific hypotheses as in deductive approaches. Instead of building and testing theories, the author aims for fact-detection and interpretation. From empirical studies (e.g., Pietilä, 2011; Bialski, 2006), CouchSurfers have varied motivations and interests when it comes to the reasons why they choose to join the community. Despite some common ground that the CouchSurfers share, it is still a highly diversified community in terms of the members’ physical location, ethnic, cultural, educational and professional background, as well as patterns of their usage of the community.

Besides the motivations identified by previous researchers (e.g., Bialski, 2006), such as “self-exploration” and “personal growth” and so on, there should be more aspects in influencing people’s participation in CouchSurfing, which the author believes is best extracted from individual experiences rather than hypotheses tested. Mere categories cannot conclude all the complexities in each individual case. Therefore, the researcher tries to avoid pre-set hypotheses, and interprets the answers from open-question interviews, and content in the profiles and system. The interview transcripts and the profiles are analysed, to find out the correlations between potential factors that may influence people’s judgments and decisions, from a quantitative approach.

It is worth mentioning that the multimethod research approach has its limits; such as the fact that inconsistency in data collection methods can be criticized for their compatibility. The comparability between different data sets needs to be carefully considered, as data collected through different channels may not always have the same measurements and standards (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p.89). Aware of such limits, the data collected through different methods will be discussed later during the analysis. The reflection on the reasons behind the consistency or inconsistency of data from different channels can probably provide new dimensions for a qualitative interpretation.
4.2 Research process

As mentioned earlier, the research mainly relies on a qualitative survey. This survey, instead of aiming to gather information from a larger number of people, is conducted through interviews. With the aim of closely scrutinising individual stories and psychological motives instead of concluding a general pattern, the core data are collected from 14 individuals’ interviews. These interviews conducted with a diverse range of CouchSurfers are recorded as material for content analysis. With an awareness of the cost of precision due to the feasibility of interviews, the focus of the interviews is placed on depth and diversity, instead of generating a theory and concluding an overall pattern based on a larger sample size. 14 interviewees is too small a number for a statistical regression to provide any mathematical implications. Nevertheless, such a number is considerably large enough to pull some interesting insights from the in-depth interviews.

During data decoding, the profiles of the interviewees are analysed parallel to the reading of the survey answers. Those self-descriptions are compared with their words during the interviews, to assess the consistency or deviation. As interviews are subject to reactive measurement effects, the reading of the respondents’ CouchSurfing profiles and other materials is intended in order to obtain multi-facet data. By comparing the words written in the profiles and the answers to the interviews, a better picture of the psychology of the CouchSurfers can be captured, regardless of whether the profile statements are consistent with the intuitive answers or not. Since the number of interviewees is relatively small, more users’ profiles are analysed for specific sessions, to stretch the sample size, with the hope of detecting additional possible variations and alternative interpretations. The authors’ participatory observations are used as supplementary to add to the layers and perspectives of the participants’ point of view. Since the study does not focus on mathematical calculations, the system’s official data are read as providing the overall patterns of demographics for the CouchSurfers. The statistics gives a general image of the CouchSurfing world, and they also give an idea of the whole population, as the study itself cannot reach the entire population.
4.2.1 Surveys

Survey research is the major method of data-collection in this study. The advantage of surveys is the researchers’ control over data collection through their interaction with the respondents in order to elicit their participation under the guidance of research goals (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 93). Surveys, compared with other data gathering methods such as field research and document reading, can produce data about specific questions regarding a target population. With an interactive nature, survey research transforms part of the data-generating process to the labour of the respondents. The respondents’ willingness to participate (which can be triggered by various motivations and research techniques) to a large extent determines the cost of the effort on the researcher’s part (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 95).

Fowler (2009, pp. 11-13) points out two major factors that cause deviations in surveys: the fact that respondents’ characteristics do not describe the whole population; and that the answers the respondents provide do not exactly match the actual situation. Results drawn out of different samples can vary significantly, as “who responded”, to a large extent influences the answers collected from surveys. Therefore, how the respondents are approached and how the questions are presented, to some degree dictates the characteristics of the group that are willing to respond. Moreover, the differences between the answers and the respondents’ characteristics add to the deviation, and are the second fundamental source of error in surveys.

Fully aware of the cause of errors, this research tries not to focus on the sample’s representativeness, but to provide insights from diverse angles. As this is fundamentally not quantitative research, the interpretation of numbers is peripheral, while the actual content presented should be read with a critical eye.

4.2.1.1 Sampling

Since the aim is to cover different types of CouchSurfers, in terms of geographical, ethnical and age distribution, as well as patterns of CouchSurfing usage, the people
interviewed are chosen through purposive sampling. With such a method, the selection of interviewees is not based on probability, but rather, to cover special samples to fulfil specific purposes (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 114). Because the sample size is small, and it is desired to cover a variety of user profiles, certain samples are intentionally included, like group CouchSurfers, senior CouchSurfers, and non-Western CouchSurfers.

Despite four interviews taking place in Sweden and Germany when the CouchSurfers were introduced via connections to the researcher, most requests for interviews were sent out through the private message function provided by the CouchSurfing system. This was based on practical concerns to reach CouchSurfers in different physical regions, which is usually too costly for research. As suggested by Webb et al. (1966), to reduce the effect of overusing certain types of samples caused by the employment of convenience samples, the validity of sampling can be strengthened by using equally convenient but less stereotypic ones. The researcher tried to reach CouchSurfers with diverse backgrounds, sending requests to randomly selected CouchSurfers in all continents. After a first round of confirmations, six out of 25 CouchSurfers agreed to participate. Having scanned through the general profile of the respondents, eight new requests were sent in the second round, with an aim of getting a sample of different types of profiles regarding location, CouchSurfing experiences, and presentation style. Two agreed to cooperate in this round. During this period, the researcher went from Sweden to Germany, and surfed with two hosts in Bonn. With the researcher’s background disclosed to the hosts, they developed relatively close relationships with the researcher and some interesting insights were revealed. To further explore their thoughts, the researcher requested to conduct a formal interview with them in person.

The response rate of the requests through CouchSurfing messages was low. The possible reasons might be that some of the users are not active CouchSurfing users and do not frequently check the site or their emails, and who are therefore not interested in spending time participating in research. Language barriers, time zone differences, and inconveniences in connections etc. can cause other problems. Despite the different reasons behind non-response, common traits of the people who agreed to participate was that they tended to be relatively
active CouchSurfers or relatively new members who were willing to explore more about the network. All of them have generally positive perceptions on CouchSurfing; this to some degree also manifests itself in their continuous and active usage of the system.

Searching for subjects was primarily based on the demographic distribution of CouchSurfers, according to its official statistics. For instance, it is claimed that more than 350 different languages are represented on CouchSurfing, although more than 70% of CouchSurfers are English Speakers, with the second and third most popular languages on CouchSurfing being French (19%) and Spanish (17%) (See Figure 2). Thus, most of the 14 interviews were conducted in English, except one in Chinese Mandarin, due to the limitations of the author’s language skills. The interviewees come from 12 countries in terms of their origin, and currently reside in 10 different countries.

![Most Spoken Languages of CouchSurfers](image)

**Figure 2 Most Spoken Languages of CouchSurfers**

Nine of the interviewees were European-based at the time of the interview. There were also three based in North America, and one in Africa, Asia and South America, respectively. Although this distribution might seem too focused on Western countries, the justification behind it is that users in Europe and North America make up more than three quarters of the whole CouchSurfing membership. Besides, among those based in the same areas, there are some who are locals or natives of the country they live in, while others are nationals from other countries from the country where their profile had been registered. Above all, the research is not aiming to represent the whole population or give a statistically significant interpretation. Especially in the context that CouchSurfing is closely associated with international mobility and global identity, the country of birth or ethnicity do not necessarily become the primary foundation for one’s reference system of perceptions and actions. However, location is still one of the important considerations during the selection. Because of the fact that essentially as a special kind of tourism, CouchSurfing activities can be shaped by the unique touristic landscapes in the cities where the CouchSurfers are located. The cities where they register are also different in characteristics, based upon the assumption that a city’s cultural, economic, and political factors, among others, influence the nature and quality of its attractiveness to travellers. Whether the city is a major touristic attraction or a countryside village remote from major traffic centres, can affect the travellers’ motivations for CouchSurfing, especially for those whose CouchSurfing activities involve hosting. For instance, a student town like Uppsala in Sweden has a large young population with high-education levels, and most of them are either from international cultures outside Sweden or are willing to take part in international experiences. The city’s CouchSurfing activities can be characterized by its size, its student environment, its location near the capital city and the airport, the high cost of accommodation as well as the number of travellers compared to the available couches. In comparison, a major tourist city like Milan in Italy can have many travellers wanting to surf the limited couches with hosts who can master a foreign language at the same time. A small village like Arcos de La Frontera in southern Spain, for example, has only one host with a couch available, and his surfers are mainly cyclists on their way to other towns in Andalusia. The reason to conduct a survey through the system is to gather as many different scenarios as possible.
While a part of the process in choosing interviewees is meant to cover diverse geographical locations, other factors are also taken into account, to make up a really diverse sample. Age, to some extent reflects the life stage that one is in. Presumably young users might be able to afford less travel expenses yet have more time to travel than the well-established users. There could be other factors, such as the familiarity with technology that might influence one’s pattern of using the system. Thus, the choice of interviewees is also intended to represent different age groups. According to the official statistics, the average age of a CouchSurfing user is 28. About 36.8% of CouchSurfing users are under 24, while those aged between 24 and 29 comprise 32.8% of the members. Besides the people under 24 that comprise around 70% of the whole CouchSurfing population, about 21% are in the age range of 30 to 39, which means that less than 10% of the users are above 40 years of age (see Figure 7). The age distribution of the interviewees is consistent to the trend. Among the 14, six of them are aged between 23 to 28, five are in their thirties, one is aged 46, and two are in their fifties and sixties.
The sample includes users from different membership levels and usage patterns. Among them are not only experienced users, but also those less-experienced users and novice users who have just started their membership on CouchSurfing. While some of them have travelled intensively by surfing to different places, others have more of a focus on hosting due to factors such as lack of time and money, or they put community networking as the primary activities on CouchSurfing.

4.2.1.2 The interviews

Among the 14 interviews, six of them were conducted face-to-face, in Uppsala, Sweden, and Bonn, Germany. Considering the feasibility of the research, the other respondents were asked to do the interview through Skype, a popular Internet call service. Six of them agreed and took part in a Skype interview. The other two interviews were conducted via Instant Messaging (IM). A Nigerian respondent was interviewed through MSN, due to technical difficulties. The other was conducted on a Chinese IM service, Tencent QQ, at the request of the respondent.

The interviews through face-to-face meetings and Internet calls generally lasted about

![Top 10 CouchSurfing Countries](image_url)
70-90 minutes. The shortest ones were those with the less-experienced users, and they lasted approximately 50 minutes. The conversations are recorded and transcribed. The interviews conducted through IM are basically textual conversations in nature. The conversation records were copied and re-organized. It took significantly longer to conduct interviews via IM. This can be explained by the fact that typing is more time consuming, and both the interviewer and the interviewee need a longer time to read and respond accordingly. The one with the Chinese user took around 120 minutes. The one with the Nigerian respondent, however, due to technical cut-offs, and limited surfing time at the Internet café being used, could not be finished in one single time slot. Two other interview times were added, in order to cover all of the survey questions. It took more than 140 minutes in total to finish the questions, including the time spent in introductions, greetings and situational explanations.

There is no denying that the means by which the interviews are conducted can lead to different patterns of responses. Text-based interviews can be less intuitive, for instance, because the time lap enables people to edit their answers. Face-to-face interviews can trigger the interviewees’ defensive reactions in private questions while Internet-based ones reduce the pressure from physical presence. However, this approach of including all this interview channels made it possible to reach the subjects with different levels of accessibility, in terms of physical location, Internet literacy, and technical availability, etc. The respondent from Nigeria, for instance, has no computer at home. He accesses the Internet via phone, or by going to Internet cafes. Both ways, according to him, are costly in Nigeria. As the primary concern is to get qualitative data without the intention of producing statistical conclusions, reaching stories from individual users with different media usage patterns is a reasonable means to obtain a diverse sample.

During the interviews, the author tried not to interrupt the narratives of the interviewees, while attempting to minimize judgemental statements and attitudes. However, the respondents sometimes asked about the researcher’s experiences or points of view. In those cases, the researcher generally suggested a delayed response in an informal experience exchange session, after completing the survey.
4.2.1.3 Questions

The questions in the survey were designed to elicit responses primarily regarding the key concepts of interest, namely profile presentation; motivation, trust behaviour, and perception of CouchSurfing (see Appendix 1). Such categories were not presented to the respondents, while the general goal of the research was made known to them in advance.

With the aim of getting sincere and intuitive responses from the respondents without provoking defensive reactions, especially regarding personal motivations and private experiences, several questions were designed in a way that the interviewees were asked to describe relevant stories instead of purely addressing abstract concepts. For instance, the primary motivation of the subjects was asked via questions like “How did you first hear of CouchSurfing?” and “What was the most interesting CouchSurfing story that you have ever heard of?” in addition to a more explicit one, “What was your purpose of joining the network?” For the question, “How did you first hear of CouchSurfing?” the researcher intended to get information regarding the initial attraction point of CouchSurfing from the individuals interviewed. By the same token, “What was the most interesting CouchSurfing story that you have ever heard of?” is a question aiming to elicit their description of something “interesting” to them, which to a certain extent reflects, though is not totally equal to, the tempting elements in the network that motivate them to participate in CouchSurfing. Other questions concerning the pattern of system usage, such as frequency of surfing/hosting, the couch availability and description and replying habits, also indirectly touch their nature and level of motivation.

Regarding the respondents’ self-presentation, the questions were designed according to the sections on the profiles of the CouchSurfing system. Because the users’ data are registered, stored and shared through the website, it is relatively easy to access the demographic distribution of the users, as well as information about their usage of the system. Although the interviewee’s information was generally accessible on the system, some same questions were still asked during the interview, on the grounds of the concern that one’s online presentation
might not be updated or consistent with real life.

All of the questions are open ones. This is because with open questions, respondents are given space to provide their versions of stories with their own vocabulary. Many of the questions encourage story-telling and self-narratives, allowing the subjects to express their thoughts without being directed by pre-injected ideas of the researcher. Moreover, open-ended answers can provide more detailed insights into their personal experiences. Many questions are designed to explore not only “what”, but also “how” and “why”. For example, in evaluating their experiences, CouchSurfing users can rate other users, surfers, hosts and other encounters in the system, by choosing whether their experience is “positive”, “negative”, or “neutral”. With reference to the statistics provided by the system, only the general evaluations are accessible, while the personal experiences behind are lost. In the first place, ones’ experiences cannot be simply concluded as “positive” or “negative” since the determination of marking one experience “positive” can mean totally different things to different people. As a CouchSurfer who registered earlier pointed out, there used to be more options to label the general experience – “extremely positive” was one of them, besides “positive”. Imagine those who would mark the experience “extremely positive” now can only choose “positive”, and then there are at least two different levels of “positive” experiences. It can also be the case that in some cultures being positive means pleasurable and enjoyable, while others might interpret the term as “not failing to meet general expectations”. Moreover, that the general experience was “positive” does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that every single part of the experience went smoothly. Some people might laugh at the misunderstandings or mistakes they encounter during the CouchSurfing experience and forget about it soon afterwards, while others may see it as something unforgivable, implying a deficiency in the system or problems with the character of the CouchSurfer that they have encountered. Thus, it is more reasonable to use open questions to get more detailed comments from the CouchSurfers.

4.2.2 Participation

In textbooks of Social Science research, the issue of objectivity is repeatedly addressed:
researchers are warned not to “over involve” themselves, or “identify” themselves too much with the respondents (May, 2001, p. 21). Researchers (e.g., Deressel & Langreiter, 2003) tend to claim a distance from human behaviours and social phenomena as if they are outsiders carrying no cultural or social meanings. However, it is mythical and unrealistic to completely detach the researcher from the respondents being studied. Feminists, for instance, challenge the idea of objectivity by holding that the research context and the people within it influence researchers. In fact, researchers and their experiences play an indispensable role in the social sciences. For constructivists, there is no objective reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They undernoted the subjective interrelationship between the subjects and the researcher, and their joint activity of meaning construction (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). Above all, it is the researcher who decides on the object of study and the methods to be applied etc., referring to their personal or disciplinary understanding and interests. In addition, the collection of data essentially involves the subjective and interactive activities of the researcher, from the questions formed and the special conditions under which the research is conducted, to the “(inter-)subjective modes of constructing knowledge” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, pp. 4-5). When addressing the nearness of the researchers and their academic peers as subjects, Dressel and Langreiter (2003, p. 8) point out that the closeness between them helps to obtain insights into their academic life on a deeper and more systematic level.

The researcher has participated in several activities including surfing, hosting, coffee meetings and community gatherings, before and during the term of the research project. The researcher’s CouchSurfing membership started in March 2010 and she registered her student room in Uppsala, Sweden as the home base. She surfed with five hosts from June 2010 to January 2011, in Italy, Spain, and China, for both touristic reasons and practical reasons (e.g., language, convenient accommodation during a language course in Beijing). As the research project started in the spring of 2011, the researcher requested and surfed a few couches in Germany in June and July, presenting herself as a normal CouchSurfer, while mentioning her background in social science and working on a research topic on CouchSurfing as a part of her self-description in the requests. After going back to Sweden in September 2011, the researcher received several requests from CouchSurfers who wanted to surf her couch or to
meet up for touristic reasons. She agreed to host three out of the eight surfers, while only one of them finally came and spent two days in Uppsala. Besides the actual hosting/surfing activities, the researcher also went to a few community gatherings for CouchSurfers in Germany and Sweden.

4.3 Discussion: reflexivity

In social science, researchers cannot totally step out of the subject as they can in natural science for example, since researchers are essentially part of the society and social practice. The issue of reflexivity has triggered different discussions, including topics such as the power relationships and egalitarian relations between researchers and participants (e.g., Marecek, 1989; Finlay, 2002; Riley et al., 2003), and the role of researchers when they become the subjects themselves (e.g., Dressel & Langreiter, 2003).

It could cause problems when the researcher studies CouchSurfing as a CouchSurfer. The identity of the CouchSurfer could lead to in-group bias, and probably an insider’s framework to look at the issues of CouchSurfing. There are also advantages as well, when certain insights can only be observed, rather than told and shared. Besides, the CouchSurfers interviewed could offer more detailed information, as well as in-depth discussions to the researcher, based on the shared community membership. The researcher was able to observe the whole process of individual CouchSurfing experiences, from profile identification, message exchange, the reaching of agreement, to the actual meet-up and stay, as well as the post-experience behaviours including reference and evaluation. Such materials could be hard to gather if the researcher were not a CouchSurfing member. These personal observations, although could be largely influenced by the subjective standpoint of the researcher, could still be of value to provide first-hand materials that would not have been available through interviews. The unsuccessful requests that did not lead to actual offline experiences, for instance, which could have been ignored by respondents, can provide supplementary data to the analysis, and as offering examples of the non-trust situation that reveals and influences personal motivations and trust patterns. Records which otherwise could be difficult to obtain,
such as the requests and private messages exchanged, are also valuable materials for the analysis.

As social research should never claim absolute objectivity, it is important to understand the standpoint of the researcher and the potential influences that the background of the researcher and the methods could have on the interviewees. Therefore, while recognizing the limits of the group identity that the researcher shares with the CouchSurfers, there are positive aspects that allow the research to be more in-depth, and focus on individual behaviours and activities in the context of CouchSurfing as an online community.
5 Analysis

5.1 How does CouchSurfing work

The most important function that CouchSurfing offers its users is the possibility to search for hosts in different locations who are willing to provide a sleeping surface (a couch, or anything that one can sleep on), for a short period of time during one’s visit. From the perspective of the hosts, they generally need to offer extra space in their homes, for those whom they have agreed to host. There are usually other activities involved during/between the surfing/hosting experience, such as guided sightseeing, language exchange and food-making, besides the provision of the couch.

Figure 5 An example of a CouchSurfer’s profile- General Information
In order to be able to surf, host, or participate in any other activities, one needs to create a profile on the site, establishing a virtual version of self in the network, as it is a member-based service (see Figure 5). Memberships are obtained for free, as well as the surfing/hosting activities. By requiring registration and profile generation, the system tries to regulate the membership and activities within certain frames. Users are asked to register with their real names, email address, birthday, gender, location, and first language. After the creation of the account, members are asked to write in different sessions about themselves and their couches. Such sessions include general information, personal descriptions, couch information, interests, philosophy etc., together with the display of “friends”, “groups” and references. These sessions, unlike basic information, are not compulsory. There are instructions from the system, the website and CouchSurfing team members, reminding of the importance of the profile sessions, with examples, guidelines and tips. For instance, in the couch session, guidelines on the site are as presented below:

Type in a description of your couch and what you have to offer surfers. Things to be sure to include:

What part of town do you live in?
How many people live with you?
What is your couch/floor/bed like?
Do you have pets?
Do you smoke?
What fun things to do are there around where you live? Local landmarks?
Public transportation?
Can you show people around? Or, are you busy working?
Do you prefer to go to bed early or late?
Best times that you can host? Weekdays? Weekends?
Do you have blankets?
How many days is too many?

The instructions focus on individual uniqueness and details. Different sessions allow the
users to describe themselves from different angles, especially their social habits and personal interests in daily life and on CouchSurfing. Travel and culture are the primary frames, rather than political opinions, economic status, professional life, and other aspects of one's identity.

In a typical hosting/surfing encounter, a surfer searches for potential hosts through the function of “couch search”. A simple search include options to search for users in a specific area with possibilities to control the result by setting limits on the general information about the person such as age, gender, language, as well as information about the “couch”, including distance from the city searched for and availability of the host etc. It is also possible to sort out users by their membership and system usage. The users’ last log-in times and locations, reply rates (the percentage of couch requests replied to), number of references, friends and photos, are shown in the search results together with the profile pictures, the mission statements, as well as age, gender, profession, and language(s). Searches are also possible through “keywords”, in order to find users with specific interests and professions etc. By ticking options relating to the status of the users’ “couch availability”, one can choose if they want to search among users who “definitely” or “maybe” have a couch, whereas in other cases one can look for a meeting over coffee by searching among those who are only available for “coffee or a drink”. A relatively new function provides the opportunity to search among friends, or friends’ friends. It is also possible to search among “visiting travellers” to look for accompanying or information exchange.

