

CouchSurfing – a choice for travellers

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<p>Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli tutkia ihmisten ajatuksia, ennakkoluuloja ja kokemuksia CouchSurfing -sosiaaliseen verkostoon liittyen. Siitä käytetään suomenkielistä käsitettä sohvasurffaus. Tarkoituksena oli selvittää minkälaisia ajatuksia kyseinen verkosto herättää ihmisissä, jotka eivät aiemmin olleet siitä kuulleet. Lisäksi tavoitteena oli selvittää sohvasurffaukseen jo tutustuneiden asiakkaiden kokemuksia. Tarkoituksena oli saada sekä ymmärrettävä että kattava kokonaiskuva sohvasurffauksesta.</p> <p>Teoreettinen viitekehys perustui viralliseen CouchSurfing sivustoon, sekä useisiin muihin nettisivuihin, artikkeleihin ja aiheeseen liittyvään kirjallisuuteen.</p> <p>Aineistonkeruu toteutettiin kyselylomakkeen avulla, joka lähetettiin sähköpostitse Facebookin kautta, HAAGA-HELIAN ammattikorkeakoulun opiskelijoille sekä sohvasurffauksen jäsenille. Tutkimusmenetelmänä käytettiin kvantitatiivista tutkimusmenetelmää. Kyselylomakkeen vastausaika oli 28.10-12.11.2011 ja vastauksia tuli yhteensä 407 kappaletta; 52 niiltä, joille CouchSurfing oli uusi käsite ja 355 niiltä, jotka olivat joko aiemmin kuulleet yhteisöstä tai jopa sen jäseniä.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat, että monet ennakkoluulot, joita ihmisillä oli etukäteen, muuttuivat nopeasti. Kaikkien mielipiteet eivät kuitenkaan muuttuneet, vaan jotkut tietysti pitäytyivät omassa kannassaan. Turvallisuusasioihin liittyvät kysymykset osoittautuivat suurimmaksi huolenaiheeksi. Tosin tutustuessaan sivustoon paremmin, he ymmärsivät kuinka monia tapoja on varmistaa turvalliset olosuhteet. Henkilöt, jotka eivät olleet alunperin tunteneet tuotetta osoittivat kiinnostusta sohvasurffausta kohtaan.</p> <p>Johtopäätöksenä voidaan todeta, että tutkimuskysymyksiin saatiin vastaukset. Tulevaisuudessa on erittäin todennäköisesti enemmän kiinnostusta kyseistä verkostoa kohtaan. Parhain lähestymistapa on omien kokemusten jakaminen. Niiden yhdistäminen sivustojen tietoihin antaa parhaimman ja kattavimman ymmärryksen asiasta.</p>	
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<p>The objective of this thesis was to examine the thoughts and prejudices CouchSurfing evoke in people who had not previously heard of CouchSurfing. Additionally, the views expressed by people who had previously heard about the phenomenon were also studied. The aim was also to determine how these prejudices affected the behaviour of people. The purpose was to understand different aspects and give a more comprehensive picture of CouchSurfing through this thesis.</p> <p>The theoretical framework of the thesis was mainly based on the official CouchSurfing web pages but also various other Internet pages, as well as articles and literature on the topic.</p> <p>The study was conducted by means of a questionnaire sent by e-mail, i.e. distributed to people via Facebook, students of HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences and CouchSurfing members. The research methodology employed was quantitative. The questionnaire results were collected during the period of 28.10-12.11.2011. Altogether there were 407 answers; 52 from the people who heard about CouchSurfing for the first time and 355 from individuals who were aware of it or already members.</p> <p>The results indicated that the prejudices some people had beforehand changed even considerably however, of course there were also people who maintained their opinion. Mainly the biggest doubt concerned safety issues and trusting people. However, once people got to know the social network better they realized that there are several safety measures taken. Naturally, using common sense was also required. Various people were not aware of CouchSurfing beforehand, but the questionnaire seemed to evoke the curiosity and interest of some participants.</p> <p>In conclusion, the research questions set in the beginning were answered. There most likely will be more interest towards the project in the future. The most useful approach could be sharing personal experiences with people who showed interest towards CouchSurfing. By combining the information from the web site with shared experiences the knowledge would become more comprehensive.</p>	
<p>Keywords CouchSurfing, hospitality, cultural exchange.</p>	

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1 Introduction

CouchSurfing is an Internet based travel oriented social network where the members offer each other free accommodation, company, a wide range of activities and gatherings all while travelling. You can also ask members for tips when you are visiting their home area. The network is not only meant for young people but to anyone who is interested in taking part. There are people of all ages living all over the world offering their company and opening their home to help likeminded members who enjoy getting to know new cultures and lifestyles in addition to the people of course. Not only can you find single people and couples but there are also families with small children who are active members. A more detailed account of CouchSurfing will be presented in chapter 4.