In the search results, a list of users registered in the searched area is shown. The summaries of the users include the user name, a profile picture, basic details relating to the person (age, gender, and profession, etc.), mission for CouchSurfing, and language levels. One can identify if the user is a local ambassador of CouchSurfing, a “vouched” user, a verified user and so on, by finding small icons displayed next to the names. One can become verified by registering the real name with the real address, with a “donation” to CouchSurfing. If the address is true, one can receive a postcard with the verification code that can be used to add an icon to prove the authenticity of the address. A “vouch” can be obtained from interacting with members who have more than three vouches, when they think the person is
trustworthy. Other status and roles in the system can be gained by applying through the CouchSurfing team.

After browsing through the search results, users can navigate to potential hosts’ profiles and get more detailed information. Once a surfer is convinced that a user’s profile is satisfactory in terms of the personal descriptions and the couch information, he or she can send out a request through the system, indicating the expected surfing period in addition to a personal message, which is expected to contain the surfer’s self-presentation and the personal statement for the trip. The host can either “accept” or “decline” the request, with an extra option of “maybe”, as a response before having enough information to make the final decision. They can exchange messages for several rounds to clarify expectations and gather more information about the other party, before reaching an agreement. Once the request is accepted, the host provides practical information about the directions, and often other means to reach the host, e.g., telephone numbers or personal emails.

The actual hosting/surfing can be very different from one experience to another. Generally the host provides a place for the surfer to stay for free. They could do other things together if both parties are interested. A home-cooked meal together or a walk to the city park are both examples of common activities. Sometimes the host accompanies the surfer for a longer time during their stay, while there are also many occasions when they may have limited time for interaction because of late arrivals or busy schedules etc. As the patterns of interactions are out of the main focus of the research, they will be discussed later in the analysis, to avoid discursiveness.

In the last stage of each experience, after hosting/surfing, one can choose to leave a “reference” to evaluate the overall experience with each other. They are asked to indicate the types and duration of interactions, and write a few sentences regarding the experience. The system also asks the users to evaluate the experience by labelling it as “negative”, “positive”, or “neutral”. The references left are then shown on the profiles of both parties involved.
The number of "positive", "neutral" and "negative" references are displayed. One can choose to view the negative references, for instance, to see the details of the reference and the CouchSurfers’ responses. In this case, the person left a positive reference to the one who gave him a negative reference after a cancelled travel plan.

5.2 Motivations and identity on CouchSurfing

On the homepage of CouchSurfing (2011), the possibilities for CouchSurfing are described with the following sentences to attract new users: “CouchSurfing is turning a missed train into an opportunity for a new adventure. Starting a weekly dinner party. Teaching your kids about other cultures from your home. Getting advice for your next trip. Engaging with the world in a whole new way.” These descriptions present the community’s understanding of the ways the system can be used and that can also be appealing to potential users. “Travel”, “host” and “meet interesting people” are three points exhibited on the homepage as main options one can use to explore CouchSurfing. It claims that through CouchSurfing, one can get away from the guide books which lead everyone to the same statues, explore foreign culture and language without packing one’s suitcase, and step outside the routines and experience the “serendipity of travel” during free time. Despite the different
activities a CouchSurfer can participate in through the network, the motivations of the users can be diverse, related to their own personality and needs. Such motives enormously affect the ways that they use the system, and can manifest themselves in their activities through the system.

In this session, the researcher firstly tries to analyse the demographics of the CouchSurfers, understanding the characteristics of the CouchSurfing population; what binds them together, how they identify themselves, and what drives them to use the system for both single experiences and long term. With a general look at the statistical characteristics, more detailed analyses are focused on the psychological motivations of the CouchSurfers.

As there are different levels of usage among CouchSurfers, motivations that attract novice users and motivations that help people to remain active and enthusiastic are discussed separately. This is based on the researcher’s interest of exploring trust behaviours through CouchSurfing, which will be discussed in section 5.4. People join the community in order to obtain certain benefits. The analysis of the users’ purpose for CouchSurfing membership will give a broad idea about the selling points of the service and the characteristics of the CouchSurfing populations’ general membership. This is also seen as reflecting a mechanism of the emergence of initial trust for the system. As the members’ experiences with the system grow however, they may or may not become active users, depending on their developed understanding of the service. During this process, the members choose to place or withdraw trust. Those who become long-term CouchSurfers and stay longer in the community are the ones who repeat trust behaviours with different users within the system. Investigating this group of “active CouchSurfers” will provide some insights for the later discussion on repeated trust behaviours in the community. Furthermore, the individuals’ identities through CouchSurfing will be discussed after a scrutiny of the users, especially the active users who integrate CouchSurfing as one of the activities or communities that shape their idea of self.

5.2.1 Who are CouchSurfers?

Before exploring CouchSurfers’ purposes for using the network, there is an initial interest
to first explore: “who are CouchSurfers?” “CouchSurfer”, the name associated with membership in CouchSurfing, represents a collective label for the users and an identity developed through network membership. Obviously not everyone is tempted, or is mentally and physically equipped to become a “CouchSurfer”.

Many non-CouchSurfers tend to be very sceptical of the system and doubt the feasibility of “letting a stranger stay with you without expecting anything”. During the time of the study, the researcher encountered many non-CouchSurfers who held very different opinions from active CouchSurfers. They generally questioned the safety issues, doubting the sincerity of the users. Carl, for example, a 25-year-old Swedish student who used “cool” and “brave” when hearing details of the researchers’ stay with several male hosts. However, despite the “cool” aspect, he especially doubted the motivation of such experiences when single male users host or surf on the couch of young females. “There must be many people who are expecting something else”, “As a girl, how can you let a 35 year-old man who you don’t know stay in your room? What if something happens?” Carl is not the only one that has such concerns. While such considerations on safety issues are to be discussed in later sections, here the question arises concerning, “who are CouchSurfers?”, or “are there any common characteristics of CouchSurfers?”. as not everyone in society wants to travel or offer their couch.

As Bialski (2006) states, the CouchSurfers she interviewed generally fell into the category of travellers whose motivations for travelling were exploratory, with the purpose of seeking meaning regarding life and self, as well as executing a way of life through mobility. Although the slogan of the network is to change the world ‘one couch at a time’ (CouchSurfing About, 2011) by promoting cultural exchange and personal improvement at home or on the road, the community do not seem as diverse as the number of languages and territories that it claims to represent. Interesting enough, as a newly certified Benefit-Corporation, CouchSurfing only got 21% of total scores on the diversity of the community. Whereas this number may look abstract, the statistics provided by the system draw a more concrete picture of the community. Statistics from CouchSurfing (11 October,
shows that the majority of CouchSurfers are English-speaking young people aged from 18 to 34, who are based in Western countries. New York, Paris, London, and Berlin are the biggest CouchSurfing cities in terms of the number of registered users, while all of the top ten CouchSurfing cities are international metropolises and popular tourist destinations (see Figure 3). The CouchSurfers from these ten cities comprise more than 10% of the whole community. That is to say, despite the fact that the users are spread over 250 territories across the globe, a large proportion of the CouchSurfers are highly concentrated in a limited number of cities and countries. On the one hand, there is no denying the fact that bigger developed cities generally have more inhabitants. On the other hand, the size of the city does not reflect the whole picture. The European city of Vienna, for instance, has a population of less than two million people, but has about 24,000 CouchSurfers (October 2011), which is ten times as many as that in Shanghai, a city with a population of more than 20 million. Hyderabad in India has four million inhabitants and around 330 registered CouchSurfers (October 2011). Although the CouchSurfers may not be living in the city that they are registered to, such statistics still provide a general overview of the origins or living places of the CouchSurfers.

The original idea of CouchSurfing was about travel. Many of the respondents, the ones who have more CouchSurfing experiences, claim to be enthusiastic travellers. They consider travel as a good way of exploring life. A large number of CouchSurfers are travellers with an already extensive international travelling experience. Others, if they cannot be labelled as “experienced travellers”, at least are hoping to travel more and ‘get something from the outside’. Among the interviewees, 10 of them have lived in more than three countries for longer than four months at a time. All of them have overseas experiences. Regardless of if they stated the motivation of travel as their first consideration in joining the system, most of them already have a plan or the drive to travel and explore. A Canadian respondent, Jonathan, for instance, has travelled to more than 40 countries already, and has experienced hospitality from locals during his previous travels as a social entrepreneur. Frank, a Ugandan-born, Norway-educated and Germany-based forestry-engineer, is a frequent traveller across continents due to job reasons. He predicted that he would only stay in his apartment in Germany for about three months in 2012. For the travellers, CouchSurfing served not as the
only way, but as an alternative way, to shape their journey. Bialski (2006) divides tourists into two categories: the ones who travel for recreation, and the ones who travel as a “life mission”. She tells the story of a 29-year-old American working professional who registered his address as his family’s place in Pittsburgh. Instead of having his own “home”, he lived in hotels provided by his consulting firm during the week, and CouchSurfed during weekends. He said, “I am actually a homebody, I forced myself to do it, because it is an experience I wanted to go through, it's something I wanted to do” (Bialski, 2006, p. 22). Although not so many people travel and CouchSurf as intensively as he does, the desire for mobility seems to be a part of the overall image of CouchSurfers, in the eyes of other members. Evidence can be found in the respondents’ answers for the questions relating to their first piece of knowledge about CouchSurfing, and the most interesting stories about CouchSurfing in their mind. While they mentioned their own experiences as very positive and inspiring, the most frequently touched on theme is someone’s intensive travel across continents. Cycling to many countries through CouchSurfing, organizing a reunion with old hosts from different places, or CouchSurfing continuously for months or years, are some of the stories they think are highlights made possible by the CouchSurfing network. It implies the general image of CouchSurfing and CouchSurfers is closely linked to global mobility and connectivity.

While previous research has focused on the characteristics of CouchSurfing as a form of tourism, the researcher argues that tourism, or specifically intimate tourism, for CouchSurfers are ways to achieve their motivations, rather than the motivation itself. As a type of highly individualized tourism, the experiences that one can get vary from couch to couch, city to city, and time to time. One cannot preview the experience, even when previous CouchSurfers might have described their experiences by leaving a reference. Worth noting is the fact that many of the hosts are expats who are not considered as a local in the places they are living in. Some of them could have no sense of belonging or attachment to the locality. It is quite common to see foreigners hosting their fellow companions, foreigners hosting other internationals, or foreigners hosting a national of the country of the host’s residence. To surf with them could mean not so much about the authenticity of getting to know the place nor the local life, but rather, the host him or herself, with the stories he or she carries.
Bialski (2006) posted an online survey linked to her CouchSurfing profile. More than 3000 people responded to the survey voluntarily. There is no guarantee that the sample represents the whole CouchSurfing population; the sample of respondents is more likely to reflect those members who are enthusiastic CouchSurfers, or at least the ones who hold positive attitudes towards CouchSurfing. In this survey in 2006, 56% of the CouchSurfers who responded stated that “personal growth” was their primary motivation to go travelling. This result cannot be directly applied to CouchSurfing, as CouchSurfing is not equal to travel itself. CouchSurfing for some people is just a way of travelling, and for other people, it is the other way around, i.e., the purpose of travel. Moreover, because it is one of the choices among other options such as “seeing interesting sights of the world”, “meeting and building relationships with people from around the world”, “to relax”, “to escape daily responsibilities”, etc., the complexity of the problem is simplified. Nevertheless, the result reflects a trend that CouchSurfers travel to get to know both the self and the people around them. This research, based on interviews with a dozen CouchSurfing enthusiasts, concluded that the CouchSurfers are mainly post-modern people who are constantly on the move and who are compelled to do so because of their inner need for tempo and touching the “local”. However, this appears to match the descriptions of the above mentioned “best practices” as voted by the interviewees in this research. The interviews conducted for this paper, though small in number, form a less “elite” sample in terms of their experience with CouchSurfing. The respondents, including novice users and those whose major CouchSurfing activities were hosting or local gatherings, indicate other patterns.

According to Bialski, CouchSurfing belongs to a class of consumers, a “society of choice” (Bialski, 2006, p. 71). It appears true when one looks at the geographical distribution of the CouchSurfers. About 70% of the CouchSurfers are young people under 30; nevertheless her conclusion does not seem valid, as youngsters generally have less ability to choose than established adults, especially when it comes to financial and social assets. There is no denying, however, that the younger generation do have more time to travel, especially under the condition of post-tourism when travel does not exclusively belong to the upper-class.
In terms of the number of members, there is no huge difference between genders, though male CouchSurfers do comprise more of the CouchSurfing population (about 50%). About 7% percent of the accounts are group-accounts, meaning that two or more people are sharing one account. They can be couples, families, friends, or colleagues etc.

![CouchSurfer Ages](image)

Figure 7 CouchSurfer Ages

Taking a closer look at the CouchSurfing population and exploring beyond the overall map, the characteristics of the CouchSurfers’ participation through the network should be analysed, as it is their interactions that ultimately form the online community. The vision of CouchSurfing is stated as “a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter”, addressing mutual understanding, respect and an open mind to “a global community”. Diversity is extolled as a part of CouchSurfing’s vision. CouchSurfing, in its vision presentation, calls for people to abandon their fear and resistance of the unknown and things that are different, and appreciate a broader spectrum of ideas provided by diverse angles. Interestingly enough, this appreciation of diversity becomes one of the key factors that the CouchSurfers identify themselves with. In
other words, it is the eulogy of diversity the users embrace that creates connections between
the people with diverse backgrounds. Place-based diversity, as well as languages, seems to be
the most measurable aspects of diversity. The numbers of territories in which CouchSurfers
locate themselves, and the number of different languages the CouchSurfers can speak, are
eminently exhibited in the system. What matter for the CouchSurfers are the recognition and
the psychological identification of this vision of diversity.

Besides, the curiosity to new cultures and experiences, the willingness to connect, and
the desire to be a part of a global society, are emphasized as well in the extended explanation
of the vision statement of CouchSurfing. Unlike nationality, gender, age and other extrinsic
aspects that are determined externally, the identity of a CouchSurfer, involving the
aforementioned mentality, is chosen by free will of the individuals. As this choice of identity
is voluntary, such ideas of CouchSurfing give more meaning once it becomes a part of the
user’s identity. What a CouchSurfer’s identity will look like will be discussed later in section
5.2.3.2. The key point here is, the CouchSurfers have diverse backgrounds and motivations,
but the central values of the community influence the perception of themselves and their
activities, thus creating a collective image of CouchSurfers. Such an image or standard
qualities of CouchSurfers do not equal the actual demography of the members, but the
imagined and preferred identity promoted by the system and active users.

5.2.2 Why join CouchSurfing?

The question “why”, essentially is an extended question relating to “who are the
CouchSurfers?”, and can be interpreted as “who is attracted to this network?”, and “what
persuaded them to join?” asked from another angle. Individuals’ motivations reflect one’s
style and philosophy of life, their attitude towards the network, and the goals they want out of
the community. At the same time, what transfers such drives into the action of joining the
community is also at the interest of this investigation, since this is essentially a simple process
of trust behaviour as well.

The interviewees were asked about the first pieces of information they heard about
CouchSurfing, their initial purpose for joining the network and the first situation that they used CouchSurfing. It turned out that their descriptions of the early information they received about CouchSurfing reflect partly the interesting points about CouchSurfing for them, but are not necessarily completely consistent with the aims of joining the community.

According to the interviews, there are basically two scenarios in which people heard about CouchSurfing and this triggered their initial interest for joining the network: 1) some people heard stories about CouchSurfing and became interested in certain activities that the social network could provide; 2) others had specific goals or ideas that they already had envisaged, and after searching among other services, they found that CouchSurfing matched their needs.

**Scenario one: interest aroused from stories**

In the first scenario, one had no idea about CouchSurfing before reading or hearing about it by chance. It could have been their friends who told them about CouchSurfing or media coverage on the system and its users. Among my respondents, a few described their experience of hearing other CouchSurfers’ stories when they were planning or discussing their travels plans, or during their journeys. This is actually in accordance with the fact that all the experienced CouchSurfers interviewed stated that they promote CouchSurfing to others who want to travel or who are willing to explore. Personal experiences are shared and advice is given during such conversations. The experienced users tend to be ambassadors automatically, provided they find the system accountable, feasible and meaningful. If the storyteller identifies himself or herself with the concept of CouchSurfing, the person usually talks about the positive experiences they have had, and at the same time provides advice for people who are curious and might be interested in knowing more. The interviewees mentioned their first fascination of the concept of having free accommodation, staying with local hosts, using the native language, and also the possibilities that CouchSurfing could provide.

Mustafa, a new user, mentioned that it was a CouchSurfer’s story that made him interested in exploring CouchSurfing: “I read about CouchSurfing in a newspaper. The article
was about a girl. She was travelling by bike around the world and she was arranging a place

to stay from CouchSurfing!” He described his purpose in joining the community: “I like

travelling already before joining CouchSurfing, and I like to meet people from different
countries. My motivation was my life philosophy! I don’t have that much time to surf, so I am
expecting to host more than to surf.”

Carlos, also newly registered, said: “I heard of one story of my friend in Bariloche,
Argentina. He was there with no money and some girl from CouchSurfing helped him and
gave him some food.” He said the decision to join the network was “initially just for curiosity.
I wonder how the networks and what kind of people I can meet there. I love to travel so I am
also curious about facilities of accommodation.”

Onni and Ulla are a couple in their sixties, and they decided to join CouchSurfing after
meeting a friend who promoted the system to them. They were convinced by the young
CouchSurfer and even changed their travel plans.

“My wife and I became CouchSurfers in November 2008 before our trip to Central
America. We had the opportunity to bump into this young lady who was a member of
CouchSurfing in Sanfrí…Her name was Michelle…She was the very first person that told
us about CouchSurfing. She did a trip to Central America using CouchSurfing, and she
was able to tell us a lot, a very bunch, about CouchSurfing. She was able to convince both
of us that CouchSurfing was a very safe system to use. Because of Michelle we changed
our itinerary for our trip the winter of 2008/2009. We originally thought about just going
for two months to Costa Rica. But after that meeting with Michelle we decided to go with
CouchSurfing. We went to Chicago city, Guatemala, and then …Nicaragua to the Pacific
coast side of Costa Rica…to the capital San Jose…”

Sometimes such story-sharing is followed by invitations. Joy, a teacher from New York,
describes her first experience with CouchSurfers when she was travelling in Fiji, where a few
CouchSurfers she met in a resort invited her for experiences that she could never have
imagined:
“When I was having a holiday in Fiji, I met some CouchSurfers. I was staying with one couple amidst the only four days of my three-week-vacation there that was not booked. The woman invited me to stay after we met while they were celebrating her birthday with a dinner down the road from the resort I was in. There she introduced me to her friends after two days. I ended up spending the next couple of nights with them on their yacht. That was when I learned about CouchSurfing and that they were all in it! They said it is a great thing. The yacht owner told me he had stayed in many homes better than five star hotels through CouchSurfing and I was in! Then I realized that my first two CouchSurfing experiences with these couples were exactly the same for me- much more than what I could expect in five star hotels!”

Although not everyone had such ‘five star’ experiences, Joy’s example can provide a picture of how new users can get attracted to the system by the stories of others, which they find appealing. They did not have a previous idea of such a hospitality service, but are generally interested in the practice after hearing the stories, though they might not be completely convinced of its reliability. Jonathan used to have his own company sending volunteers abroad, and he read about CouchSurfing from a magazine. “I thought it provides a way for the young people to travel and meet people, and they don’t need to pay. It can be a cheap way for the Y generation to travel. I actually had some negative attitude towards such an idea. But after I looked at it, I found it actually intelligent.”

Scenario two: community services match existing goals

The second scenario is that a person already has certain ideas envisioned, and the activities offered through CouchSurfing appear to match their existing ideas. Such visions vary from individual to individual; some are more concrete while others are vague. Some people find CouchSurfing after searching actively, whereas others come across information about it and feel the CouchSurfing network can fulfil their previous dreams.

Sometimes the perceptions relate to practical purposes. The person has certain immediate needs and looks for a means to realize them. In the era of the Internet, it is usually
the case that one search for specific “key words” according to their needs results in CouchSurfing popping up in the search results. Faith, a young Chinese woman, stated that, “I was planning to travel and was wondering if there was any website that I could exchange accommodation with others or live in other people’s homes. I searched on the Internet and found CouchSurfing. I just thought I could do that through CouchSurfing.” Michael also found CouchSurfing through a search engine because of practical reasons. “It was in 2007 when I was applying for a job in Oslo. Norway is very expensive and I wanted to save money. I heard from a friend about hospitality clubs before so I searched and found CouchSurfing.” Faith’s idea was to exchange accommodation, whereas Michael was looking for ways to save money in Norway. Such needs made it natural for them to join CouchSurfing.

In other cases, the individuals have ideological perceptions, which are not directly attached to immediate utility. In other words, it is their spiritual or psychological aspects, which they believe can be achieved through CouchSurfing, which plays the key role.

A Nigerian respondent, Clement, has been writing to internationals through a Germany-based pen-pal club for more than 10 years. “My purpose was to make friends, know the world, improve my English, and learn foreign cultures and to eradicate loneliness. It was fun. I have about five good friends from Germany, three female and two male. I also hosted one of them last year.” He is a devout Christian, and believes that every Christian in the world is his brother or sister and he wishes to connect with them. Realizing that his desire to meet more people from other parts of the world could be achieved through CouchSurfing, Clement started his journey on CouchSurfing, connecting others through this online society and hoping to get fresh voices from the “outside world”. “I read about CouchSurfing in their (a pen pal club’s) bi-monthly magazine. It introduces CouchSurfing as one of the social networks for travellers around the world. I read some testimonies of some members who had visited a foreign country and the accommodation they found without spending too much money, but with open hands of CouchSurfers.”

Frank, a Ugandan respondent, claimed that he had envisaged an idea resembling CouchSurfing long before he joined it. Based in Germany, he works as a Forestry engineer
and his job involves auditing different forestry companies all over the world. He is frequently on business trips in different countries.