There are several safety measures to make sure each member can have a safe and positive experience while staying with another CouchSurfer. Verification is a way for the organization to check your name and address in return for a small fee. References can be left after any contact with a member; whether it is after you have hosted, surfed or met a person face-to-face. Vouching someone means that you highly trust that person and consider them as a trustworthy person. It can be done by anyone who has been vouched for three times. More details about safety will be presented in Chapter 5.

Many CouchSurfers like to travel alone because it is easier to meet new people, consequently the reason why travelling alone will be discussed in general. Furthermore, the topic of women who travel by themselves will be touched upon in chapter 3. Definitions mentioned in this thesis will be explained briefly in the beginning of each chapter. Information regarding SWOT can be found in section 10.5.

The objective of this thesis is to improve people's knowledge about CouchSurfing and to reduce prejudices which people might have beforehand. A complete picture of the hospitality exchange project will be given so that anyone who reads the thesis would comprehend the concept. The aim is to share different kinds of experiences people have had and to give a genuine image of the network, presenting both advantages and

disadvantages and simultaneously hoping that the readers would wish to join the network after reading this study. The writer wants answers to the following questions: How do people feel about such concepts?, What do people think is the best part of CouchSurfing?, How have people's opinions changed?, What is the main concern people have about CouchSurfing? and What would people like to change about CouchSurfing? Quantitative data collection method was used as the research method. The research was conducted by means of a questionnaire, and sent to the students of HAAGA-HELIA, the author's Facebook contacts and random members of the CouchSurfing website.

In the thesis, some general information is presented on travelling and reasons to travel are discussed in chapter 2, furthermore, the issue of solitary travel is covered in chapter 3, as mentioned before. Consumer behaviour is also discussed shortly in chapter 3. The information that is provided on CouchSurfing is meant to increase the knowledge both about what is offered and how to participate. Additionally, there is an introduction to the history of the phenomenon as well as its founders. Finally, there are also some statistics included in chapter 6 to get a better view of the overall picture and the members. There is also a short introduction to other similar hospitality networks which you can find in chapter 8.

At this point the reader should be made aware of the fact that I, the author of the thesis, also carry a personal interest towards CouchSurfing. I also want to share my subjective experiences and positive thoughts and how my prejudices changed as I finally decided to give CouchSurfing a try. It has made such an impact on me and my travelling. I feel so much more confident about travelling alone now that I know there are great members to greet me in the destination.

Two versions of the questionnaire were made to explore the thoughts and feelings CouchSurfing arises; one for respondents who have not heard of CouchSurfing and the other for ones who have heard of it or are already members. The research is presented in further detail in chapter 9 and, finally, the results are discussed in chapter 10.

The main source is the official CouchSurfing web page but also several books and articles will be used for finding information as well as the Internet.

2 Motivation to travel

The definition of travelling is the following: Travelling is getting from one place to another with some kind of transportation. It can be any means of transportation such as a bus, train, boat or an airplane as long as it takes you to your destination. A tourist travels to see the sights and attractions whereas a traveller travels for the sake of travelling. (Travel Notes 2011.) Tourist is defined as a person who travels to another country for a maximum 12 months at a time to see attractions. A tourist travels and stays out of her ordinary surroundings for pleasure. She wants to escape from her routines and stressful everyday life and at the same time is looking forward to experiencing different recreational activities. People tend to be more relaxed and liberated to behave in ways they would not act in their home country. (Patterson 2006, 9-10) Traveller, however, is a person who travels for a certain purpose, for example, business or to get healthcare. Airline crew on a layover is a good example of a traveller. (Page 2009, 260.)