“My hotel rooms are paid by the company so money is not the problem, but I just cannot understand why the hotel rooms can charge you 90 Euros per night without them doing anything. I mean, yes, they have huge rooms with a wide bed, a TV, sometimes a fancy toilet with bath- but I don’t really use them. I don’t need their breakfast or huge bathtub. What did they do to earn this much money?”

Frank said he was happy to find CouchSurfing, something he feels that can be a solution to the problems that had been haunting him for so long.

5.2.3 Why continue CouchSurfing?

Noticeably, the motivations of CouchSurfers do not necessarily remain the same as their initial purpose when they have accumulated more experiences. They become active members provided that their previous experiences are positive, and their motivations remain or grow. If the experiences do not match the expectations, and no new motivations develop, they remain passive and might withdraw eventually. For those who remain in the community, regardless of if they are actively seeking new opportunities, only participate upon others’ request, or in passing, the motivations for each of the occasions are also different.

Questions regarding the usage of the system, the people they prefer to interact with, the members’ views of CouchSurfing, as well as their descriptions of their experiences, are designed to be explicit of the CouchSurfers’ utility of this network. At this stage, the active CouchSurfers’ responses are of more value, since they carry out most of the CouchSurfing activities and tend to motivate novice users by sharing their own experiences. The active CouchSurfers themselves are also the primary group of interest, since their repeated trust behaviours represent mechanisms that drive the online network to move forward. As the main actors in CouchSurfing, who they are and why they continue to be motivated can cast a light on the types of people that form the community. Their preferences and hosting/surfing
strategies are adjusted through experience and make it clearer to understand their motivations, while providing some clue for what kind of people are marginalized in the network.

Worth underlining is the fact that motivations for using CouchSurfing do not refer to the same thing as the motivations for each individual travelling through CouchSurfing. Joining the network includes more environmental and systematic practices and people can focus on one or a number of different possibilities provided by the network, while the latter is about individual encounters.

According to information gathered from the 14 interviewees, the motivations of CouchSurfers can be identified as practical reasons, cultural experience expectations, and emotional needs. They could have varied motivations in each individual encounter, and the above-mentioned aspects could be combined and weigh differently in different situations.

**Practical reasons** include monetary considerations, lack of alternatives for accommodation, and convenience to services and so on. Several young travellers stated that their initial drive to participate in CouchSurfing was to save money, as travelling can be unaffordable for young people without cheap or free accommodation. Like many other students who are excited about travelling, Barbara, a 24-year-old student joined the network when she was planning a trip in Europe. “*The first thing I thought about CouchSurfing is that I could go to other cities without paying.*” Mark lives in Bonn, the former capital of Western Germany, which is now the hub for more than 150 Non-Governmental Organizations and international organizations. He told the researcher who surfed his place before her own room became available, that she was the only surfer he had who did not send an emergency request to him at the last minute. “*They usually come to Bonn for conferences or temporary jobs. Sometimes they are people like you, who cannot fix their accommodation earlier than they arrive. I know the housing situation is tough in Bonn, especially for newcomers.*” In such situations, people, especially expats, are inclined to seek help through CouchSurfing, as they might not get the same help elsewhere than from the locals/local expats who know the city. These practical reasons are usually from the perspective of the surfers, rather than the hosts. At the same time, for the people who are willing to meet people from other places, hosting is
a cheap option for them to get experience and information from the guests without having to spend time and money on travel. Especially when a person already has a plan to visit somewhere, it is more likely that he or she welcomes guests with knowledge about the specific destinations. In fact despite some users who join the network after the interest derived from earlier knowledge about CouchSurfing, the direct motivation for many are the needs for incoming travel plans.

In addition to the practical aspects, another reason that makes CouchSurfing appealing is its possibility for people to get cultural experience. It is one of the selling points of this SNS. Through CouchSurfing, members are connected to the locals, or the “local tourists” who can provide cultural guidance to the locality that the surfer is visiting. At the same time, for the host, it’s a convenient way to get to know a stranger, usually a foreigner, who is a symbolic culture-carrier, without spending time and money going abroad. In the era when people are faced with abundant information from the globalized world, the thirst for fresh cultural input and the fascination with “life elsewhere” makes it desirable to get experience by interacting with people from afar. By doing something together, the host and the surfer interact in such a way that cultural aspects of their identity are revealed, presented and negotiated. They absorb the nutrition of different lifestyles, which they could otherwise not get.

More intangible are the emotional fulfilments that CouchSurfers pursue through the network. As mentioned earlier, CouchSurfers tend to reach a deeper level of intimacy, which is especially observable in their verbal conversations. They have the need to talk, to share, and to learn, from the other CouchSurfers. In addition, the feeling of getting connected or contributing to the individuals and the community can also be a part of their concern. Onni, a retired man with a passion for languages and people, states his fascination of going travelling through CouchSurfing is that he could, “meet the local people and actually use the language.” He started his CouchSurfing journey with his wife, Ulla, who was not as enthusiastic about languages. Despite the language-learning journeys they made to Central America, which Onni kept talking about for a long time, they hosted travellers in their home in the countryside of Canada. He said they preferred to host elder people instead of young party-goers, so that they
could have more common topics to share. Ulla was not as talkative as Onni, but she kept surfing and hosting with Onni. “I think Ulla’s purpose is to help the young people to save their money. She knows there are young people who want to go travelling but have not much money. She feels she wants to be able to help.” Others might have a need for intensive talks with others, and the people nearby might not enjoy such long conversations as much as a person from far away. Travellers might find interesting points from the daily routines that they would otherwise take for granted. The outsider’s perspective could make people re-discover the colours of their daily life. Some CouchSurfers tend to be talkative people. An active CouchSurfer states, “One of my favourite things is to have conversation with someone new. Especially a protracted one that comes on a personal level that explores things that I might not have thought about” (Bialski, 2006, p. 47).

The three categories are not separated, but rather, closely weaved into the overall experience. Imagine an Italian traveller visiting a Brazilian who has been living for several years in Seoul, Korea. It could be that the traveller needs directions in Seoul; where are the local delights on a budget, how to read the Korean signs, how should he behave when he goes to a spring in a neighbouring village etc. He could also find the host interesting because the Brazilian’s grandfather was from Italy, and they could talk about their home countries, their experiences, besides topics about life in Korea. They could choose to have some Korean-Brazilian barbeque or the surfer could offer some “real Italian” pizza recipe. This, for both the guest and the host, can be practical, cultural, and emotional at the same time. However the weight of the factors will vary from time to time. A student’s request to surf in Paris, for instance, can concern more monetary concerns and language issues, while the same person’s motivation to surf in a minor city in India will be more related to cultural experience. How they expect to share emotional conversations then depends on the backgrounds of the two parties and the chemistry between them. Jonathan focuses on different aspects when he plans each individual activity.

“I use CouchSurfing whenever I feel like being with people. In certain countries I prefer just meeting some people for coffee and staying in hotels. In cities that are expensive,
I am more likely to surf. Now I think there are a lot of gatherings, which I think are really useful. It’s a super good way to go out to meet people. It’s easy to break the ice when you have the mutual connection through CouchSurfing.”

5.2.3.2 Why surfing and why hosting?

People who primarily host can have different motivations compared to those who are more interested in surfing. The people interviewed report more practical concerns when they go surfing, and more social and emotional factors that become their motivations to host. Within the framework of Habermas (1984), it can be understood that people are mainly guided by instrumental rationalities when surfing, and more by communicative rationalities when hosting. These two rationalities of course are connected, although the CouchSurfers put different priorities on individual experiences. A potential explanation can also be associated with the general logic of interactions through the CouchSurfing system, where in most cases it is the surfers who actively contact the hosts. The surfers choose to contact the hosts for a personalized travel experience with expectations for a local reception with individualized guidance, reduced accommodation costs, insights to a new culture and so on. The hosts, on the other hand, do not often get practical benefits except for information and small gifts from a traveller. Their motives can be more communicative and social, aiming for emotional exchange and cooperation with the surfer - for a good story from far away, a chance to explore more opportunities through CouchSurfing, or simply a reference exchange that can be helpful for future encounters. In SNS where one’s single experiences can be recorded and reflected on profiles, the previous experience and contribution to the CouchSurfing community are made meritable in the long run. In this sense, communicative rationalities are more important for hosts and long-term CouchSurfers than for single time travellers.

Besides the three categories mentioned in the last section, which are generally people’s considerations in single situations, the continuity of the membership and the long-term goals should also be taken into consideration for the analysis. A study of Lauterbach et al. (2009) finds out that in the first experiences, there are equal numbers of people who opt for surfing
and hosting, while the percentage of people both surfing and hosting increases considerably over time: about 80% of the CouchSurfers have done both surfing and hosting after 10 experiences, and the ratio goes up to 90% among the CouchSurfers with 25 CouchSurfing experiences. Empirical research (e.g., Rosen et al., 2011) also suggests that CouchSurfers’ identification and belonging to the community increases with their participation.

The previous experiences, as well as the anticipation of future experiences can be seen from the perspective of social capital. One’s increased experiences continue to add to his or her “attractiveness” and “authority” in the network. Here, a member’s attractiveness is generally determined by the community’s collective value of diversity, mobility, and openness. Accumulated experiences imply more cultural exposure and adventures, as well as a willingness to connect. The ones with multiple experiences and extended networks represent increased social capital, in terms that such people are usually “brokers” who are connected to remote relations, adding fresh prospects. In regular organizations, brokerage represents a kind of social capital that is usually valued by the network members. By the same token, in the CouchSurfing network, where plurality is one of the central values, such well-travelled people with complex backgrounds are seen as possessing more social capital, which generally leads to advantaged positions in the network. Increased experience implies augmentation in one’s social capital, and the intention of getting long-term benefits from the CouchSurfing also motivates the individual users to continue participating in CouchSurfing activities. The envisioning of better usage in the future often encourages a user’s temporary decision to participate. For example, Mark, with the basic purpose of meeting local CouchSurfers, started hosting last-minute surfers. He started to get more requests and have more influence in the local community after the first few references were received. Others also started to host and gather ideas and stories before surfing, which they believe is more difficult without earlier CouchSurfing experiences that can make them stand out among the people requesting a couch.
5.2.4 Motivations behind the curtain

While recognizing the factors that drive most of the active CouchSurfers, the researcher notices some “heretical” and deviant motivations behind the personal stories described. They can be detected from one's narratives of his or her own experiences. They are implicitly stated between the lines or they can be found from one’s descriptions of others’ stories. Such hidden motivations tend to be overlooked, or deliberately filtered out when one names the CouchSurfers’ motives. This phenomenon probably reflects a collective psychology where only the motivations matching the community’s identity are legitimated and “typical”, while the peripheral and unacknowledged motives that could dilute the density of the central values of the community members are therefore deliberately ignored.

Since this study is interested in individual cases instead of making a quantitative conclusion, those ignored stories, mostly not-so-positive ones that are not regarded as “standard” activities matching the CouchSurfers' own identity, are important to list here, to give examples of off-track behaviours. They are exhibited here as in contrast to “mainstream” motivations, providing an idea about how this community can be utilized besides the “officially” stated reasons that bounds CouchSurfers. In addition, the negative ones could serve, as examples of the “risks” of CouchSurfing, which will be discussed later together with trust decisions.

Job opportunities

Some respondents pointed out that CouchSurfing as an SNS provides a channel for people to reach a large number of other people, regardless of what the reason is. Faith, a Chinese young woman, received a message from Turkey, who wanted her to go and work there. “The person wanted someone to work for him there.” As a matter of fact, because many CouchSurfers are international-minded people with multiple language abilities, some people use it to specifically reach this group of adventurous, open-minded people with specific cultural backgrounds and language abilities. Besides the general networking meetings, or diasporic reunions, people could also search CouchSurfers through key words. Frank, the
international auditor said he sometimes searches for interpreters through CouchSurfing:

“We don’t really need a certificate, as the jobs are often daily conversations. There is no point looking for a professional interpreter charging a large amount of money. I found a few interpreters through CouchSurfing. I just checked their profiles and contacted them. The young people I find all turned out to be very good in English and I was never disappointed.”

A young woman with a law background searching for jobs within the public sector contacted Mark, a lawyer in an NGO living in Bonn.

“Apparently she read my profile, or maybe she searched by keywords. Anyway she found me and sent me a message, asking if we could meet for a drink and she wanted to consult me about the job market in Bonn. I agreed, so we met. Actually my assistant will leave in October and I need someone to replace her. I found that this young woman had a good profile and I liked her during our talk. I got my degree outside Germany and I would need someone who understands the German laws. She studied law in Germany. So I employed her. Now my assistant is doing transitions with her. It’s just good timing, that I don’t have to train her myself because my assistant is still here.”

When the researcher mentioned this story to some other CouchSurfers or non-CouchSurfers, almost everyone reacted with a “wow”. In contrast, Mark told the story with a natural and calm tone, as if such networking connections are nothing to be surprised at.

Despite such goal-specific networking requests, “friend requests” are commonly reported as well. For instance, the researcher received a few such requests, when members from other countries sent out simple messages and asked if the researcher wanted to become their “friends”. The people hoping for “pen-pal” style connections seem to have a lack of mobility and complexity in their backgrounds, and do not have the prospect to meet offline and create real life experiences with other members. While such people also practically represent other cultures and remote connections, they do not seem to be the “right kind” of
diversity and do not match the CouchSurfers understanding of the community, making them less successful in creating connections.

**Dating**

As mentioned previously, there has constantly been a concern for the “what-will-happen-when-one-single-man-is-alone-with-one-single-woman” issue. Though none of the interviewees would mention this as one of their motives, many joked about the stories they have heard about such “you-know-what” scenes.

Claire, a French girl who has an account with another girl registered in Paris, said that she gets a lot of requests every month. “Well, you know, they just send many requests of meeting up, because we are two girls, and we are French. We ignored them of course.” A 31 year-old Dominican girl living in Beijing, who contacted the researcher in January 2011 for a meet-up, said that she remained cautious in her self-descriptions, looking into that she did not reveal too much information because “there are so many weird coffee requests from men, and I just don’t want to meet them and I feel dangerous if I put up more information about my job and location.”

When the researcher was trying to contact a young Portuguese man who she had encountered before in order to get some of his CouchSurfing stories, he replied back through email, saying “I am in fact thinking of de-registering myself. There are so many gays sending me messages.”

While it is generally the females complaining about the requests that are suspiciously with “not-so-pure” motives, the most unexpected stories the researcher gathered were about female users.

Clement talked about his distant “love story”, which might look unbelievable from many others’ eyes. A girl sent a request directly mentioning she wanted to marry him in Nigeria. This out-of-the-blue relationship, though it did not work out, was a real and strong one for him.
“There had been...a girl from Israel who has promised to marry me. I agreed to marry her and we started the friendship. We later switched from CouchSurfing site to mobile messages to communicate. She was always crying, ‘Clement, I want you to give me a brown baby.' She tried to come here and live with me. She loved me too much. I, myself, I loved her in return. But her daddy did not allow her to visit me because her past lover from Eastern Nigeria raped her and since then, her dad hated Nigerians. I ought to stop our relationship because as long as her dad did not have the interest, it would be dangerous for me to marry her. She’s still in Israel. I don’t want to talk much about her because I will cry. Love is when she left you and you still love her. I miss her a lot.”

Frank also mentioned his story with a German girl.

“She wrote me a message and said she wanted to surf my place. I said ‘no’ because I was kind of busy at that time. She had a relatively new profile but I did not care that much because I didn’t have time to host anyway. After a few days she wrote back to me again and said she had developed her profile. She said, ‘now I have a better profile. Please accept my request.’ So I thought if she really wanted to come, ok, come then. I waited for her at the station, and the moment I saw her, I could tell that she was looking for something else. We went to a pub later. There suddenly she told me that she liked me... later we started a short-relationship, for about three months. I asked her later, why she wrote to me like that. She admitted that she wanted a black man.”

With little doubt we can deduct that the girl did contact Frank for “you know what” reasons, and more cases can be found as many of the respondents more or less mentioned such stories in relation to themselves or others. Most of the interviewees, when asked about their opinions, talked about it as a not-so-rare phenomenon but just gossip topics other than a form of abuse of the system. Some mention romances developed through CouchSurfing activities but they mostly see it as nothing more special than when you meet someone in a dance club or on a fishing trip. It is difficult to tell how many CouchSurfers are expecting romance or sexual experiences through the network. Besides, one can hardly evaluate how much this kind of purpose weighs in the users overall motivations for CouchSurfing; one can
be reluctant to articulate or even acknowledge such motives because of the sensitivity and personal level of the topic.

**Business Opportunities**

Some people’s attempts at selling touristic products have been reported. Hostels and tour operators use the system to get in touch with the CouchSurfers who are planning to visit their locations. Some people defend themselves by claiming that they just provide extra information about tours that the travellers have interests in when they are CouchSurfing, which has no essential difference from giving advice for other tourist options. The other party, however, might find the person dishonest about the motivations for joining CouchSurfing just for winning more customers, though some CouchSurfers find it acceptable if they “provide good deals” and if they are not “just for business.” The suggestion from CouchSurfing’s safety page (2011) is:

“Sometimes these offers turned out to be phony, other times it was just commercial spam, and other times it was a well-meaning CouchSurfer who found a good deal. Don't risk finding out which scenario is the case: play it safe and say no to any offers. And like your mother always said, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

**Crime**

Although the majority of the experiences recorded are positive ones, extreme cases of crimes through CouchSurfing are reported occasionally. Among the 14 interviewees, only two “ambassadors” of CouchSurfing and one German CouchSurfer have heard about crimes committed through CouchSurfing. Such crimes included a German male who registered as a new member who was looking for hosts in other German cities. He took valuables while the hosts were away. The ambassadors also heard about a rape, which they believed was the extreme case. The British media reported a case in 2009 whereby a Moroccan man in Leeds raped a 29-year-old female surfer from Hong Kong when she stayed at his place (Brooke, 2008). The system also suggests that one should never send money to anyone’s personal
account before the meeting because of the danger of fraud. There is no way to obtain information about whether such people intend to commit crimes through CouchSurfing. However, such incidences indicate the potential dangers that one might face when using the network.

5.2.5 Community identity and online-offline relationships

As identity is formed through ones’ continuous reflexive activities (Giddens, 1991b), the ones who choose to stay with the CouchSurfing community tend to take on the identity as CouchSurfer more than basic account owners, while the active members with more experience might identify themselves more with CouchSurfing. Since the concept of choice is central to these intimate-tourists, they choose to be ‘CouchSurfers’, which denotes a certain kind of group identity formed through the dynamic interactions of the users whose activities are framed by the SNS of CouchSurfing. CouchSurfing in the technical sense is a virtual infrastructure, or an abstract system in Giddens’ words. The site provides guiding rules, norms and hierarchy systems for the users. At the same time the users themselves develop their own understandings out of the framework, and contribute to the shaping of the community and group identity. Because continuity is key to the modern self, the motivations of the active users are closely related to the identity formed out of their repeated CouchSurfing experiences.

When CouchSurfing as a community, whereby the users have developed real connections and meaningful experiences, their behaviours go beyond the initial idea of just to host and to surf. Literally, anything done by the CouchSurfers becomes weaved into the meaning of the online society. The technical system supporting this online community is constantly changing, encouraging the users to new possibilities and innovative structures. The website is developing new services according to the needs and desires of the CouchSurfers. The emerging new services, in the first place, are inspired by the users’ personal explorations with others. Community gatherings, tours, and even a dinner party organized by a CouchSurfer, can be linked to the members’ understanding about CouchSurfing. The identity, constructed as
CouchSurfers, is constantly shaped and negotiated through such interactions; and it in return exerts influence on the users’ understandings and usages of the system.

Whereas the novice members are generally motivated by others’ descriptions of CouchSurfing stories, experienced users remain active because of continuous motives developed from new information input. At this stage, they can actively search for new information through increased knowledge of the system, extended network information, and personal experiences. They identify themselves with CouchSurfing as a lifestyle or a philosophy, and this identity is confirmed and repeated when they refer previous experiences to new encounters or when they are sending requests to potential hosts. The members also choose to interact with the ones who fit into their imagined framework of a CouchSurfer, instead of anyone with an account. As discussed previously, one’s experiences, seen through the colour spectacles of CouchSurfing values, can be linked to the social capital he or she owns in the network. The identity perceived by the users influences their patterns of using CouchSurfing, re-affirming the perceived group values and reinforcing the group identity by interacting in accordance to the unspoken norms. At the same time, such practices marginalize the people who do not get the chance to gain experience and accumulate their social capital in the network. The more “similar” the other members are, in terms of their identification with the community, the more predictable their behaviours can be. The more centralized expectations the CouchSurfers have collectively, the ones with established status and social capital in the network, are more likely to emphasize their own practices and perceptions in order to make the less privileged ones move towards the same direction as them.

There is evidence that the group identity of CouchSurfers plays an important role in one’s expectations and understandings when using CouchSurfing. Despite upholding the value of “diversity”, only a certain array of values and motives are welcomed in the network as they conform to the collective identify of CouchSurfing. Faith recollected her experience of hosting two Iranian tourists, who were brother and sister working and studying in Canada.

“They came to live with me because they wanted to experience CouchSurfing. They stayed only for one day, and moved to a hotel the second day. I think they are kind of too
dependent on others. I was at work, but they kept calling me, asking about things like bus routes and stops. I could not answer the phone all the time because of my job, so it was a bit frustrating. Another thing I did not feel so comfortable was that, they talked in their own language when we three were together. The brother was ok, but the sister was a bit too squeamish. I think CouchSurfers should have the ability to survive independently.”

Taylor, a “pioneer” CouchSurfer who has hitchhiked for more than 100 000 kilometres with and without CouchSurfing, wrote the following long paragraphs in his profile, regarding his opinions on CouchSurfing:

“From the start CouchSurfing started off as simply a free place to stay for travellers, with copy/paste messages being the norm...now it’s taboo to mention that CouchSurfing is used by people to save money...and many people refuse to host people who use copy/paste requests....CouchSurfing has changed from when it originally started. Now, as I understand, CouchSurfing is less about bringing travellers together, and more about Culture exchange through hospitality. Culture exchange is the emphasis, but it only comes about because you are staying at someone’s house and you get to see how they live. So as much as it is about culture exchange, this only happens because you are staying with the person....As CouchSurfing is a website that facilitates real world interaction - is it more important to spend hours online sending out messages - or to simply send copy/paste messages and show up in person prepared to interact with your host?....Sadly nowadays it seems like a lot of people are using CouchSurfing simply as another social networking site for parties and get-togethers - not participating in surfing/hosting. For me CouchSurfing is primarily about surfing/hosting. I want to see how you eat/sleep/shit - this is how I know a culture, not by making small talk over coffee for an hour.”

Taylor is not the only one who has a self-defined idea of the “real spirit of CouchSurfing.” Many CouchSurfers have their standard understandings of “what CouchSurfing is about.” Whereas new CouchSurfers have more superficial and individual understandings, depending on their personal motives, the more experienced are more likely to hold strong regarding what a CouchSurfing experience “should be”, in an ideological sense.
There are different standards and views about what CouchSurfing should be about, but not all voices are considered “proper” and “right”. The personal aspects of benefits and motivations are just attractive points when only the “officially agreed” values are recognized and promoted as the only legitimate motivations for CouchSurfers.

In terms of relationships, the nature of CouchSurfing in that it connects people with its site in order to make real-life interactions happen inevitably raises the question of “how meaningful and strong are the relationships formed through CouchSurfing?” The place-based individual membership links the users to specific locations, no matter how much they identify with those places. CouchSurfers’ interactions, compared with interactions on other SNSs, depend more on the physical settings behind each member in real life. As opposed to SNSs such as Facebook in which users also have real profiles associated to real-world activities, CouchSurfing does not have its main function to maintain existing relationships in real life, but to transfer online relationships into real-world interactions. At the same time, it is also different from online dating sites, where the aim is for users to build long-term relationships, CouchSurfing creates one-time transactions and the people might not be able to keep real-life contact again in the future.

In Bialski’s (2006) survey, CouchSurfers were found to keep in touch with 50 percent of their hosts/surfers. Nevertheless, the researcher doubts such a percentage on the grounds of the fact that her respondents are predictably active members who arrived at her profile by searching, indicating their activeness and initiative in CouchSurfing. Besides, the definition of “keeping in touch” is too vague. How does one define “keeping in touch?” On Facebook, for example, one might claim “liking” one’s Facebook status once in a while means to keep in touch. Some might say “happy new year” through messaging or e-mails. Others might regard “keeping in touch” as regular meetings or telephone calls, and other channels of communication with recent updates. The fact that the CouchSurfing is neither an SNS with pure online communication available, nor a network where members focus mainly on face-to-face encounters makes it hard to draw a clear line. The interviewees in this study also have various opinions about that, but when asked how many CouchSurfing relationships
become long-term contacts, the interviewees admitted that not so many actually kept regular contacts with them, even if they have connected on CouchSurfing as “friends”. One of the most important factors is the conflict in the static nature of physical places and the tendency towards mobility of the CouchSurfers. In each of the interactions, the host represents a defined location, whereas the surfer represents mobility. The mobile pass by while the hosts stay stable. Since the CouchSurfers are generally seeking new experiences, it is not likely that they go to the same hosts again and again in the same place. The possibilities of having future physical meetings include when the roles are switched and the host pays a visit to the surfer as a guest: they meet in a new place. Otherwise, they keep virtual contact, no matter whether they have real emotional connections, or just as a format of courtesy or routine. Because the utility-oriented consumerist CouchSurfers look more at the temporary needs and in gaining social capital instead of relationships, they do not tend to make extra efforts to maintain relationships unless there are other drives that make the interaction with other parties look “useful” and “rewarding”. Most of the longer relationships initialised through CouchSurfing are actually those who seek real-world relationships. The most common format of such relationships is that people build relationships with the people they meet frequently in CouchSurfing community meetings where the members aim to make local connections, instead of the typical host/surf relationships. Physical distance is the key. Faith described a couple living in a suburb of Chongqing, China, who she had requested to surf with when she just started to work in Chongqing. They later maintained contact and surfed each other’s place when Faith visited the suburb and when the couple were in the city centre. Mark, who hosted the researcher for the first two days in Bonn during her three-month stay, kept meeting the researcher once in about two or three weeks. He talked about his on-going romantic relationships and work plans with the researcher as a listener and a friend who did not know more about his social context apart from his own descriptions. “There are not many people that I can talk to about such issues, and I am glad you are a perfect audience.” He checked CouchSurfing’s Bonn group every day and joined the meetings when he had time and energy, and had not contacted the researcher since her departure from Bonn. Compared with many other information-oriented SNS, CouchSurfing does not provide a fast flow of information updates, but provides the members with possibilities to search users with a relatively stable
profile, according to their needs, and with the expectation of face-to-face interaction.

Bialski (2006), on the relationships formed through CouchSurfing and intimate tourism, states that the quality of the relationships are neither poor as researchers generally predict online acquaintances, nor stable, long-lasting, and overcoming geographic problems. The relationships are intense and meaningful, when the surfers and hosts meet in a private space, which is usually shared only by intimate relationships. However, such intimacy is a must in the experiences and they have no choice. Whether it is the intimate space that creates the intense relationships or the expectation to become involved in intimate conversations and relationships that motivate people to go for CouchSurfing, vary from person to person. Nevertheless, it seems that the users tend to only focus on the latter possibility, rather than the former. From a perspective of consumerism, the different users like various brands of products with individual attractive features but no substantial variance in terms of utility and fundamental difference in the satisfaction level of consumer experience. The CouchSurfing encounters are like products picked from a long shelf, the availability, the convenience of getting them, the attractiveness of the package and other factors, are then consumed for their utility and are abandoned quickly. The chosen members, seen as people having the ability to fulfil one’s needs, are replaceable and disposable, thus longer relationships are not likely to happen after the consumption of experience. The researcher doubts Bialski’s argument that intimate relationships are usually cultivated in such cases. A simple reason here is that people can have completely different motivations, which makes their interactions different from those whose focus is on emotional support. There is no denying though that highly intense emotions can be generated in such experiences. However, in terms of relationships, they are catalysed but not determined by the structure of CouchSurfing or the physical closeness. Rather, they are more related to the practical motives of the CouchSurfers.

Worth noting is the fact that CouchSurfers generally join the network for either hosting or surfing, but as their knowledge of CouchSurfing grows, they identify more possibilities such as interest groups, local support, and so on. It is commonly mentioned in the interviews that they find the community of CouchSurfing helpful as they offer support for each other in
other situations, more than only on couches. Local information, activity guides, long-term accommodation, and language exchange, are some of the popular usages. Meher, a Pakistani student who had a studio apartment with a high rental price, contacted Nikos who had difficulty finding accommodation in Uppsala. They shared the place and the cost for a few months until Nikos swapped rooms with Meher’s girlfriend, a girl Meher met through Nikos’ friends. Clement said he helped a few people obtain a visa for Nigeria. Such possibilities, which can also be categorized as behind-the-curtain ones, reflect the in-group support within the network. People are happy to mention such stories, while not listing them as major concerns about CouchSurfing, because the collective identity requires them to recognize the primary vision of the network in order not to be excluded.

5.3 Presentation

In this section, the researcher focuses on the SNP presentation of the CouchSurfing users. The content on SNPs is read with a focus on languages, themes, styles, non-verbal information and so on. Individual profiles are presented as illustrations, providing cases for the analyses on the interplay between motivation, identity, and presentations through the Internet community. Besides the 14 interviewees, the researcher expanded the scale of the analyses by collecting other CouchSurfers’ profiles. The profiles presentation are scrutinized in relation to the personal characteristics, CouchSurfing usage patterns, as well as the goals that they expect to get out of CouchSurfing.

The analyses will be from two angles: the CouchSurfers’ self-presentations through SNS profiles, and their reading of others’ profile presentations. The former will be discussed more in detail, while the latter will also be touched on in the later section, together with the mechanism of trust. Above all, both the two orientations regarding CouchSurfers’ profile presentations are analysed in comparison with the motivations.

5.3.1 Motivation and presentation

Continuing with the topic of motivation and identity, there is a correlation between the
users’ self-understanding, self-awareness, and their way of presenting themselves in order to manage the image of self. One adjusts the strategy of self-presentation in order to manage one’s identity for different purposes. Their identity-management mechanism is operated both cautiously and unconsciously.

The discussion here on the motivations cannot be separated from the idea of CouchSurfing as a community. The community identity influences in the first place how the CouchSurfers should behave, by listing the possibilities of CouchSurfing, providing safety tips and reference systems. Moreover, even though the system can only provide guidelines for the users’ behaviours and the activities are ultimately self-defined, the users themselves form certain unspoken roles and expectations for other users. All the experiences are independent regarding individual encounters and requests and simultaneously interdependent on the characteristics of CouchSurfing as a system.

5.3.2 Motivation in presentation

In terms of CouchSurfers’ individual presentation of their motives, the simplest phrases relating to their “mission” statement on their profile might provide some clues. Usually with less than 15 words, the users’ “mission” statements are probably the CouchSurfers’ central concern exhibited in front of the others. Although there is no definition or regulation on how one should compose the statement, and sometimes such words just cover certain aspects of their thoughts, the “mission” can still show CouchSurfers’ attitude towards life and CouchSurfing. It reflects at least one important part of the complete understanding of the self a CouchSurfer chooses to present on the site. As they are exhibited as one of the most eminent parts of the profile as well as in the search results (see Figure 8), they can probably reflect how people view CouchSurfing, as a tool to fulfil the mission. Depending on the individuals’ understandings and start points, they can choose to write about different aspects of themselves and their CouchSurfing purposes through certain presentation styles. After a content analysis of the missions of CouchSurfers, a pattern is clearly observable, though the text written includes diverse themes in many different styles (randomly recorded mission statements, see
Many of the mission statements are comprised of abstract, general, artistic, and philosophical terms. Words and phrases involving actions, are usually abstract and metaphoric, such as “enjoy”, “be happy”, “sing songs of life”, “looking for the meaning”, “to know the world” etc. These words are related to the CouchSurfers’ psychological needs, representing a state of mind and reflecting emotional needs. For instance, “On the way to stars...will you join me?” represents an invitation, with a dream-seekers’ image depicted with a few words. If one reads through these missions without looking at the context, one will probably think this is a group of poets, philosophers, ethnologists, energetic social movement advocates, or public relations practitioners.

![Example of search results for a couch search.](image)

**Figure 8**  An example of search results for a couch search.

Despite those poetry-like statements, those statements that enclose more concrete facts, with actual action words in realistic contexts, are usually associated with travel, mobility and
culture, closely related to the community’s self-image. Frequently observed are two extremes of much less abstract statements: it is either that the CouchSurfers talk about their everyday routines, or big numbers, grand ideas and crazy practices that are very different from normal people’s lives. Recurrent themes include the number of countries or languages they have explored and the adventurous trips they are planning. Hitchhiking, extreme-sports, and adventures without plans, are among the topics mentioned frequently in this category.

Most of the short sentences appear to contain strong emotions, which can be seen in the extensive usage of exclamation marks, question marks, emoticons and so on. Such marks add clues to the person’s tone in saying such sentences, giving a more vivid picture about the owners of the account. Such mission statements do not necessarily reflect a whole view of their motivations on CouchSurfing, but by the short sentences, they give a first image about themselves for others. It is the chosen part of self that is presented to others.

Similarly, many CouchSurfers choose not to write their profession in their profile. Instead, they use teasing tones to describe their jobs, sometimes continuing with their philosophy slogans. You can often encounter a person who states his or her job as ‘survive’, ‘living’, ‘getting scratches’, and ‘learning’, etc.

5.3.3 Network and presentation

Compared to the motivations identified earlier in section 4.2.3, we can clearly see the inconsistency. Practically no one talks about his or her practical needs, while the seeking of cultural exchange is exceedingly expressed. The emotional aspects of the CouchSurfers’ needs can be sensed but not as explicitly stated. At the same time, a certain amount of people tend to present their non-conventional activities as life styles and as adding to their “coolness” to fit into the stereotypical profile of a CouchSurfer with “true spirit of CouchSurfing”. The aforementioned notion in the tendency to maintain a group identity plays an important role in the patterns of the presentations of CouchSurfers. The values of diversity, exploration, and cultural exchange are manifested through the pervasive phenomenon of name-dropping in almost all of the sessions. With the slogans “more than just a couch”, “change the world, one
couch at a time”, CouchSurfing sells the idea of “cultural exchange” and openness for global connectivity. Being a part of the community seems to give the members a collective vision of changing the world. However, when looking at the varied personal goals of the members discussed in the previous chapter, not many CouchSurfers seem to be thinking about CouchSurfing and saving the world as their mission.

Besides those motivations for CouchSurfing mentioned in section 4.2, it is also necessary to recognize the more direct motivation of their profile presentation; to present themselves and to manage the identity that they show to other CouchSurfers. The fact that the users are hoping to get a host for a planned trip to a new country, a visitor bringing interesting stories, or any potential opportunities that could be created when others read through the profile, are more practical and realistic drives that weigh more than the general drive of CouchSurfing. Basically a profile’s function is to attract certain kinds of people in the network, to win their curiosity, trust, and potential support in adding their social capital in the network. The motivation of presenting oneself as one of the in-group contributes largely to the shaping of the presentations. As argued before, the active users are of more influence in terms of their total experiences, extended network, and their willingness to share information. Although there is no essential difference concerning whether the participants of a CouchSurfing activity are savvy users or experienced ones, the ones with more experience usually have louder voices in communication. Each completed experience adds on one’s social capital in the network, making a member look more “credible” and “knowledgeable” in the community. In some circumstances, the collection and exhibition of past journeys, events, and connections appear as the central part of the presentation for many users.

Also noticeable is the fact that CouchSurfers are inclined to focus on the international experiences they have, while placing less attention when they address their travels at home. This can be regarded as a reflection of the tendency to focus on symbolic meanings of mobility, which to a certain degree are associated to one’s self-identity. Individual users’ conformation with CouchSurfing values are believed to be more attractive to other members. Thus, presenting oneself as a stereotypical CouchSurfer is perceived to increase the chances
that lead to more opportunities for interaction and more experience and references, which in turn enhance their image as a CouchSurfer.

The interface of the CouchSurfing site to some extent also determines the pattern of communication and presentation. Compared to some other SNSs, the interface of CouchSurfing has the following characteristics. Unlike Facebook and MySpace, the site is not designed in a way that one can share one’s daily life, as the sections are steadier and less vulnerable to change. There are no functions such as newsfeeds of friends, for instance, unless one is navigated to another user’s profile. The profile is displayed in a way that only the latest version of the person’s self-description is shown, and no one can tell when the user added the last update. The only clue about the person’s latest events is probably the IP-reading function, which shows the last login time (if not too long ago) and the location of the user. At the same time, there is no chatting function such as instant messaging, though messages and requests will be updated immediately. All such characteristics make CouchSurfing’s site look more stable, compared to some other SNSs that focus on immediate information sharing and emotional expression within certain circles. This is probably due to the place-oriented nature of CouchSurfing. Most information on the site is directly attached to the users and their locations; this is substantially different from many other sites where “what” and “when” is more important than “where”. The notion of “place”, which is regarded as less important in a lot of online encounters, plays an undeniable role in CouchSurfing, due to its function as a connecting point of online-offline dynamics.

The system also provides some suggestions for the construction of profiles. The tips include the expected format and content in the individuals’ self-descriptions. In the ‘How to make a profile section (2011), the suggestions given are: “Be honest and detailed”, and “Set your standards”. It is suggested that CouchSurfers should write honestly about their personalities, habits and specific expectations of interaction in order to reduce potential miscommunications. Photos are also recommended: “What’s the most beautiful place you’ve ever seen? What does a night out with your friends look like? Where do you drink your morning coffee?” CouchSurfing encourages the users to give visual presentations about the
couch, the person, as well as their life and adventures. Besides, there are also preferred formats for the couch description: updated settings of availability provide guidelines for others about what they should expect for the stay etc. Apart from the sleeping surface, privacy rules, living habits, the interaction patterns are also encouraged for inclusion. Languages and travel experiences are also addressed as important factors. Despite the languages one is confident with, labelling oneself as a “beginner”, according to CouchSurfing, could be of value for others to know. “Share as much as you like” is the principle for travel experiences. Members are also advised to build up their CouchSurfing friend list by searching for friends in the network, or become involved more in the community. “By listing someone as your friend, you’re telling the community that you have some level of trust in that person. Be wary of adding acquaintances, former friends, or online friends. Never add a friend that you don’t know at all” (CouchSurfing ‘How to Make a Profile’, 2011).

From the above guidelines, it is clear that all such preferences are associated with the practice of mass-listing and name displaying; the more complex background you have, the more languages you know, the more countries you have travelled to, and the more extended network you have, the more interesting you are. The construction of one’s profile in CouchSurfing is like arranging an information booth in an Expo. One is supposed to have all the basic arrangements required in the booth, while additional decorations displayed make them look more interesting, and furthermore, the Expo itself will appear better organized and more attractive in general. In order to build an image of sincerity and trustworthiness, one is supposed to have a complete profile with every session filled, though it is not explicitly required. CouchSurfers without photos, for instance can win less chances not because of the lack of attractiveness, but because of the assumed “unwillingness to open up”, according to my respondents. The basics give an overall foundation for others’ trust, while other extensively displayed items indicate expertise, attractiveness, and reputation in the CouchSurfing network. It is also a kind of presentation of social capital. Michael, for instance, has text written in five languages he has knowledge of, in several sections of his profile. He said the messages in different languages are not of the same meanings, “but I don’t know why I did that. I am not expecting someone to read them all. It just feels cool and shows I am an
international, multi-lingual CouchSurfer.” On one hand, the exhibition-style presentations could be read as statements showing their identification with the community’s characteristics and values. As modernity produces “difference, exclusion and marginalization” (Giddens, 1991b, p. 6), explicitly stated interests help one to keep being included in networks. On the other hand, such self-disclosure in an online network also serves as a means to reduce uncertainty created by increased possibilities.

There are of course different styles of presentation based on other concerns and philosophies. For instance, Mark has only two pictures on the system and none of them are of his face from the front. He thinks it is better to be simple. Faith also has two photos, one with her face and one of her couch. She thinks photos make people more trustworthy, but too many can be unnecessary. As a good-looking young girl she also does not want others to contact her only because of how she looks. Mustafa, a history teacher, has quite new a profile. He joined CouchSurfing after he read a story about a girl travelling to many countries on her bike and sleeping on couches. When asked why he did not write more about his education, background, and self-descriptions, he questioned the meaning of it,

“I don’t think a higher education level means better hospitality. I think education does not matter, and I believe it is all about if you like that person or not. I didn’t actually write anything about myself, nor had I many photos. I agree that it will be better for the travellers to read more about me before they contact me. But do you think if I write something good about myself, it means I am a good person?”

However, most CouchSurfing members do not favour such low-key presentations. The relatively plain profiles are generally found with less-experienced CouchSurfers. Mark just started to receive more CouchSurfers when he got new references after contacting a few last-minute surfers. Not having much time to travel, Mustafa was aiming more for hosting, and “will consider going for a visit to my guests who invite me to go visiting them.” Mustafa had hosted only one surfer by then, and received not so many requests in the popular island of Cyprus. It seems that the divide of CouchSurfers is deepened by the presentation style. The stereotypical CouchSurfers with colourful experiences presented receive more chances to
meet others and gain more experience, which reaffirms their image as a CouchSurfer by adding more social capital from their travels, their connections, and their system usage. Those who do not follow the same path tend to be overlooked, especially when they are placed among others who have more social capital. The lack of competence, though it is not meant to be a competition, makes it difficult for them to build up their social capital in the network. Such users could thus enter a vicious circle, not getting involved in the CouchSurfing community and staying in the periphery as no experience is accumulated.

All the experienced members interviewed have detailed descriptions about themselves. They have very detailed descriptions about their couch’s condition and traffic connections, their stories of travels, personal habits, and expectations for the other party. It is not uncommon to see thousands of words in each section, and hundreds of photos about each aspect of their travels and life. The more extensive one’s travels through CouchSurfing, the more they tend to have a full profile with detailed information about themselves: their interests, the way they prefer to interact with others, their couch information, their previous interactions through CouchSurfing, etc. The researcher tracked the profile of a few members of CouchSurfing who sent friendship requests or host invitations to the researcher one or two years previously. The researcher ignored such requests because those requests were too far away and impractical. The researcher wondered then how could such connections make sense when the goal was not to meet up face-to-face and engage in intense interactions with each other. The ones without any prospect of meeting up do not seem to match the goals of the researcher herself, and probably many other typical CouchSurfers. The self-reflection seems to go along with the practical idea of utility. It seems that other CouchSurfers tend to have the same attitude: none of the five people have any references or self-descriptions reflecting their interaction with other CouchSurfers. It implies that such styles of presentations through simple presentations do not look interesting enough for others. Moreover, the stated motivation of “making friends” across distances does not seem to be interesting for the practical-minded CouchSurfers. Although those people have different cultures to the researcher, the bare idea of cultural exchange does not sell without mobility and the potential of off-line interaction.
From the above analysis a divide of active users and non-active users can be clearly seen. The ones who present themselves as active receive more experiences and become more motivated, whereas the ones who have “dull” profiles can hardly attract any attention, winning less chances of being chosen as the trustees to start their CouchSurfing journeys. Such a divide in social capital is reinforced when one’s CouchSurfing experiences are added onto the presentation.

5.4 Trust on CouchSurfing

This section is devoted to the trust behaviour on CouchSurfing. The emphasis will be the decision of placing trust, which involves, but not limited to the evaluation of the trustworthiness and trustfulness of the other party. As Bialsiki (2006, p. 71) points out, for many of the CouchSurfers, the virtual community is ultimately for utility. It is their goal of getting certain experiences that motivates them to use the service, not the trust for the community or for the individuals.

Looking at the various motivations listed in the previous section, regardless of if they are acknowledged by the users themselves and the CouchSurfing society or not, it can be observed that the CouchSurfers, though with different goals, in most cases are prone to be very pragmatic. Following the metaphor of business transactions, the CouchSurfers identify their needs, and search for users according to their criteria. Like in a business transaction, they spot potential partners, make basic contacts, agree on the transaction, and make the deal. Both parties evaluate the risks and benefits during the process before carrying out the trust behaviours. The researcher in this section will explore the risks, benefits and control, in the processes of trust on CouchSurfing.