During medieval times only the wealthy or religious would travel. Subsequently, when commercialization increased in the 14th century, people and products travelled more. This made buying or selling products possible and the building process of accommodation was initiated. Only the wealthy had the opportunity to travel for pleasure until the working class were allowed to have a vacation. The motivation to travel can be anything from business to leisure, religion and culture. People have congresses and meetings in other countries. People like to visit their relatives and friends abroad or might travel for health reasons. (Buhalis & Costa 2006a, 192). Other reasons for travelling can be the need for a break from everyday life, going abroad to complete a part of your studies or work, taking part in an event or activity. (Ward 2000, 3.) Travelling will have the biggest influence on hospitality in the future. People need accommodation, food and transportation service in order to survive (Buhalis & Costa 2006a, 192).

The behaviour of people explains their motivations and goals in life. (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg 2006, 90.) Motivations help guide your behaviour in the direction towards your personal goals, and once they have been achieved you will feel satisfied. (Patterson 2006, 23.) Understanding the motivations of people also helps to

understand consumer behaviour and get a better idea of what people want and need. (Robinson, Long, Evans, Sharpley & Swarbrooke 2000, 5, 431.) Many factors have an effect on motivation. You must make yourself challenges and goals that are achievable; otherwise it will put too much pressure on you and in the worst case might end up not being reached. The factors depend on how high the goals are and how they can be accomplished. Motivation can change a lot depending on what you want to accomplish and what kind of life situation you are in. No matter how many factors there are, they are linked together. (Hellsten 2004, 13.)

Your current life situation can affect your future motivation (factors). You set yourself time limits to get things done and the way you see the future and how things turn out will motivate you even more. The final results affect the strength of your motivation, the more you want something the more motivated you get. (Hellsten 2004, 13.) For example if you want to go on a around the world trip you would have to work hard to make the money for travelling. You would set yourself a certain time limit such as one year to save the money for it and knowing that the next year you get to travel would motivate you to work harder.

The process consists of the strength of the motivator, belief in your own abilities, the time limit you have made yourself, and the emotional intelligence. The entirety of the previously mentioned factors decides the success or failure. There are plenty of differences between people, how to motivate yourself, and the importance the results have. However, everyone has hopes and goals which motivate us. (Hellsten 2004, 11-14.)

To reach a goal it takes both physical and mental resources as well as enough motivation. You have to believe in yourself. (Hellsten 2004, 16-17.) According to Reinhard K. Sprenger, in Hellsten's book, success requires willpower, capabilities and competence, as well as the surroundings and the conditions it provides. (Hellsten 2004, 24.) After reaching a goal people make new goals and can also have several goals at the same time. Unfortunately some goals never get accomplished or change considerably along the way. (Robinson et al. 2000, 58.)

Tourist motivators can be, for example, the fact of desiring to travel, being interested in the attractions the destination has to offer, experiencing new things or fulfilling fantasies. Physical factors are refreshment of mind, body and health; cultural factors are wanting to learn and see other cultures; interpersonal factors are wanting to meet people or visit old friends and family and new experiences, and status/prestige factors are wanting personal development while getting attention from others. (Robinson et al. 2000, 5-6.)

It is quite often assumed that people always have one certain kind of holiday type and motivation which can satisfy them. However, people can be part of different groups and move between them. Sometimes people only want to relax and recharge their batteries while the next time they might want to go on an adventure vacation with a full schedule of activities. (Robinson et al. 2000, 27-28.) 'Old tourist' is described as being satisfied with mass-produced packages to basic Mediterranean destinations having everything arranged for them. 'New tourist' is considered a more experienced person aware of environmental issues (Page 2009, 315.) and is seeking selfhood while experiencing different cultures. Those cultures can offer the individual something they consider lacking of their own life. Passive tourists, on the other hand, are not interested in the local people or the cultural attractions. However, 'post tourists' are the kinds of travellers who enjoy having different experiences each time and enjoy the culture and locals as well as the all-inclusive packages. They, unlike the others, enjoy all kinds of tourism. (Robinson et al. 2000, 45, 461.)