5.4.1 Risk vs. temptation

CouchSurfing has its core activities and values carried by the interactions of the members. The typical patterns of CouchSurfing activities are offline-interactions after initial connections through the site. Such trust built upon online-presentation, is argued to be risky,
as the possibilities for untruthful and partial presentations, as well as misunderstandings, are more observable in cyberspace than in face-to-face situations. However, at the junction of online-offline relationships, CouchSurfing brings virtual risks to real life. At the same time, practices from other parts of the world are challenging the old mind-set. New risks develop with people’s willingness to receive the benefits of alternative lifestyles. For instance, the temptation to become involved in a global life makes the ability to deal with problems in intercultural interactions a prerequisite. Language barriers, cultural norms, and different social styles based on economic levels can cause such problems.

Risks that one might be faced with in CouchSurfing include personal and property safety, as well as the quality of the experience. The concerns of the potential costs influence the CouchSurfers’ final decision regarding the trust behaviour. However, as the theory of trust games suggests, one is generally more likely to take the risk, and the trustworthiness of the other matters less, when there are high temptations from the trustees. The trustors are more inclined to place trust, when the estimated lost in trust-abuse is much smaller compared to the loss of not trusting and the tendency of abuse is small. In the context of CouchSurfing, the temptation of the other party is tied to individuals’ motivations. When a person aims at getting free accommodation in central London, the key temptation lies in the location of the couch. If one is more into meaningful conversations, the profile of the host/surfer/traveller weighs more in the pre-evaluation process of the trust decision. At the same time, the risks play a peripheral role when the temptation is big enough. Barbara, a 24-year-old student describes her requesting on mass when searching for hosts in touristic cities in Europe, “I didn’t really check the profiles clearly, because I was desperate about the housing. I am a poor student and I cannot afford to go travelling in Europe for long by living in hotels. I sent requests to everyone who appears in the result. I couldn’t really choose the hosts, so any one of them would do, as long as I could get a place. I don’t care if I sleep on the floor or what, just a place to stay.” It reflects a practical orientation of using CouchSurfing. In order to get the benefit of free accommodation, one has to place trust and care less about the trustworthiness of the other. Such attitudes are seen mostly in popular destinations where the demand for couches is high. Michael also mentioned his earlier experiences in searching for places. He
said he did not care much about the hosts’ qualities as long as there was a couch when he travelled in Europe. It was because the cost of accommodation was high and there were numerous travellers competing to get a couch. However, he was more selective when he travelled in Asia, where the cost of hostels is low, and his purpose of CouchSurfing would be mostly to get local cultural experience.

The risks in the eyes of the non-CouchSurfers tend to be very different than the perceptions of the surfers. Most people, especially non-CouchSurfers are concerned with the safety issues of CouchSurfing. For the surfers, especially women, personal safety is more a concern, and that tends to be one of the important issues. While such questions are repeatedly raised, only three respondents in this research named this as a potential risk. The reason could be that people who are more motivated by the potential benefits of CouchSurfing overlook the risks. As the ambassador of the CouchSurfing community in Uppsala, Michael said he heard more stories of system abuse than other members. One of his missions is to inform the community members of the potential safety issues and provide advice, especially for the new members, in order to improve the safety level of CouchSurfing.

“I did hear about one rape, perhaps in Britain. We as ambassadors get frequent information and are to inform the other members. I often tell the girls that it’s better to look more carefully at the profiles, read the references, and try to avoid surfing the new male CouchSurfers. Well I don’t know how much they listen to my advice; they just go anyway, if they think it’s interesting.”

The enthusiastic CouchSurfers sometimes ignore the risks even if they have heard negative reports. For the hosts, the biggest concern is probably the safety of their properties. Such issues are not limited to theft, which is relatively more severe, but also less serious problems such as misuse of equipment, damage to furniture and pollution to the environment etc.

By agreeing to surf or host, one also faces the possibility that the other party does not act as they are expected to. The worse cases could be that the guests do not show up, leaving the
host wondering if any accidents have happened, or the host cannot be reached when the guests have already arrived at the meeting place. Mustafa, a new member has only hosted and not surfed yet, as he would prefer to surf at someone’s invitation, and interact with the people who he already knows,

“I don’t really worry about hosting. What could I worry about? Would they steal my bed or sofa? But for surfing, I think yes. If somebody invites me to go somewhere and I trust them. But if they don’t meet me as we have agreed and I have not arranged my hotel room- that can be a problem.”

In fact, according to the interviews, scenarios where the surfers do not show up as planned are more likely than a host not turning up. Joy sounded very annoyed when she talked about one of the guests,

“My last guest arrived a day late. After all I posted about inconsiderate people doing that, she had the nerve to ask if she could stay a day later to make up for it, AND so she could see the fireworks for 4th of July holiday at another CouchSurfing host nearby who had said yes to her after I did. She even said ‘It’s about time to give up a key’ when I had a change of plans and decided to go to New York that last day instead of staying home, when she wanted to just relax before going to fulfil that other CouchSurfing plan!’”

Other respondents also mentioned things such as the surfers not arriving or not contacting the host until a few days later. The cost to the hosts in such situations, is the time spent in arranging the meeting and trying to reach the surfers, the change of plans, as well as the shift of mind status, from the excitement at the prospect of a new experience to frustration.

Incidents causing concrete harm however happen scarcely. The recurring themes in fact lie in the uncertain and immeasurable level of satisfaction during the actual experience. Other concerns include: one might not be received in the way that was expected, miscommunication of the plans, or an inability for the two parties to create conversations and experiences that are mutually enjoyable. As the experiences are not standard designed tours written in the
brochures, and both parties create the method of interaction in specific situations, there are risks that the chemistry between the CouchSurfers can lead to undesirable situations. Meher told a story she heard,

“My host in Paris told me that he received a couple from Hungary. He thought everything was alright when they were having dinner, even though the guy was a bit quiet. Later the guy seemed to be a little bit drunk, raised his voice and said ‘I don’t like you!’ The girl apologized later but he felt uncomfortable.”

There is no universal rule or principle for how the CouchSurfers should act. Differences in values and cultural backgrounds can be one of the reasons. While CouchSurfing sells diversity, “open for diversity” becomes the unspoken rule one must follow as the spirit of a CouchSurfer. The different expectations might bring problems when one of the participants takes their own framework for granted. For example, Clement said he had not hosted much as he could not afford it. “I hosted only one since it is expensive to host here. I also hosted one from Letternet, Germany. For me it is not just providing a couch. I need to show them the best hospitality, offer food, take them around and give them the best protection.”

In addition, the social environment in which one lives in might be another cost that might keep people away from CouchSurfing. “My neighbours thought I am the most popular guy in Bonn”, Frank said with an ironic smile, “because I am bringing back different girls every time, and sometimes they are more than one at a time.” Some other CouchSurfers also mentioned that their families and roommates might not accept CouchSurfing when they share their living space, while for singles, their neighbours usually misunderstand the guests staying with them as new sexual relationships.

The interplay between risk and temptation also lies in the individuals’ perceptions of risk. In the modern context, risk is fundamental and one needs to face the increasing risks brought about by new practices and the opportunities in the changing and connected world with stratified lifestyles. The old standards and the traditional ways of analysing risk do not function as well in such contexts. For some cultures, it is common for young people of the
opposite sex to share accommodation whereas it can be seen as less acceptable in other environments. For males, in most cases, there is not so much to worry about their personal safety, though there is always the possibility. “What can I worry about? I am a man!” is a typical answer from my male respondents. At the same time, the researcher’s CouchSurfing experience is often doubted: “Did you really let a 34-year-old strange man live in your small room?” “It is ok to live with male friends, but I just cannot imagine sleeping in the home of a man you don’t know.” Facing such doubts, experienced CouchSurfers tend not to regard such factors as risks because of their previous experience with other forms of budget travelling or positive encounters in previous activities. Instead, they see such risks as the necessary investment in order to get the benefits. “It is like travel by plane. You always put your life at risk as there are opportunities of plane crash, but you still do it because you don’t want to swim across the ocean or walk through the desert. There are risks everywhere and you just cannot avoid it.”

Furthermore, CouchSurfers are willing to take the risks not only because of the potential benefits they expect out of the experience. The anticipation of gaining positive feedback that increases one’s social capital in the system plays an important role. The researcher noticed the phenomenon that when a member is new to CouchSurfing, they tend to be curious about the services and are willing to start building up their profile more than others, because increased experiences make them look more interesting and trustworthy for future encounters. The respondents generally agree on the fact that it’s easier to get responses from relatively new users. “Especially in popular tourist cities, it is very hard to find a couch. I think the people who have ‘ok’ profiles with no or few references are more likely to answer your requests.” Michael said, “I am Uppsala’s ambassador and have a lot of references, so I guess they think it’s good to host me and get some positive references from me.” The ones who host more, also said that they accepted their first requests as long as they had time and the requests did not include anything too weird. It can also be seen in the descriptions of the novice users and the experienced users. The more they are experienced, the more they tend to have criteria for selection, especially when hosting. The growingly selective criteria is associated with increased requests, which create the possibility of choice, their previous experiences, as well
as the reduced need to collect more experiences in order to make a difference in social capital. Jonathan sees this and said, “I write references for relatively new people, but if they already have a lot of references, I don’t normally bother to leave a reference because they don’t really need one more.”

5.4.2 Control

Faced with potential risks, one needs to take control of the situation in order to rationalize the placement of trust. Since the initial contacts of both parties are through the CouchSurfing site, the process is mediated through the SNP and interactions through the system. In most cases, the profile and the short request messages are the only channels of information about the other party. In terms of trust, the trustworthiness of the website itself is taken into account, besides the evaluation of the trustworthiness of the users.

First of all, as a SNS, CouchSurfing’s rapidly increasing number of members is not only a result of the idea and the service itself, but also the safety system that helps users minimize the risk by providing regulation and external evaluation that to some extent can supervise abusive behaviours. What keeps CouchSurfing running are in fact the members who connect and interact as a community. Therefore, the reputation of the community itself influences a lot in the process of the trust behaviours. Each single successful transaction adds to the credibility of the system, because it reflects the realization of the community’s mission and temptations, and a positive result of the system’s model of control.

To address the issue of safety, probably the most concerning issue of such hospitality networks online, CouchSurfing claims on its start page that it is a “tight-knit community whose participants educate themselves about careful decision-making and share knowledge to help keep everyone safer”. It features “member-driven”, “references”, “vouching”, “verification”, and “profiles” (CouchSurfing ‘Safety’, 2011), to increase a sense of trust for members. In the more detailed safety page on CouchSurfing, it emphasizes the capacity of information gathering for members through the system, through profiles, references, verifications and vouches, as well as support and suggestions from experienced members.
“Reputation is the foundation of a safe community”, CouchSurfing compares itself to a small town where everyone knows and respects the community and its members. At the same time, it addresses the importance of honest profiles, and multiple points of view in sources within or without the networking system.

Realizing that the safety issue is a core concern for users, especially new users, CouchSurfing invests much effort in creating ways of regulating to ensure the safety of the site. The issue of safety is addressed on the start page. It has logos of high credibility that have covered CouchSurfing, including the Guardian, and the BBC and so on, on its start page, to increase its own credibility. CouchSurfing addresses five points on the safety page: (1) CouchSurfing members are active participants who keep themselves and the community members safer by sharing, educating and making careful decisions; (2) honest profiles with clear statements of ideas and offline identities, are encouraged, as a “true self” in return helps to attract the right people; (3) the reputation system makes the community safer, like in small towns where everyone knows and respects each other; (4) the information channels offered through the system together with member-to-member communication provide multiple perspectives for the users’ choices; (5) CouchSurfing claims to take a neutral stand when dealing with disputes (CouchSurfing ‘Safety’, 2011). A detailed instruction session of safety control is also provided to give detailed instructions on how to use systematic control to assure one’s positive experience. “Informed decisions” by the members themselves is the key of safety, implying that the community offers multiple channels of information, but no guarantee that the CouchSurfers will definitely get what they expect. Among the risks named in the former section, the CouchSurfing system speaks in a vague tone regarding the extreme possibilities (crime and unpleasant experience), which are primarily concerns of the members, especially the new members. It phrases the safety issue not as cases of dispute or crime, but rather, as levels of quality for each experience. Again with the analogy of a food market, safety is not addressed as the potential of getting food poisoning, or ill-tasting products, but rather, as the uncertainty of getting different qualities of food. The advertisement would be about how the quality reports, “Fair-trade” labels, overall amount of sales, the rating from the customers, can help the customers make a rational choice. The customers are empowered to
make “informed decisions”, which implies that they are responsible for their own choices, not the system. If they are trapped by the cheap price and the fancy descriptions, the attitude will be, “we told you to check all the channels and be cautious of the risks!”

**Tools of control**

The tools one can use to determine the others’ trustworthiness include “verification”, “vouching”, “reference”, “community roles”, and “friends”, together with the alerts and newsletters etc. from the system. Note that the tools to control the users’ trustworthiness are used to increase the network’s trustworthiness. Essentially it is not the SNS itself but the users themselves that increase the credibility of it by making use of the tools of control.

“**Verification**” and “**community role**” assignments are user-system interactions motivated by the users’ own willingness to build up a “trustworthy” profile. Many new CouchSurfers, without any previous CouchSurfing experience or references, choose to add the logo of “verification” by donating a certain amount of money to get a code from CouchSurfing. For the more active ones, however, if they identify with CouchSurfing and are willing to become involved in more complicated activities like managing online groups, organize community gatherings and so on, they can apply to be city ambassadors, family ambassadors, and other roles, if they are not “pioneer” users or “CouchSurfing team members”. One of my respondents, Bill, for example, has the icons of “CouchSurfing team member”, “family ambassador”, “pioneer”, and “travelling band and musician” in the profile for the account of him and his partner.

CouchSurfing’s features of “**Vouches**”, “**references**” and “**friends**” are reflecting user-user relations. Anyone can leave a reference to anyone else, while friend connections are to indicate one’s networks. It is not recommended to “friend” each other or to leave references if the two parties have only had online interactions. By giving such an instruction, CouchSurfing tries to make the friend links and references more meaningful than casual encounters. Vouching, a function only available by interacting with previously vouched members is less common. Though the system has given instructions on vouching, suggesting
that those who want a vouch can simply go to a vouched member, many take it very seriously and are not willing to vouch a person after just one encounter. Generally, the emphasis of such features is placed on the offline experiences rather than online identities, since this community focuses ultimately on offline experiences.

In addition, news channels, community notices, and other system information is to give general guidance for the users, providing information about the network in general, rather than about the potential trustees.

The CouchSurfers’ practical orientation is reflected in their perception of the systematic tools. While the general structure of the safety control system is evaluated more carefully before and during the beginning of one’s membership, once the person has entered the community, the individuals’ evaluations become more important for them. In other words, after the preliminary evaluation of the network in general, the person, if tempted by the potential benefits and is convinced of the safety control tools, shifts the attention from the system to the individuals they expect to interact with. Thus, the system news and other general control tools matter less to a person who is already motivated to go on CouchSurfing. When actually evaluating the potential trustee, the user-user reference tools tend to also weigh more than the user-system tools.

Among the interviewees, no single one of them says they really care if the other person is verified or not, because they consider that as a simple action of contributing to the sponsorship of the system and no more. They don’t think a person without verification is less trustworthy than those who are verified. Again, since CouchSurfing has cultural exchange and community members’ interaction as the primary goals, it is considered to be less of the “spirit of CouchSurfing” to emphasize system-oriented behaviours. Taylor, a pioneer CouchSurfer with hundreds of references, explicitly expresses his objection to the idea of verification through his profile.

“I am against passport verification; CouchSurfing is about breaking down walls, not enforcing nationalism and government control. Verification through the CouchSurfing
website doesn't achieve anything useful in my opinion. It does not matter if you are Billy Bob from Arkansas and the name of your billing address matches the name on your credit card - how does that make you any more trustworthy?"

On the other hand, other users’ feedback through references, vouches and friend connections do weigh more in the eyes of the CouchSurfers. Such external evaluations matter more than the person’s own self-presentation.

The function of vouching, as is only available for experienced users who have already got three vouches, seems to represent privilege based on accumulated social capital. Some mentioned that it is always hard to get the third vouch, because it means that the person will be empowered with the same right of giving out vouches. Taylor, a person with more than 100 vouches and about 300 references, writes his principle of vouching on his profile: "I vouch for people that I have a good feeling about and/or I think it would be safe for an 18 year old single-female-traveller to stay with:)" However, the people interviewed do not specifically look at the vouches before making the decision. If the person has got many vouches, it generally indicates the person’s trustworthiness is high, although 30 vouches could only imply the person’s intensive participation rather than being 10 times as trustworthy as a person with three vouches. Nevertheless, if a user has no such vouches, they don’t consider them less trustworthy just because they have not met someone vouched to vouch for them.

All the interviewees mention their usage of references as their primary tool before making a decision. Checking references is the most important way to get control over the other party. A preferred reference guided by CouchSurfing is “clear, descriptive, and informative to the community” (CouchSurfing ‘References FAQ’, 2011). The areas of interest to others, such as the accuracy of the member’s profile, the trustworthiness of the person, the safety and welcoming atmosphere of the host, the general experience and special events, the personal qualities of the person, and one’s own enjoyable connections with this person, are suggested themes that one can write about in a reference. With such references, more points of views are made accessible for the members, supplementing the self-presentation on the profile. One can describe one’s own hobbies and habits without being aware of the context as one
takes that for granted. However, other members can tell the same thing from different angles as outsiders. Routines one does not find interesting to write about in one’s self-description can be revealed in a reference. Each individual meeting can have something special, and the other party’s narrations can give the profile-readers a multi-layer overview on how meetings with this person are likely to take place. At the same time, a negative reference can serve as a sanction for trust-abuse behaviours, a point to be elaborated on in the discussion on sanctions. Onni, like many other CouchSurfers, thinks the reference system is “the success of the programme”:

“I like the reference system because we have the possibility to leave a negative reference, and anyone who has stayed with us can also write about us. To me, it is crucial to the success of the program, because in that way Ulla and I wouldn’t lie since the others could write a negative reference about that. By the same token, the obligation is also on you to respect us because we can also write about that. Our say is, because it is neutral, therefore the obligation is on both parties to be respectful, and to be honest about themselves.”

Friend connections, in comparison to other tools, are not considered as important to monitor one’s credibility. Rather, they are seen as a display of one’s social network. One’s offline-friends, colleagues, as well as CouchSurfing “friends”, can be among the connections. It is not specifically about CouchSurfing, so the members do not see it as important, though some admit that they use the links of the users to “stalk” other users, and look for additional information about the context. When a person describes the condition of the apartment, it might be revealed that another CouchSurfer is sharing the place. Members interested in surfing the couch might track the flatmate’s profile, which is linked through a small picture with a description such as “we are flatmates”, to see if this person is interesting as well.

Joy, who is very prudent and critical about many things, suggested more links to external environments could improve the level of security on CouchSurfing:

“In addition to the CouchSurfing suggestions on this site, CouchSurfing would be
better with links to each member's social networking sites, blogs, criminal background checks and so on, so we feel even more secure about knowing those we are letting into our most prized possessions before their arrival or granted request. Besides, using the verification process, tips, safety information on the site, common sense precautions and our gut instincts, we can enquire one on one as individuals with those giving references about potential hosts/surfers and then possibly learn more than they would be willing to post publicly. But generally the power of an organized group is stronger!”

CouchSurfing team members and “ambassadors” usually offer tips to new members when they register or join the group. Faith, the young girl felt grateful for the woman who wrote a long message to her, giving suggestions when she had just joined CouchSurfing.

However, despite of all those information channels that empower “informative decisions”, the respondents generally state that they determine trustworthiness based on a general impression. The reading and decoding of the profiles and messages, with the help of the evaluation system provided by the network, are the most important means of control. When asked how seriously they check the profiles of others and what the crucial categories are that they look into before deciding to accept a host/surfer, the interviewees responded that they tend to place more weight on the person’s overall self-presentation style and the others’ references, rather than other tools in the system. Almost all respondents said that the most crucial factor is the references that others have left, while quite a few of them mentioned intuition or “sixth sense”. Nine out of 14 interviewees mentioned that their way of control was “intuition”, or “feelings”. Such feelings are based on the profile in general, including the overall evaluation of the self-presentations and the reading of the references. The experienced members, though having more options in the selection (more requests, or more chances to be accepted), also have no specific logics identified. However, it seems to be that the principle is that one should have a complete profile, meaning some description about the self and the couch, at least one photo, and a few lines regarding the perception of CouchSurfing, to win the “feeling” of trust from the others. All the respondents said they would only consider CouchSurfers with photos, because “it feels like the person is sincere and real”, as Faith
mentioned. An overwhelmingly large amount of photos, on the other hand can be regarded as a person’s expressiveness, or showing off in relation to past experiences, which reflects more the personality, rather than adding to the trustworthiness. The descriptions also do not need to be long to look real, while empty sections and short sentences do not give the impression of “honesty” and “motivation”, especially for those ones who identify more with CouchSurfing’s “spirit”. As a senior citizen actively promoting the idea of CouchSurfing among the elders around him, Onni sees the principles of CouchSurfing very seriously,

“We have turned down a couple who had registered on CouchSurfing for over one and a half years but still had a very incomplete profile. I think he had just one or two lines in the profile and I could not know what kind of person he was. I replied to the man and said that ‘you are not following the principles of CouchSurfing.’ I never heard from him again. I think that to use CouchSurfing and ask for help you need to open up yourself.”

Sometimes it is not what a member presents in the profile, but rather, how they interact with the system, that influences the “feelings” of the others. Half of my interviewees stated they do not like “last-minute requests”, as they want to plan things ahead, although some others would not mind to accept such requests as long as they are free and the person requesting “sounds sincere and interesting”.

5.4.3 Reciprocity and trust in the network

The nature of the community encourages reciprocity and compatibility of the members. Non-CouchSurfers doubt the feasibility of such an idea where a person provides their own space for a stranger without charge, “why there is any one doing that, what can he get?” However, one’s motivation of offering is not totally altruistic. As discussed earlier, each CouchSurfing experience can be driven by practical, cultural and emotional purposes, as well as the prospect of gaining new experiences from the CouchSurfing network in the future. Especially for the surfers, the fact that the host is willing to give up his or her own private space and probably welcomes the surfers with local delights and city anecdotes, the feeling of incompatible benefits they get lead to their extra effort in engaging in meaningful interactions.
with the hosts. Because money has been a taboo in CouchSurfing, small gifts, information from afar, and invitations of hosting in return, are common ways the guests show appreciation and symbolize non-monetary compensation.

Beyond the individual hosting/surfing experiences, reciprocity also manifests itself in CouchSurfing as a community, where experiences with previous encounters lead to equivalent activities with subsequent CouchSurfers. This supportive behaviour is seen in Joseph, a Chinese American who contacted the researcher after her post in the Beijing CouchSurfing group when she was looking for a place in the Chaoyang District during her Spanish course in Beijing in January 2011. Joseph said his profile was not searchable in Beijing as his registered community was in the USA, so he was reading the forum posts to see if he could host somebody.

“I am Chinese and I am not a Chinese. I want to get to know more people in Beijing. I did CouchSurfing in Europe when I was younger. I feel really grateful and I want to contribute back to the CouchSurfing community. You are a young student and you seem to be interesting and sincere through your profile, so I contacted you.”

Such stories are commonly heard across CouchSurfing. In this process, trust is gradually built for CouchSurfing in general, based on earlier experiences. The members’ levels of trust sometimes largely depend on the other parties whom they interact with, and whom they have interacted with. For instance, Jonathan, when asked about the most interesting or memorable experiences through CouchSurfing, mentioned,

“There were two similar situations when the hosts were too nice to me. They gave me the key and they left for one week or 10 days. In Saint Petersburg the guy went away when I was there, leaving only a few words ‘take care of my plants’. Another time I was in Finland, she left for 10 days, leaving me alone in her place.”

Due to the trust he had received, this in return made him think about the positive aspects of CouchSurfers. Later he started to give his key away to his CouchSurfers. Treating the
others the way he had been treated and trusting the others as he had been trusted, looks like
the philosophy of the community members. The individuals’ experiences are embedded and
transcend to the whole community and its members. The ones relatively new to CouchSurfing
have fewer “easy attitudes” when they are interacting with their hosts/surfers. The first-time
host Mustafa said he would only go to people he knows and expected his surfers to invite him
to surf back. In contrast, the ones with more experiences may have doubted the feasibility of
certain concepts, changed their attitudes after receiving unexpected trust from other members.

Without one single exception, all the CouchSurfers interviewed had positive first
experiences with CouchSurfing. It can easily be understood, as a negative experience in the
beginning is like having bought some food from a new fancy grocery store with many great
deals that were sometimes too cheap to believe. If the first experience is positive, one is more
inclined to continue going to the store. If the product caused food poisoning or was found to
be packed together with a dead cockroach, the customer might lose confidence for the store
and abandon it totally. While the positive experiences generally result in equivalent reactions
towards other members, not so good- if not totally negative- experiences, provoke users to
develop protective strategies. Experienced users sometimes have extensively detailed
descriptions about themselves, the couch, and expectations for the people who wish to interact
with them. The basic requirement sometimes is that the members should read through the
profiles before sending out a request. Normally the CouchSurfers describe in which situations
they would be able to accept a request, and what behaviours are preferred. The total number
of nights one can stay, sleeping hours, rules for leaving keys and food and so on, are
commonly covered in the descriptions. In some situations, especially the popular
CouchSurfers have extremely long lists of requirements and presentations. “NO LAST
MINUTE REQUESTS!”, “smoking is not allowed”, “I would love to have dinner with you if
I have time, but I won’t pay for your food”, are examples of how CouchSurfers write about
their preferences, while trying to avoid people who cannot accept certain practices. It is also
common for CouchSurfers to avoid “mass-requests” composed without individualized
messages– “please write a little about yourself as well as something about Hawaii which I
mentioned in my profile so that I know you have read my profile”. Taylor, as he hitch-hikes
all his way in his travels, has a very appealing profile for many of the CouchSurfers. He writes long descriptions about himself, listing “freegan”, “eat local”, “non-touristy”, “travel with own sleeping bag and cooking gear”, “uncertain time of arrival because of hitchhiking”, “minimalistic”, and “no guarantee for personal hygiene”, as some of things the others should know about before accepting his requests. He also suggests “direct communication” and he “won’t be offended” as long as the other is respectful, and sleeping conditions are of little concern, compared to the hosts. Reading his profile, two negative references and four neutral references can be found. One of the neutral references was in fact a situation when the Indian host did not agree to let him stay but invited him for dinner, though Taylor thought the invite was for the stay. In Indian culture outspoken conflicts are avoided, which was probably the cause of the unpleasant experience in the first place. Based on such previous encounters, he adjusted his descriptions accordingly.

**Negative references**

In the theory of trust games, trust behaviours are more likely to happen with increased costs for the trust-abuse of trustees. In networks, the potential sanctions of trust abuse can depend heavily on the information shared within the community. For CouchSurfing, the system-user as well as the user-user information flow can be seen as raising the cost of trust-abuse for each of the transactions, since one’s poor performance can be heard by other members who would therefore not place trust on them in the future. Bill, a former ambassador of CouchSurfing in Glasgow, said there are different kinds of sanctions whenever there are disputes or negative experiences reported, such as commercial usage of CouchSurfing.

“Sanctions include deleting someone’s CouchSurfing Profile and adding links and email addresses from their profile to a ‘Black List’ to minimize the prospect of them simply re-joining with a different name. The Local Ambassadors and local communities on CouchSurfing ‘Self Police’ the system to a large extent also, so there are very few problems and usually when someone abuses CouchSurfing they are pounced on from all directions – and cut out of the system.”
However, not all negative experiences were caused by ill-purposed people, but rather, were caused by inconsiderate behaviour, incompatible personalities and cultural practices, and issues that had resulted from miscommunication. In such cases, other people’s references can give descriptive narratives regarding the individual experiences.

Negative references are considered as a kind of sanction. However, one of the most interesting findings is that although most CouchSurfers claim that the references are the primary thing they look at when evaluating the other party’s trustworthiness and personal character, leaving negative references is something that they usually avoid. Joy’s case can serve as an example of how CouchSurfers see the reference system’s function. She mentioned a few negative experiences, besides the inconsiderate CouchSurfer already talked about in the previous section. She believed she lost her 600-dollar travel voucher when a mother with two teenagers and a friend went to surf her place. She was very unhappy about this though she had no proof that it was one of them who took the voucher, and she had bought food for all five of them during their three-day stay. However, she had not written a negative reference to anyone.

“I didn't. Ironically, I was talking to the druggie-looking woman about that same thing right after missing the voucher because she said she had also had many people requesting a couch then not showing up yet she had never posted anything negative. It was just like what the other local CouchSurfers I had met said. I haven't met a local CouchSurfer who has posted a negative reference though we've all had such experiences. The mother had no negative/neutral references and I didn't want to be the first to leave one. One of the friends in a CouchSurfing meeting told me, ‘who’s going to believe the first one!' I think references are important, but too many people (including me) are reluctant to post anything negative for reasons explained, because we don't want to look unkind in a world of so many overwhelmingly positive references seen on most CouchSurfing pages. We also do not want to deter potential surfers or hosts from themselves. I know that sounds illogical yet I'd like to think it's true for most of us in this world of CouchSurfing.”

Other respondents also mentioned similar situations, when they were not so comfortable with the other party but did not feel comfortable in leaving a negative reference. Faith said the
reason not to write “neutral” or “negative” references for the Iranian surfers was that she felt it might be cultural differences that had caused the problems and “it was no big deal, they are not bad people.” Jonathan mentioned a 20-year-old girl who was talking about herself all the time, “she was always addressing ‘me’ ‘me’ ‘me’ ‘me’ ‘me’, instead of having a conversation”, and was not considerate enough to keep the bathroom clean. However, he decided not to write anything about that, “she is just too young and someday someone will tell her about that.” The majority choose not to leave a reference in such situations, instead of leaving a neutral or negative reference. For many of them, neutral references are equal to bad experiences. Joy, for instance, realizing the problem of the reluctance for CouchSurfers to leave such references, states she reads the references between the lines.

“I track the people who have left references. If the other references they have left are more enthusiastic, and there is this single one with no details but just general appreciations means the experience is not 100% pleasurable. I wrote once to a previous host of a potential surfer, and she said the person had some issues with personal hygiene. They just don’t write such things in references but you certainly want to know because it influences your experience!”

There is no clear measurement of how to define a “negative reference”. When one is faced with unpleasant experiences, it is difficult to say if it is a negative experience or not. The evaluation of certain behaviours sometimes depends on ones’ overall relationship with the other person, as well as the context of the interaction. A cancelled travel plan with a friend can be acceptable, while the same happening with a stranger can be seen as rude and disrespectful. The principle of reciprocity sometimes makes one reluctant to label an experience as “negative”, because the other party has made some effort to make the experience possible. “It is too mean to leave your host a negative reference just because of the not-so-good feelings. They offered you a place to stay after all!” Michael, like many other CouchSurfers, thinks it is always good to remain nice and tolerant when the others provide you with a hospitality exchange that you could not experience otherwise.

If the dispute is not a clear mistake on behalf of one party, the unpleasant experiences are
usually miscommunications and different frameworks of analysing the situation. It is usually difficult to judge if it is anyone’s intention or fault. The ones involved also lack the information to evaluate the situation, since they are interacting with strangers in varied situations. The unfamiliarity of norms, routines and the other party’s general behavioural habits make the CouchSurfers holding the value of diversity reluctant to paste negative labels on them. Although the system states that one is free to share negative experiences “for common good”, the CouchSurfers usually mark the experience as positive and avoid negative evaluations. It can be related to the prediction of the third-party effect in networks, as their references can offer third-party evaluation in the community, which can provoke negative reactions from others to themselves. Moreover, negative references can lead to “revenge” from the other party, as a way of self-defence. This potentially harms the CouchSurfer’s reputation as social capital makes negative references unfavourable. After all, it is not likely that the two parties will have future interactions, so sanctioning the other’s mistake with the risk of receiving harm to one’s own reputation in the community scares the member. For long-term usage and building up their social capital in CouchSurfing, the individual transactions matter less than the long-term goals of getting more out of the network.

At the same time, it should be noted that in the SNS, the experienced users have accumulated more social capital, which make their voices stronger in interactions within the society. In addition, their words of references have more possibilities to be spread and trusted throughout the network, making them less vulnerable because the cost of abusing trust may lead to greater sanction for the trustees. The experienced users could be less reluctant to leave negative references, since their voices sound louder. Even if they receive a negative reference in return, others members may believe the other person more, even though the system claims to be neutral. Besides, if they already have many positive references, one new negative reference will look like a deviance that no one will really believe.
6 Conclusion

CouchSurfing as a growing SNS is expanding rapidly with a soaring number of registered members. While statistically the demographic distribution of the CouchSurfers looks very diverse, with people representing an amazingly extensive range of geographic regions, professions, ethnicity, age groups and so on, it is not a collective of “people of all kinds”. Under scrutiny, certain characteristics of CouchSurfing members can be observed. The growing phenomenon of CouchSurfing reflects a trend towards post-tourism in the context of high modernity, where the separation and distanciation of time and place is one of the most important characteristics. Tourism, which in essence involves the notion of the change of place, is transformed with people’s increasing ability of mobility empowered by technological advancements. In an increasingly globalised world, people are more connected, concerned, and influenced by people and things from remote areas. Tourism is no longer a privilege of the rich as it once was, when various possibilities are made possible, other than the typical tour routes and must-see sights. CouchSurfer is one of the alternatives for traditional tourism, not only in terms of the individualized experiences and plans, but also, the intimate relationships people can form through the experiences. Due to the shared private space, and lack of common living contexts for discussion, the two participants tend to exchange intimate conversations in an intimate space. Such patterns, referred to as “Intimate Tourism”, to some extent reflect the modern mentality of fast-pace consumerism and utility-oriented social interaction.

The ability of reaching people from other parts of the world makes it possible for the formation of internet communities based not on geographical locations, but on mutual interests. CouchSurfing, practically speaking is an online network that connects people who share similar (or dissimilar) ideas about travel and life, and who identify themselves with CouchSurfing as a lifestyle. Though CouchSurfing was intended only to get travellers connected so that they can obtain free accommodation from locals and create meaningful
experiences, nowadays the members’ activities have been continuously creating a sense of community despite the different physical locations and interests of the members. A central identity as CouchSurfers has emerged, though the core values agreed such as cultural exchange, self-exploration and inspiring the world, are not necessarily each individuals’ primary concern.

It is crucial to realize that CouchSurfers have multiple motivations that motivate them to CouchSurf. In individual experiences one can aim for materialistic benefits, cultural information and emotional support, while also expecting to gain experiences and social capital for future opportunities in the community. These motivations vary from time to time, even for the same CouchSurfer. Various different aspects of CouchSurfing also attract different people. However, there is an unspoken but central concern, of a collective identity as a CouchSurfer. Within the framework of the CouchSurfing system, the members, through online-offline interactions with other members, gradually develop their own concept of a “standard” CouchSurfer and the spirit of CouchSurfing. All talk about CouchSurfing and label themselves as CouchSurfers with “real values” of CouchSurfing. However, what exactly CouchSurfing is and how it should be used remains disputed, when everyone holds their own truth based on their own motivations. Cultural exchange, diversity and open-mindedness are frequently mentioned values for CouchSurfers. Nevertheless, in practice, when the majority of CouchSurfers are young people based in Industrial countries in the West, the individual orientations, consumerism tendencies and cultural standpoints are not always as diverse as they might look. An average (neither new nor very experienced) CouchSurfer is indulged in his or her own imagination about CouchSurfing and eulogizes the diversity, connectivity and mobility the CouchSurfers are embracing. At the same time, the same person’s motives can be very practical when diversity is just like music played in the background. Only certain types of interactions are accepted as good practices, making the idea of a global horizon and open-attitude a self-contradictive illusion.

The initial information people get about CouchSurfing in general generates a basic trust about the community and attracts new members. Once the entrance is made to the system, the
members focus more on each potential encounter. They analyse the profiles and presentations of other members and determine attractiveness (both about the place and the person), the measurement of which is related to their motivations. In order to receive better benefits from the system, people make efforts to construct their profiles according to the spoken and unspoken rules of the community, presenting a self that is favourable in the community and that assists in accumulating their social capital.

CouchSurfers, in order to win the trust of other members to get their individual needs fulfilled, rely largely on profiles where they present themselves in a way whereby they attempt to manipulate their identity to win the favour of the community members. Since the activities are based on mutual benefits from both sides, reciprocity is the key that guides their behaviour. Their perception of others based on their own expectations in return influence their ways of managing their own image presented on the profiles. The styles of presentation reflect their general understandings of CouchSurfing and are also consistent with their perception of “what CouchSurfing should be about”.

Inconsistencies are found between their real motivations and the motivations presented through their self-profile. A large number of CouchSurfers emphasise the cultural exchange aspect of CouchSurfing, while other motives are deliberately ignored in the presentations. They tend to have ideological, abstract and poetic narratives regarding their passions about CouchSurfing, though they have very practical goals that they want to get out of the community. For instance, while “self-exploration” and “learning about life” are frequently presented as one’s drives for CouchSurfing, the realistic concerns of money, language learning, and consumption of the meaning of place as a part of tourism, are underplayed in the presentations. Since the community is substantially driven by the members themselves, the abstract and intangible identity of the CouchSurfer is shaped by the users, simultaneously shaping the users’ perception of the self and their activities through CouchSurfing.

From another angle inspired by the theory of trust games, the mechanism of trust on CouchSurfing can be seen as the CouchSurfers’ decision making process on trust behaviour, after the overall evaluation of the other party’s trustworthiness and tempting qualities as
presented in their profiles, with a measurement from the motivation of themselves. The utility-oriented CouchSurfers, though concerned about the safety issues they might face when placing trust in a stranger from the network, tend to overlook some potential risks, as they “have to” trust in order to get their needs fulfilled. Inspired by a model in trust games, the different motivations represent the temptations that the trustee has in the eyes of the trustor. The more interesting qualities the trustee has, compared with the potential cost of trust abuse, the more likely the trustor places trust to make the transaction happen. CouchSurfers, facing attractive offers from the other members (e.g., a free room in the city centre of London, stories from a travelling musician, home-made sushi by a cook in Tokyo, the potential to receive a vouch for their profile etc.), do not necessarily thoroughly consider the trustworthiness of the other party in order to get the benefits. The group of CouchSurfers are not a collective of all kinds of people. To some extent, they belong to a class of consumers with choices. They are provided with a whole range of possible and undefined experiences after choosing to CouchSurf instead of staying at home watching TV or going to touristic sites following traditional tour groups.

The dynamics of trust behaviour on CouchSurfing are concluded as follows: the trustor evaluates the trustee’s profile and determines the potential benefit (temptation) according to the trustor’s own motivations, and then analyses the potential cost for the trustor as well as the trustee if trust is abused. In this context, the foundation of trust behaviour is neither the trustfulness of the trustor nor the estimated trustworthiness of the other party, but rather, the practical willingness to place trust to ensure the motivation is fulfilled regardless of the potential risk. In the networked community of CouchSurfing, the feedback of previous interactions with other members are transmitted to the collective knowledge on the system, influencing one’s own social capital as well as the overall trustworthiness of the CouchSurfing community. Possible sanctions, which are considered as costs of trust-abuse, reduce the possibility of the trustee’s abuse of trust.

However, it is not without limitations when business-oriented models are employed to explain the behaviours in CouchSurfing. Human interactions and motivations can hardly be
measured, and monetary gain and loss cannot fully explain the dynamics. The analyses based on such analogies should therefore be seen as inspirational exploration, instead of providing measurable calculations. In addition, hosting/surfing through CouchSurfing does not involve simple buy-sell relationships. The risks are not necessarily the abuse of trust, but rather, can be incompatible expectations and the different perceptions and practices of the both parties, and the problems caused by miscommunication. The trustworthiness of a host/surfer includes both their willingness to carry out the promise, and their ability to understand and fulfil the needs of the other member and deliver a mutually acceptable result. Since there is no standard way for an intimate tourist whose experience relies a lot on both parties’ mutual understanding and spontaneous interactions, it is thus difficult to predict the quality of the CouchSurfing activity, within the framework of each individual’s private motives. The employment of the theory within business studies offers a way of thinking, although social behaviour and interactions involve elements too complex to be fully explored by a money-oriented model.

Control is operated through tools provided by the CouchSurfing system, as well as through the members’ sharing of information in the community. Possibilities for becoming verified, vouched, referred, and so on, enable the users to engage themselves in the effort of constructing a positive image through their profiles. In individual experiences, CouchSurfers pay more attention to the information from other members about the targeted trustee and regard the users’ self-monitoring through the CouchSurfing system as less important. The envisioning of being sanctioned through the network or by other members tends to play a role in increasing the system’s trustworthiness and is understood by the members. However, they hesitate to use such tools in real interactions.

The phenomenon of the reluctance in leaving a negative reference is an interesting example. CouchSurfers speak highly of the reference system on the CouchSurfing site. They can describe their experiences with others that they have interacted with by leaving a reference, which will appear in both people’s profiles. From the references in one’s profile, others can read about different aspects of the person, and how meeting with that person is
likely to go. These outsiders’ views are regarded as more trustworthy than the words written by the CouchSurfers themselves. Positive evaluations enhance the CouchSurfer’s credibility as well as increase their social capital, which implies more options in future “transactions” through the system. Simultaneously, negative references seen as a means of sanction, are not often seen in the CouchSurfing network. The tendency is that the perception of the potential harm of negative references reduces the tendency of trust-abuse by raising the costs for trust-abuse, such as a reduced prospect of getting future transactions. Moreover, opposite to the CouchSurfers’ affirmation of the function of references, not all are willing to leave negative references when they experience unpleasant situations. On one hand, there is no strict definition for “negative”. In situations when the experience does not go as expected (such expectations are usually vague and can only be estimated by the levels of satisfaction in meeting the needs because the actual carrying out of the experiences can hardly be predictable) but the other party is not ill-behaved on purpose, many choose to keep quiet or to leave a positive reference with general appreciations for the interaction, instead of leaving a neutral or negative reference. This is consistent with the predictions in the theory of third-party effects in networks, where trustors’ attitudes towards third-party opinions depend on the context, and third parties might be reluctant to give negative feedback because of the potential harm to themselves. In addition, it appears for most users that a single negative reference does not matter much if the overall views are positive. As long as one has established records from previous experiences, a single negative reference does not seem to count for much, as the ready-gained social capital of the user speaks louder. Noticeably, many problems actually arise from different cultural practices, which are even more complicated in setting standards. The overwhelming positive evaluations push them towards the same direction in affirming the community spirit rather than pointing out the limits of the system. Sometimes the slogan of diversity becomes the excuse if people find the experiences less pleasant because of different interaction patterns and cultural practices.

Interactions through CouchSurfing reinforce the participants’ imagination of the community’s identity. The intention to interact better with CouchSurfers means members work on the identity they present in CouchSurfing in a way so that their self-image matches
with the desirable traits in the community. While there are many users who do not fit into stereotypical descriptions of a CouchSurfer in terms of experience and motivation, the more different they are, the less likely it is that they will be involved in this community. In this sense, it can be argued that CouchSurfing as a network is continuously creating exclusion and marginalization, despite its claim of “an eye for the world of diversity”. The divide is deepened through the mechanism of trust behaviours; when the ones perceived to have attractive profiles according to CouchSurfing standards get more opportunities for interactions, the ones who do not are restrained from being offered chances of interaction. From a more critical point of view, this USA-originated network seems to have started in the western world and established the rules for the service reflecting patterns of consumerism. The fast-paced consumption of intense relationships and the utility-focused interactions are practiced and celebrated as “common sense”. The newly joined users from other cultures, while excited about the chance of meeting a community of “diversity”, face the choices of either to join the celebration following the rules established by the former users, or to be marginalized if they stay with their own methods of hospitality. The game belongs to the ones who follow the rules, and the alternative CouchSurfing patterns are only the “diversities” exhibited to increase the system’s social capital.

**Reflections**

Reflecting on the research method, the issue of subjectivity and reflexivity should be discussed, because of the researcher’s identity as a CouchSurfing member. The researcher has had experiences of both surfing and hosting. She has received positive references from other members, has been verified in the system, and has just got the right to vouch others after receiving a third vouch. This automatically led to the issue of objectivity in the research. There is no denying the standpoint of the researcher influence on the objectivity of a study, although the researcher tried to minimize such influences that may have lead to biased results in this investigation. The researchers’ experience as a CouchSurfer can influence the definition of the problem, the methodology, the interviews, as well as the reading of the data. A researcher with previous experience of CouchSurfing can identify issues that could be
difficult to detect as an outsider. However, the researcher’s background cannot be avoided nor filtered out in the research, just as any social scientist. Aiming at observing the patterns from data collected, instead of hypothesis testing, the researcher tries to get out of the framework of her standpoint. The theoretical tools are also chosen from different fields such as Social Science, Business, and Tourism, to give a broader horizon to the analysis. In fact the biggest influence of the researcher’s role as a CouchSurfer is not how she conducts the research, but the other CouchSurfers’ responses to the researcher. The researcher’s appearance as a CouchSurfer might trigger different reactions from the target group than their responses to another researcher without such an identity. Possible inferences can be their self-defensive reactions when talking about unrecognized practices through CouchSurfing, or a “take-for-granted” attitude when addressing common issues in CouchSurfing. If the CouchSurfers strongly identify with CouchSurfing as a community, their attitude towards the researcher may also contain in-group bias. They sometimes ask about the researcher’s own experiences. The willingness to compare and share with an imagined in-group could have caused problems in their orientations of responses. Realizing such problems, the researcher does not claim a totally disinterested standpoint, but rather tries to interpret the materials “in their trousers”.

There are also limitations in applying a multimethod strategy. Although the author tries to look into the choice of samples based upon statistical rationales, there is still an issue that they might only serve as describing a certain part of the population. The universe of theories analysed also provides lenses that influence the significance of the representativeness of the sampling (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 118). As the research focuses on motivation, presentation and trust, there might be other unidentified factors influencing the users’ behaviours. There should always be a sceptical attitude towards statistically proper but atheoretical samples, as well as those “theoretically relevant but empirically unrepresentative” ones (ibid). Although it is still true that CouchSurfers from the western world comprise the majority of the active users, there is no justification ruling out the peripheral groups, who can be more diverse in their motivations as well as their ways of interaction. As a matter of fact, it is very probable that a huge number of CouchSurfers are newly registered, passive users, and
people in less touristic cities who might be less experienced and less inclined to respond to the request of interviews. Within individual CouchSurfing groups, there could be different patterns of usage because of the local practice. The sample analysed also represents only part of the CouchSurfing community. Since the interview requests were sent through the system, it might also imply that the responding users are those ones who check their account or email within a certain time. Those who have reduced access to the Internet have a decreased tendency to reply to requests, irrespective of how motivated they are to participate. This is especially true for people living in the developing world who might not have easy access to the fundamental prerequisites for using these services: computers and the Internet. Thus, the sample population does not truly cover the whole picture. However, it should be realized that CouchSurfing, or digital travel in general, is never a game for all, but more for those digital natives (Gasser & Simun, 2010). As the method of interviews employed in surveys requires, among other factors, high articulateness and literacy (Brewer& Hunter, 1989, p. 119), there are certain groups of people who have more of a tendency and willingness to cooperate. As an example, language sphere could be one of the factors. Especially when many of the interviewees are not native English speakers, the people who are not confident English users, for example, are excluded from the observation and conversation. There are users indicating French as their own language, and city groups observed which use solely Spanish in their interactions. There could be a whole distinct universe that is not reached. A British CouchSurfer’s habits of using the network can be very different from a native of Mongolia, who simply cannot be involved in CouchSurfing activities dealing with internationals without a second language. A Spanish-only person can still expect overseas guests from Latin America, or the ones who are confident in their Spanish, while the Vietnamese CouchSurfers generally need to master English or other languages, with little hope that they could find anyone who speaks their language. As far as it is known, there are other language-based hospitality exchange networks, the users in which could have different characteristics.

**Further thoughts beyond the research**
This study on CouchSurfing is both about the mobile lifestyle in the globalized world comprised mostly of people who consume culture and mobility as a lifestyle, as well as the online community where people’s online presentations and interactions extend to the real world. As online interactions are more integrated into the daily life of many, especially the “digital-haves”, it is important to analyse how digital identity itself is perceived by those who build their online community on mobility in the physical world. As seen from the analysis, although with complicated structures for the reputation system, people’s practical concerns usually bypass such structures in their trust behaviour. The system does not seem to function well when people have strong motivations, and when they are overwhelmed by the intangibles in the online community, such as the power of social capital, positive atmospheres, and the expectations of reciprocal behaviour. With the increasing options provided by CouchSurfing, future research can go beyond the main activities of surfing/hosting, placing an eye on other activities that also help build the community’s interactions and shape the CouchSurfers’ identities. Although CouchSurfing claims to be global, its members are mostly people with Western backgrounds. Future researchers could probably analyse the differences between the interactions and presentations within communities and across communities, especially in the focus of intercultural communication. The presentation styles and their perceptions can also be interesting points to discuss.

CouchSurfing as an emerging form of tourism based on relationships through SNSs reflects people’s changing mentality and practices in the modern world of globalization, shaping and being shaped by the possibilities of communication technologies. The growing number of CouchSurfers suggests people’s increased connectivity through the Internet and their growing interest to explore the remote and to become linked to the locals. It is not only a form of tourism, but also a lifestyle chosen to fulfil their individual needs. It is a new utopia. People dream about the globalized community and their identity attached to multiculturalism and mobility. They dream about this network of different cultures and its supportive members, despite the not-always-perfect experiences. Nevertheless, CouchSurfing does not necessarily indicate equal access nor pure openness and hospitality. People are driven by their own goals. The ideal model of cultural exchange is more like a marketing slogan by the CouchSurfing
system as well as the individuals, rather than the principal guideline for CouchSurfing practices. What they say do not necessarily reflect all the aspects of their real motivations.

Nevertheless, the researcher is not pessimistic about the phenomenon of CouchSurfing, which essentially does provide its members with possibilities to explore the world afar in an individualized way. It is their way of self-expression and identity-construction. Personally the researcher is positive about the network where people make rational choices to individualize rather than take part in traditional tourism based on mass-production. The technological innovations provide new opportunities to build relationships across physical limitations, and people are empowered to step out of the place they live in and embrace the diverse group of CouchSurfers. Although it may be sad to look at CouchSurfer’s behaviours as similar to choosing products to consume and dispose of, it does not necessarily imply the conclusion that people are heartless and aiming only for self-interests. The emotions and social interactions, argued as the personal needs of individual CouchSurfers, are not to cast a pessimistic light on the relationships through CouchSurfing. Rather, it is a way to understand that people’s social and emotional needs are growing with the stimulation of the interconnectivity of the globalized world. With the possibilities of communication technologies, people’s methods of consumption are no longer the same as in industrial societies. People are empowered to choose to consume more than industrial products.

At the same time, it is important to realize that CouchSurfing, like many other phenomenon in the context of globalization, is not truly globalized. Despite the language barriers, characters of cultural practices and other factors that have been discussed earlier, there are also practical issues such as the digital divide due to inequality in knowledge, economy, infrastructure, and so on. But just as any community, where certain shared beliefs and goals make the members feel tied together, CouchSurfing unites this group of people that have a common attitude to travel and hospitality. The core values such as openness and diversity, although not fully achieved in the practices, still serve as the vision that unites the people who identify with the concept of CouchSurfing with their own motives.
Literature


Relations in a Mobile World. Ashgate: Aldershot.


**Electronic Resources**


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Appendix 1 Questionnaire

A. Personal information
1. Age
2. Gender
3. Birth Place
4. Registered location on CouchSurfing
5. Other Places that one has lived for more than 4 months
6. Profession
7. Education
8. Languages

B Motivation and CouchSurfing experience
1. How did you first hear of CS?
2. What was your purpose of joining the network?
3. When did you start to send out your first message/request through CS? How did you plan your first travel/hosting through CS?
4. How often do you check your CS account?
5. How many times have you surfed/hosted?
6. In what situations will you use CS?
7. What was the most interesting/appealing CS story that you ever heard of? Where did you find the information?
9. What services do you use on CS? (Hosting, surfing, coffee meeting, CS local meetings, tours, events, networking, etc.)

C. Profile
1 Usage
1.1 Membership start time?
1.2 How often do you reply your requests?
1.3 How often do you check your account?
1.4 Did you write about your profession? What did you write? Why?
1.5 Did you write about your education? What did you write? Why?
1.6 What else did you include in the general information session of the profile?
1.7 What groups did you join?

2. Couch Information
2.1 What is your current couch availability? What were the expectations do you have for the other CouchSurfers when you chose this status?
2.2 Did you write about your preferred Gender? Why?
2.3 What more information did you write on your couch info?
2.4 How often do you receive requests? What kind of requests?

3. Personal Description
3.1 What languages do you write on CS?
3.2 Do you have photos? How many? What kind of photos?
3.3 What do you include in your personal description? Why
3.4 What kind of experience did you write?
3.5 What are your interests?
3.6 Did you include any philosophy in CS profile? If yes, what is that?
3.7 What kind of people you like in life and what did you write on CS?
3.8 How do you describe yourself?
3.9 Have you travelled much before CS? How do you compare?
3.10 Where have you travelled?
3.11 What do you think of CS? (Compare answer to online one)

D Trust
1. What do you care about when you are looking for in a profile of a host?(rating different factors- personal traits depicted, mutual interest, photos, profession, (about the person), or
2. What do you care about when you are selecting a surfer? (rating different factors—personal traits depicted, mutual interest, photos, profession, (about the person), or number of surfers, duration, request type (about the couch request), percentage of replied requests, language, CS experience, references (systematic usage). What kind of surfers have you turned down?

3. What would you do/ not do with a host/surfer? (leave the key, allow access to private stuff without accompany, guide the surfer around town, cook for surfer, go together to private parties, buy tickets for a surfer before his arrival, share the sleeping surface, leave one’s luggage in a host’s home, sleep in an open room, etc.).

4. Did you have worries about CS before your first experience? What are they? Have you changed your perception/concerns after that?

5. How safe do you think is CS? How do you minimize risks of using CS?

6. Have you got some not-so-good experiences with CS? (Language problem, not-so-punctual hosts/surfers, lost of property, sexual harassment, changed schedules, unable to fulfil the promised tour/attractions?) Describe the situation.

7. Have you left any references? Have you left any negative references? Why?

8. Did you promote CS to your friends? In what ways? What did you say about CS?

9. Have you ever heard of mal-usage/ abuse of CS? What are they? Did they influence your usage of CS?
## Appendix 2 Information of Interview respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Gender, age)</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Birth Place</th>
<th>Registered Place</th>
<th>Activities (times)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael (Male, 29)</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Uppsala, Sweden</td>
<td>Surfing (60+) Hosting (30+) Meeting (organizer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ambassador of CS Uppsala. Started with surfing but now more hosting and organizing local meetings. Speaks four languages fluently. Extensive travelling in Europe and Asia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meher (Female, 26)</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Uppsala, Sweden</td>
<td>Surfing (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Surf only, sometimes with her girlfriend. Cannot host because of limited place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onni and Ulla (Couple, 63/65)</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Finland/USA</td>
<td>Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, Canada</td>
<td>Surfing (15+) Hosting (10+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Started to surf to practice Spanish. Host at home. Promote CouchSurfing among seniors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara (Female, 24)</td>
<td>Intern</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Edinburgh, Scotland</td>
<td>Surfing (4) Meeting (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CouchSurfing for cheap accommodation and travel companions. Language majored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan (Male, 37)</td>
<td>Master student</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Vaasa, Ostrobothnia, Finland</td>
<td>Surfing (20+) Hosting (15+) Meeting (10+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Used to run own hospitality company and travelled to 40 countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos (Male, 31)</td>
<td>Product Manager of poultry company</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Pereira, Risaralda, Colombia</td>
<td>New member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hoping to host but no requests yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clement (Male, 30)</td>
<td>Civil Servant</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Ado, Ekiti, Nigeria</td>
<td>Hosting (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pen pal club member. Has CouchSurfing friends in Christian community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark (Male, 36)</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Bonn, Germany</td>
<td>Hosting (5) Meetings (5+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family roots from Puerto Rico. Lived in South America, USA and three countries in Europe. Joins community meetings and hosts for new connections in the new city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy (Female, 46)</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>New York, USA</td>
<td>Surfing (2) Hosting (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Started to host after positive experience of surfing. Critical about CouchSurfing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith (Female, 23)</td>
<td>Customer Service at an airport</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Chongqing, China</td>
<td>Surfing (3) Hosting (9) Meeting (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Surfs to nearby places. Hotels for business travels are paid by the company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank (Male, 34)</td>
<td>Forest Engineering</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Bonn, Germany</td>
<td>Surfing (5), hosting (30+) Meetings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent traveller for job reasons. Hosts whenever he has time. Against the idea of hotels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender/Age</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Surfing/Hosting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustafa</td>
<td>Male, 32</td>
<td>History Teacher</td>
<td>Cyprus, Girne, Kyrenia, Cyprus</td>
<td>Hosting(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Love the poor more than the rich”. Consider surfing if the guests invite him for a visit.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia and Claire</td>
<td>Females, 24/25</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>France, Paris, France</td>
<td>Surfing(40+) Hosting(20+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Started in USA when they were exchange students. Now emails are directed to Claire in Paris and Cynthia checks the account in Austria.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill and Kate</td>
<td>Couple, 56/51</td>
<td>IT Support Analyst</td>
<td>Scotland, Kinross, Scotland</td>
<td>Surfing (15+) Hosting (40+) Meetings (organizers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The couple met through CouchSurfing. Hitchhiked in Europe before CouchSurfing. Pioneer CouchSurfer, Family Ambassador, New Member Welcome Team member, labelled Travelling Musicians and active member of rural CouchSurfing project. Bill used to be the CS ambassador for two years in Glasgow.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3 Quotations from interview transcripts

“I heard of one story of my friend in Bariloche, Argentina. He was there with no money and some girl from CouchSurfing helped him and gave him some food. I joined CouchSurfing initially just for curiosity. I wonder how the net works and what kind of people I can meet there. I love to travel so I am also curious about facilities of accommodation.”

“My wife and I became CouchSurfers in November 2008 before our trip to Central America. We had the opportunity to bump into this young lady who was a member of CouchSurfing in Sanfri...Her name was Michelle...She was the very first person that told us about CouchSurfing. She did a trip to Central America using CouchSurfing, and she was able to tell us a lot, a very bunch, about CouchSurfing. She was able to convince both of us that CouchSurfing was a very safe system to use. Because of Michelle we changed our itinerary for our trip the winter of 2008/2009. We originally thought about just go for 2 months to only Costa Rica. But after that meeting with Michelle we decided to go with CouchSurfing. We went to Chicago city, Guatemala, and then ...Nicaragua to the Pacific coast side of Costa Rica...to the capital San Jose...”

“I think Ulla’s purpose is to help the young people to save their money. She knows there are young people who want to go travel but have not much money. She feels she wants to be able to help.”

“When I was having a holiday in Fiji, I met some CouchSurfers. I was staying with one couple amidst the only four days of my three-week-vacation there that was not booked. The woman invited me to stay after we met while they were celebrating her birthday dinner down the road from the resort I was in. There she introduced me to her friends after two days. I ended up spending the next couple of nights with them on their yacht. That was when I learned about CouchSurfing and that they were all in it! They said it is a great thing. The yacht owner told me he had stayed in many homes better than five star hotels through CouchSurfing and I was in! Then I realized that my first two CouchSurfing experiences with these couples were exactly the same for me- much more than what I could expect in five star hotels! ...The experiences were positive. However, I stopped liking the male host from the first couple after he started appearing very racist towards Fijians ... I guess my expressions showed my disapproval. I no longer joined in any conversation he tried to initiate with me, though I really liked his wife. During the breakfast of the second morning, she said he suggested they bring me to the nearest hotel and though she claimed she thought it was just that he wanted more privacy for them, I suspect otherwise. The rest of my time at their home was fantastic because I love nature and art like they do. She is an artist and they were adding to this breathtakingly beautiful botanical garden on the property where their lovely rugged home lay high on a mountain, overlooking a bay...”

“I wrote very detailed descriptions of my place, including room description, our habits,
location, neighbourhood, traffic information and travel information. People can make the best choices for themselves given the circumstances described. Some may not want to be in a moderate income urban neighbourhood within a city known more for its high crime rates than anything positive. Some may be allergic to or dislike pets. I think the more information in advance of what to expect, the less negative surprises for all concerned. Though I love that a few clicks on the CS map allows us to learn about each others' travels in detail, it takes a bit to figure that out. So I posted a map, too, to show my travels. I put my couch availability as ‘Maybe’, to give space to judge safety for reasons explained. I have said ‘no’ to one photo-less request without references-I would never say yes to such. I also do not like last minute requests so much because you get no time to get to know them. I'm a single woman who many already consider ‘paranoid’ enough already!

“Cs is such a wonderful concept as you can see from my experiences, I'm no longer on cloud 9 about it! In addition to the CS suggestions on this site, CS would be better with links to each member's social networking sites, blogs, criminal background checks, et cetera, so we feel even more secure about knowing those we are letting into our most prized possessions before their arrival or granted request. Besides, using the verification process, tips, safety information on the site, common sense precautions and our gut instincts, we can inquire one on one as individuals with those giving references about potential hosts/surfers and then possibly learn more than they would be willing to post publicly. But generally the power of an organized group is stronger!”

“I've always been cautious and believed that trust must be earned, rather than given instantly. My last guest still arrived a day late. After all I posted about inconsiderate people doing that, she had the nerve to ask if she could stay a day later to make up for it, and so she could see the fireworks for 4th of July holiday at another CS host nearby who'd said yes to her after I did. She even said ‘It's about time to give up a key’ when I had a change of plans and decided to go to New York that last day instead of staying home when she wanted to just relax before going to fulfil that other CS plan!”

“I actually hosted once during last summer too, making it for hosting experiences. That was a mother with her two teenage sons and a friend. They showed up on the day we agreed they would leave-three days after they were supposed to arrive. I had bought all this food to feed the five of us for that whole time! While the friend (who looked like a drug user) was in my room with me, I was sure my 600 dollar travel voucher was there and I had put it right on my keyboard before going downstairs. However, I never saw it again! In that case, I'd gotten a bit 'too' comfortable after letting them still come because I'd been looking forward to it and preparing for some time for their visit. Of course when I said it was missing, they all denied taking it. When the mother read my mind, she was kind enough to have them all empty their pockets and bring everything back out of the car so she could go through it in front of me since they were just about to leave anyway. It was never found and I know where I had left it, so I wouldn't forget to use it that day since that's when it expired!

“I didn't leave any negative references. Ironically, I was talking to the druggie-looking
woman about that same thing right after missing the voucher because she said she had also had many people requesting a couch then not showing up yet never post anything negative. It’s just like what the other local CouchSurfers I had met said. I haven't met a local CouchSurfer who posted a negative reference though we've all had such experiences. The mother though there were no negative/neutral references and I didn’t want to be the first to leave one. One of the friends in CS meeting told me, ‘who's going to believe the first one! ’I think references are important, but too many people (including me) are reluctant to post the negatives for reasons explained, because we don't want to look unkind in a world of so many overwhelmingly positive references seen on most CS pages. We also do not want to deter potential surfers or hosts from themselves. I know that sounds illogical yet I'd like to think it’s true for most of us in this world of CS.”

“I read about CS in a newspaper. The article was about a girl she was travelling by bike around the world and she was arranging place to stay from CouchSurfing! I liked travelling already before joining CS, and I like to meet people from different countries. My motivation was my life philosophy! I don’t have that much time to surf, so I am expecting to host more than to surf. So far I have hosted twice and I think my guests were interesting. I haven’t planned to surf yet. I only received the first request months after I signed up. The people requested to stay in my place one day before arrival. They were travelling in the Middle East by walking! They had backpacks with small tents in the bags. I love people with dreams!”

“Why should I include information about things like my education? I don’t think high education level gives better hospitality. I think education does not matter, and I believe it is all about if you like that person or not...I didn’t actually write anything about myself, not even many photos. I agree that it will be better that the travellers to read more about me before they contact me. But do you think if I write something good about myself, it means I am a good person? I didn’t actually write anything about myself, not even many photos. I agree that it will be better that the travellers to read more about me before they contact me. But do you think if I write something good about myself, it means I am a good person? At least I don’t think so. Anyway I think they can read other peoples’ comments about me.”

“I don't really have plans to go to surf a couch now. I can go if someone has stayed in my couch and invite me to visit back. I generally trust those people I already know, but maybe I will search to stay with strangers in future, I don’t know yet. If I am going I think the most important is the character of the person. I want to stay with good people. Of course I would want a place with a nice bed and shower. The city is important, transportation is important, and languages, the couch, photos... but I believe if I go surfing, most probably they will be people whom I have hosted before, I mean I think I will go to somebody that I know.”

“When I had the visitors I gave them the keys and I told to them, 'during the 3 days, my flat belongs to you. Do whatever you like!' I cannot cook. I could take them anywhere in Cyprus by my car. In terms of worries, I don’t really have any. What could I worry about? Would they steal my bed or sofa? But for surfing, I think yes. If somebody invites me to go somewhere and I trust them. But if they don’t meet me up as agreed and I have not arranged
my hotel room: that can be a problem.”

“I thought it provides a way for the young people to travel and meet people, and they don’t need to pay. It can be a cheap way for the Y generation to travel. I actually had some negative attitude towards such an idea. But after I looked at it, I found it actually intelligent. I use CS whenever when I feel like being with people. In certain countries I prefer just meeting some people for coffee and stay in hotels. In cities that are expensive, I am more likely to surf. Now I think there are a lot of gatherings which I think are really useful. It’s a super good way to go out to meet people. It’s easy to break the ice when you have the mutual connection on CS.”

“I read about CS in their bi-monthly magazine. It introduces CS as one of the social networks for the travellers around the world. I read some testimonies of some members who have visited a foreign county and the accommodation they found was without spending too much money, but with open hands of CouchSurfers. My purpose was to make friends, know the world, improve my English, and learn foreign cultures and to eradicate loneliness. It was fun. I have about five good friends from Germany, three female and two male friends. I also hosted one of them last year.”

“There had been … a girl from Israel who has promised to marry me. I agreed to marry her and we started the friendship. We later switched from CouchSurfing site to mobile messages to communicate. She was always crying, “Clement, I want you to give me a brown baby.” She tried to come here and live with me. She loved me too much. I, myself, I loved her in return. But her daddy did not allow her to visit me because her past lover from Eastern Nigeria raped her and since then, her dad hated Nigerians. I ought to stop our relationship because as long as her dad did not have the interest, it would be dangerous for me to marry her. She’s still in Israel. I don’t want to talk much about her because I will cry. Love is when she left you and you still love her. I miss her a lot.”

“My hotel rooms are paid by the company so money is not the problem, but I just cannot understand why the hotel rooms can charge you 90 Euros per night without them doing anything. I mean, yes, they have huge rooms with a wide bed, a TV, sometimes a fancy toilet with bath- but I don’t really use them. I don’t need their breakfast or huge bathtub. What did they do to earn this much money?”

“Before this time, I only hosted people who were looking for last-minute couches in the Bonn group. I check the group every day. At that time I was new in Bonn so I was checking the group frequently to see if there were any events. Sometimes I saw such requests and then offered to host them. After the first two or three surfers, there have been more requests coming. They usually come to Bonn for conferences or temporary jobs. Sometimes they are people like you, who cannot fix their accommodation earlier. I know the housing situation is tough in Bonn, especially for new comers. I did not put any preferences about my CouchSurfers, but so far all the surfers were girls.”
“Sometimes if we need an interpreter during our audits, I search among CouchSurfers. It was not that professional situation. I would rather find some young people who need money. We don’t really need a certificate, as the jobs are often daily conversations. There is no point looking for a professional interpreter charging a large amount of money. I found a few interpreters through CouchSurfing. I just checked their profiles and contacted them. The young people I find all turned out to be very good in English and I was never disappointed.”

“Last week I met a girl in Bonn. Apparently she read my profile, or maybe she searched by keywords. Anyway she found me and sent me a message, asking if we could meet for a drink and she wanted to consult me about the job market in Bonn. I agreed, so we met. Actually my assistant will leave in October and I need someone to replace her. I found this young woman had a good profile and I liked her during our talk. I got my degree outside Germany and I would need someone who understands the German laws. She studied law in Germany. So I employed her. Now my assistant is doing transitions with her. It’s just good timing, that I don’t have to train her myself because my assistant is still here.”

“The messages are directed to Claire’s email, and I check this account with the website. I answer only if the people are interesting and honest. There are so many requests every day. I guess maybe it’s because we have the address set in Paris. Well, you know, they just send many requests of meeting up, because we are two girls, and we are French.”

“Well sometimes you just can tell that some people have other purposes. I don’t really expect anything, but sometimes the girls made their moves, then I would consider if I liked them. There was one time a girl sent me a message after she left, saying “would you have agreed if I asked to sleep with you.” There was another time, a German girl who had a new profile. She wrote me a message and said she wanted to surf my place. I said no because I was kind of busy at that time. She had a relatively new profile but I did not care that much because I didn’t have time to host anyway. After a few days she wrote back to me again and said she had developed her profile. She said, ‘now I have a better profile. Please accept my request.’ So I thought if she really wanted to come, ok, come then. I waited for her at the station, and the moment I saw her, I could tell that she was looking for something else. We went to a pub later. There suddenly she told me that she liked me… later we started a short-relationship, for about three months. I asked her later, why she wrote to me like that. She admitted that she wanted a black man.”

“One of the interesting people I met through CS was a Chinese boy who was from Beijing but immigrated to the US when he was five. He’s got many relatives in China. He stopped by Chongqing when he visited his cousin last summer in a nearby city called Chengdu. He spoke fluent mandarin with an accent from Beijing, but understood almost nothing about Chinese culture. He would “wow” at everything he saw, and was very amusing. We had a mutual interest which was to discuss the disadvantages/advantages of Chinese Communist Party. He knew that I may not have access to some kind of news in China, so he sent me emails and told me about the Western coverage about China that he thought I might be interested in.
“One of my guests, a student from Belgium told me another story. That was when he was searching for hosts in Tokyo, where it was really hard to find a couch. He requested to surf with an American “uncle” who lived by himself in a good location and he agreed to host. The student found his place weird as soon as he stepped in, because there were weird decorations and things like inflatable love dolls and so on. He thought the host also spoke with a strange tone but since he thought it could be just his way of talking and he should not say anything to be polite. He arrived in the evening so he got to sleep early. He heard there were some noises in the apartment in the middle of the night, so he got up to check. The host had brought two white girls back. The student thought it might be the uncle’s private thing, like a one-night-stand or something, so he said “hi” and went back to his room. The second day he came across the two girls when he was visiting the city, and realized they were also CouchSurfers who wished to surf the place of the American. The girls were also uncomfortable with the “scary” apartment so they checked in a hotel instead.”

“I do not really have experiences that are really negative, but one time two guests from Iran stayed with me and I felt a bit uncomfortable. They came to live with me because they wanted to experience CouchSurfing. They stayed only for one day, and moved to a hotel the second day. I think they are kind of too dependent on others. I was at work, but they kept calling me, asking about things like bus routes and stops. I could not answer the phone all the time because of my job, so it was a bit frustrating. Another thing I did not feel so comfortable was that, they talked in their own language when we three were together. The brother was ok, but the sister was a bit too squeamish.”

“I don’t really check the profiles clearly, because I was desperate about the housing. I am a poor student and I cannot afford to go travelling in Europe for long by living in hotels. I send requests to everyone who appears in the result. I can’t really choose the hosts, any one of them will do. I don’t care if I sleep on the floor or what, just a place to stay.”

“I did hear about one rape, perhaps in Britain. We as ambassadors get frequent information and are to inform the other members. I often tell the girls that it’s better to look more carefully at the profiles, reading the references, and try to avoid surfing the new male CouchSurfers. Well I don’t know how much they listen to my advice; they just go anyway, if they think it’s interesting.”

“I wrote in five languages: English, French, German, Swedish, and Korean. The messages in different languages are not the same. But I don’t know why I did that. I am not expecting someone to read them all. It just feels cool and shows I am an international, multi-lingual CouchSurfer.”

“I have just hosted. It was a couple from Poland. They are young people with dreams. I like people with dreams. I drove them around in Cyprus and had a nice time. I don’t have recent plans for travelling with CouchSurfing. I will consider going for a visit to my guests who invite me to go to visit them. I don’t really worry about hosting. What could I worry about? Would they steal my bed or sofa? But for surfing, I think yes. If somebody invites me to go
somewhere and I trust them. But if they don’t meet me up as agreed and I have not arranged my hotel room- that can be a problem.”

“My last guest arrived a day late. After all I posted about inconsiderate people doing that, she had the nerve to ask if she could stay a day later to make up for it, AND so she could see the fireworks for 4th of July holiday at another CS host nearby who would said yes to her after I did. She even said “It’s about time to give up a key” when I had a change of plans and decided to go to New York that last day instead of staying home when she wanted to just relax before going to fulfil that other CouchSurfing plan!”

“My host in Paris told me that he received a couple from Hungary. He thought everything was alright when they were having dinner, even the guy was a bit quiet. Later the guy seemed to be a little bit drunk, raised his voice and said ‘I don’t like you!’ The girl apologized later but he felt uncomfortable.”

“I hosted only one since it is expensive to host here. I also hosted one from Letternet, Germany. For me it is not just providing a couch. I need to show them the best hospitality, offer food, take them around and give them the best protection.”

“It is just hard to explain what CouchSurfing is. My neighbours thought I am the most popular guy in Bonn. Because I am bringing back different girls every time, and sometimes there are more than one at a time.”

“Especially in the popular cities, it is very hard to find a couch. I think the people, who have ok profiles, but have no or few references, are more likely to answer your requests. I am Uppsala’s ambassador and have a lot of references, so I guess they think it’s good to host me and get some positive reference.”

“I like the reference system because we have the possibility to leave a negative reference, and anyone who has stayed with us can also write about us. To me, it is crucial to the success of the program, because in that way Ulla and I wouldn’t lie since the others could write a negative reference about that. By the same token, the obligation is also on you to respect us because we can also write about that. Our say is, because it is neutral, therefore the obligation is on both parties to be respectful, and be honest about themselves.”

“We have turned down a couple who had registered on CouchSurfing for over one and a half years but still had a very incomplete profile. I think he had just one or two lines in the profile and I could not know what kind of person he was. I replied to the man and said that “you are not following the principles of CouchSurfing.” I never heard from him again. I think that to use CouchSurfing and ask for help you need to open up yourself.”

“There have been two similar situations when the hosts were too nice to me. They gave me the key and they left for one week or 10 days. In San Petersburg the guy went away when I was there, leaving only a few words ‘take care of my plants’. Another time was in Finland, she
left for 10 days, leaving me alone in her place.”

“I write references for relatively new people, but if they already have a lot of references, I don’t normally bother to leave a reference because they don’t really need one more.”

“There was one time I hosted a young girl in Finland. I did not feel that good as she was always addressing ‘me’ ‘me’ ‘me’ ‘me’ ‘me’, instead of having a conversation. One day the door bell rang and I went to get the door. When I came back to my computer she was already there, using my computer and saying ‘just five minutes!’ Of course it does not matter if she uses it, but at least she should ask in advance! Well I did not leave any negative words for her. I think there is no big deal. She is just too young and some day someone will tell her about that.”

“It is too mean to leave your host a negative reference just because of the not-so-good feelings. They offered you a place to stay after all!”
Appendix 4 Examples of Missions on CS profiles

1 “...to know this world wider, deeper, better ...”- Male, 24, student
2 “To survive until my next trip abroad.”- Male, 42, Accounting
3 “meet, learn and grow”- Female, 36, I work for a charity
4 “working a couple month without going crazy.”- Male, 30, N/A
5 “find inner balance” - Female, 22, student, volunteer
6 “be excited everyday about tomorrow”- Male, 23, Student
7 “making my journey the destination.”- Male, 31, I stick my finger up my nose on a regular basis..... something purple I think....
8 “Visit every country in the world! 70 done, 122 to go!” - Male, 41, Travel Author
9 “Cantarle a la vida mi mejor canción!!” - Female, 32, Working, listening, traveling, getting scratches. Sound Design - Music Production- Designer-Painter
10 “On the way to the Stars... Will you join me?” - Male, 25, Part time taxi driver, part time hotel job, part time school minibus driving... heck, looks like I am quite busy now :D
11 “Be close to nature. Estarcercia de naturaleza”- Male, 44, IT, IxD, VoIP etc, etc.
12 “Work goes on” - Male, 33, see me working at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS_T02KNZnc
13 “Enjoy life!”- Female, 33, working and playing, learning through both
14 “Find a place so we can host!”- Several people, 30, Mandy works with kids with special needs and Benny at a solar energy company
15 “Finding my way through and expanding my views/friendships/being to become a Supernova :)”- Female, 26, After graduating in HR Education and Development, I started an internship in Milan...but my soul longs to fly away :)
16 “To keep the stars overhead and the earth beneath my feet”- Several people, 105, Hitch-hiking Vagabond/Environmentalist
17 “Enjoy life, take loads of holidays and be happy”- Several people, 50, Renovating property and other stuff
18 “Let the dreams come true!!!”- Male, 30, Survive
19 “Peace in this life time, unconditional love, playfulness, joy”- Male, 58, art, poetry, energy work, in home pet care, carpentry
“Live the life you look forward to remembering. ... ‘It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye’. ... Saint Exupery”- Female, 61, Multi-tasking to survive in rural areas in tourism, Recycler, Gardener, Teaching: TESOL, currently a personal care worker, etc.

“Discover the northern Scandinavia! + experience the northern lights! + check out all the Swedish "death" metal bands! + learn Swedish and then Norwegian!!!”- Female, 26, Geoscience student!

“Running away with a circus and playing the accordion in as many different countries as possible.”- Male, 22, Barista, amateur musician, hobby photographer. And oh, I broadcast radio at a students' radio station.

“buscando el camino ... If you wake up at a different time in a different place, could you wake up as a different person?”- Female, 38, living, sharing time and interests, exchanging cultures

“Wandering on the edge of time, food blog elsinfin.wordpress.com, always more music, bicycling to waterfalls, falling ever in love with you and your city!”- Male, 28, Chef, Musician, Painter, Lover, Wanderer, Friend

“It's just a jump to the left”- Female, 25, Student/Historian wannabe

“Looking for the meaning of life...but I am really sure, I'll never find "the meaning"- Male,

“Save money to get married then travel with the Mrs”- Male, 24, Part time Superhero and Full time Service adviser

“Get back home without a plane! (though see more of Tunisia first)”— Male, 28, Technically unemployed! Resigned from Job, left London to travel + will go back to study in September

“AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 MONTHS &10 LANGUAGES! Step 14, Months 33&34: Ich bin ein Berliner! For 1 more day, December 22 -> Visit the East Side Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie, Topography des Terror Museum, the Bundestag, play again Tischtennis & Kicker...”- Male, 31, LIVING!!! Enjoying life! (I used to call myself a "professional tourist", I would now say "Professional TRAVELER" :D)

“Life is short, so why does one have to live it only in one culture and language?!” - Male, 38, Civil Servant

“Snowboard in the Alps and learn how to be a better climber.” - Male, 21, Living

“having travelled to a lot of places and lived in a few countries I would like to share my experiences either one to one or with a group”- Male, 71, Retired-Track & Field Coach
Appendix 5 Examples of References

Positive references

1

Surfer-host

I was in Mazar and met him in the hotel and helped me to make it till Kabul and stayed in his office during few days. Thanks to him I felt safety. Thanks Abdul for everything. Now I know the real Afghan hospitality..

Host-Surfer

He is really kind and good person

2

Host-Surfer

Amazing Girl with a strong will for freedom! I never met such a passionated Turkish motor cyclist...

Also very uncomplicated remembering our secret ST. Gallen open Air mission ;)
All the best for you!!!!

Surfer-Host

In the beginning we were planning to go Radolfzel but then due to the coming reply to our last minute request, decided to change our route to Konstanz!;) However, that day we had the bad luck and almost everything went wrong! Called Max maybe ten times even in the middle of the night but every time he said ok guys no problem! He also came to the harbor just to pick us up and it was nearly 3am in the morning!!! So what can I say more!? Great host with full of patience, with the coolest flat ever and with a very friendly brother! ;)

Hey Max it was really nice to meet you and Peter, and also be in Konstanz! But the best part of our stay was being in St. Gallen even in the very last moment!;)
second day to honor my request. It was quite the adventure to get to his place w/ our bikes on the tram and then the bus, Pierre will stop at nothing to make his guests feel supported. I appreciated his good humor and interesting sport; anyone would have a great time stayin w/ this fine chap!!

Host-Surfer

Tamara told me about how she got into travelling around the world for a year and a few of her adventures on the road. She showed interest in my hobbies as well, and listened even when I talked too much :-(

She can definitely carry her own weight, so don't worry about the fact that she's travelling with a bike. I'd host her again.

4

Host-Surfer

It's too bad we didn't get to spend more time with Viktorija and Goda, as I believe would have a lot more to talk about :)

Nice meeting you both and hope to see you again some time!

Surfer-Host

Joakim hosted us for two nights what we were very thankful for. It was nice to get to know them and of course to lose to the best Mariokart players! :D

5

Surfer-Host

Jennifer is the spirit of CouchSurfing personified. I was immediately made to feel at home in her home, her community and her group of friends. I had a blast hanging out with her and her friends and appreciated the insights she gave me on the city. She even has binders full of maps and information for her guests!

An incredible host and an awesome person. I hope I can return the favor in KC sometime.

Host-Surfer

Matt came to explore Denver's neighborhoods and architecture, but it was abnormally rainy so instead I kidnapped him and took him to a Super Diamond concert and out on the town with my friends. He managed to survive, thrive even, in that foreign environment. I look forward to hijacking him again when I'm in his neck of the woods.

6

Surfer-Host

Anri was a huge part of Japan for me, the time we spent together provided any number of amazing cultural insights and access to a hidden side of Tokyo and the
Japanese psyche that is not easily accessible to visitors. We also had a great laugh, plenty of wicked nights out and visited various parts of the country.

Anri’s is warm, caring, wicked and outrageous all at once, you cannot fail to have a laugh with her! I’ve never met anyone quite like her, highly recommended!

**Host-Surfer**

Magnificent lad. I can rely on him 100% with trust. I still remember when we hitchhiked in Japan with a help of the local police man by the highway - it was a great experience. Maybe I see him in Manchester.

7

**Host-Surfer**

Young is a personable individual, quick with a laugh and a compliment. While we speak almost no Korean, Young’s English was plenty good enough for us to coordinate our meeting and for us to learn quite a bit about him and his ambitions. We were very pleased to have as a houseguest and wish him the best.

**Surfer-Host**

This couple is really cool. I surfered 2 days. During the time, so excited. We have dinner together, drinking beer, so funny playing Bowling. If you find host? I recommend steve, bathny. Thanks to you all very much. Take care. See you later.

8

**Host-Surfer**

I’m pleased that Arien and I have become good friends. Although we often disagree, I trust him implicitly. Hosts should take advantage of his vegetarian cooking skills.

**Surfer-Host**

Laura is a fun and sassy girl who loves to mix her culture with others to create a fun ever changing environment.

9

**Surfer-Host**

Thanks to Didier my experience in RdC was a big success. He helped me to volunteering teaching people how to use computers and did his best to make me feel at home. For sure is the best address I can suggest in Lubumbashi. Asante sana amigo.

**Host-Surfer**

rafef is a very open minded person who demonstrates a deep respect for everyone. I am very touched by his ability to interact and immerse himself in African culture, despite the differences. I think everyone should try to meet him for advice or discussions open on all fields. Success to all its projects.
10. **Surfer-Host**

    Julius was a great host! He is a great guy who wants to change the world, especially Kenya. The conversations we had were great, especially about politics. He is truly a nice person and was wonderful to meet!

**Host-Surfer**

    I met John in Christchurch, the same day he flew in from the USA for coffee and chat. He is a charming guy to talk to and has a great tolerance to different cultures and very curious to know what happens elsewhere in the world. I invited him the next day to spend a night with us, and believed me we slept late due to some interesting political discussion we had. I would trust John and wish him all best in his endeavour to serve his country and the world. Best wishes in the rest of your journey, John!

11. **Host-surfer (Neutral)**

    Jon was like a tourist at my house - I only found out he was sick very late because he didn’t say a word. He didn't help around or clean up after using the toilet. He made me dinner once but he didn't wait for me to eat together. I think he needs to improve his social skills in order to share more. CouchSurfing is not a free hostel.

**Surfer-Host**

    I had a great time in Lisbon with Adriana and her family. Her daughters were great company and it was exciting to see the city and beaches with her. Unfortunately I stayed with her at a time when I ran out of money and I fell ill with the flu. Rather than over stay my welcome I left and slept on the streets of Lisbon until I sorted out my finances. I actually spent my last few Euros buying the goods for the meal I made them. Glad to see it was appreciated.

**Negative references**

12. **Surfer-Host**

    My opening conversation with Arup lead to us having a disagreement. I am a big fan of truth being plural – but the way Arup forced his opinion down my throat made me feel extremely uncomfortable. It was ‘his way or the highway’. I was tired from walking around waiting for him for 6 hours and I did not have it in me to make the compromise. I felt as if I had been preached to by a missionary, but one who had never read the bible.

    I felt so uncomfortable after this...and there was so much bad energy from Arup that I excused myself and went and slept on the street, which strangely was more welcoming than
Arups home.

I would question the retaliatory nature of Arups negative reference given that:
1. He continued conversation as I sat in stunned silence
2. He didn’t even get out of his chair as I left.
3. Despite having 5+ days of internet access in his bedroom he left his reference within hours of mine

My first negative reference in 4 years of CouchSurfing.

Host –Surfer

When I spoke to Taylor over the phone he seemed a nice person and I offered him a couch. I also told him it would be best if he turned up on Sunday my day off and if was not possible to give me a call on my mobile so I could tell him where to come. He called me on landing up in Siliguri around noon, and I told him I’m at work and what were his plans till I got back. He said he’d look around town so I said to call me for anything and he should be at my place around 5.30, Where the 6 hours wait comes from beats me. I was home at 6 pm, 1/2 hour late due to traffic. When I got home he wasn’t around and turned up an hour later. Seemed to be put I wasn’t waiting for him. I noticed that he has fixed opinions and feels threatened when they are debated. We were debating education when all of a sudden he gets up and says he has a bad feeling and walks out with his backpack without a word. He should know Hosts work and fit in surfers who need to adjust to that. 1st surfer I met whom I didn’t like.

13
Surfer –Host

I stayed with Antoine for five days, although he did offer for me to stay ten days. I left early because I did not feel comfortable and experienced a lot of uninvited comments and INAPPROPRIATE jokes were made on his behalf. I do not treat my guests like they are children. I left money for a dinner he prepared and charged me for it only the day I left. I was on a budget but would have been happy to contribute to the meal had I been notified at the time.

(No reference from the host)

14
Surfer –Host

I am very disappointed with this first couch surfing experience. The first night was fine as I slept in the bedroom with my friend. Ale welcomed me but spent most of his time playing guitar. He was not unkind, but was just not very sociable. I was not expecting this from his profile and talking to him prior to my visit. However, the next night, I felt uncomfortable
because Ale moved his sleeping mat next to mine in the middle of the night and put his arm around me (and under my many layers of clothes onto my skin) in the morning. I feel that this was inappropriate and I was not expecting anything like that when I signed up for couchsurfing. I am sure he didn't mean any harm, but as a woman traveling alone, I felt very uncomfortable and upset. I would not feel comfortable CouchSurfing on my own again unless I stayed with a female.

Host – Surfer

Coleen came without sleeping bag, Brandon and Cara were sleeping on my double bed and I was playing guitar in my living room where Coleen was sleeping (on the floor) with my sleeping bag open and unfolded like double size cover. When I went beside her I cover myself with half of the sleeping bag and put my closed hand on her upper side and fell asleep (I didn't even spooned her, I was just a tender sleeper :)

All the rest about undressing is history but here just was my part.

No hard feelings anymore, but the negative just goes for lying about something very serious to me.

Also I found her extremely catholic and confused about the terms truthful and catholic, having history shown in many cases that these words are no