A person's nationality has its affects on consumer behaviour. Nationality has an influence in the way a tourist behaves and there are invisible differences between members of different nationalities, such as American, Western Europeans, Japanese and Arab tourists. The differences can be discovered from their choice of destination, participation in activities, expectations and perceptions of service quality. (Buhalis & Costa 2006b, 189-190.)

A homestay accommodation is a form of tourism where a traveller rents a room from a family for a certain period of time. The interaction between the visitor and the family

can vary from little to a lot of time spent together. The reason can be to view the local lifestyle and culture better or to learn the language. The family benefits from it by receiving an agreed amount of money from the visitor as well as a cultural exchange. (Rivers 1998, 492-494.) Homestay is a good option for those who are interested in the comfort of a home while travelling. (One Caribbean 2012.)

The interaction between a host and a guest, in guesthouse, farmhouse and Bed & Breakfast type of accommodation, has a big influence in the guest's satisfaction. A good match of people makes the experience more pleasant and satisfaction guaranteed. A homestay accommodation gives people a chance to see different lifestyles from other cultures as well as an easier opportunity to interact with local people. The experience can be very different from staying in a hotel and could easily be recommended. (Thyne & Laws 2004, 11.) The relationship between a host and a guest is essential highlighting the importance of communication from both participants. The motivations regarding staying in a homestay accommodation seem to be related to educational reasons, as well as economical. Quite often the prices of B&B are much less than a local hotel or motel and also more unique and personalized. The hosts of such accommodation were motivated because of the company of guests, and enjoying meeting new people and creating new ideas. Many hosts also claimed they thought about the guests as guests upon arrival but as friends at the departure. (Thyne & Laws 2004, 13, 21-22.)

Social impacts make communal structure changes while cultural impacts have a more long-term change in the norms and standards of a society. Cultural impacts also depend on the economical, political and social development of the society. (Robinson et al. 2000, 206.) People bring money to the destination they visit improving the local economy while creating more jobs. At the same time the resorts expand and improve the areas with the money they receive from tourists. (Page 2009, 477-478, 481.) The impacts between locals and tourists can create wider understanding towards diversity and increase tolerance, yet, at the same time it can also create more safety issues. Tourism also causes movement from rural areas to cities in hopes of seasonal jobs. (Page 2009, 489-490.)

First accommodation started as being just a necessary place to stay for the night but people are getting more important and it is getting more attention. It is considered as more than a roof over your head. People have several options of places to sleep from a hostel or a guesthouse to a hotel. To many people the accommodation choice depends on the company they travel with as well as the purpose and length of the trip. The destination can also have its impact on the choice, for example, travelling to the Irish countryside would most likely lead to the choice of a guesthouse or a Bed & Breakfast. (Robinson et al. 2000, 431.)

These days students travel more and are brand aware while at the same time their motivations to travel are changing due to globalisation and internationalisation. International experiences, such as studying abroad, are quite often required in the business world, offering a wider range of jobs. (Robinson et al. 2000, 127.) Notably, nowadays when low-budget airlines are so popular it makes it possible for basically anyone to travel. Buying a cheap flight ticket and staying in a hostel or a CouchSurfer saves people a lot of money but also gives the opportunity to see the world and enjoy other cultures. The whole package is a great motivator for travellers who enjoy exploring places and meeting new people for a low cost. CouchSurfing has made travelling possible more often than if you would stay in a hotel during your trip.

Non-profit hospitality like hospitals and schools for example, which also used to include CouchSurfing, are part of the hospitality industry. However, as Buhalis and Costa (2006a, 191-192.) claim “both accommodation and foodservice are provided for people who have little or no choice but to stay or eat away from home”, is a choice the CouchSurfers make. However, the food is not automatically provided, only the accommodation. (Buhalis & Costa 2006a, 194-195).

Buhalis and Costa (2006a, 195-198.) discuss the importance of hospitality in tourism. They argue that also in the future the hospitality action will be seen near airports and other transportation because it makes travelling easier and faster. In addition there are more unusual concepts like themed hotels and guesthouses, ice hotels and haunted

guesthouses for instance. Naturally, both hotels and restaurant will still have a prominent role, however people will be more conscious about environmental responsibility and sustainability. The Internet will be used more often for booking flights, accommodation and other hospitality operations. Since the Internet offers plenty of information and possibilities to buy products and services as well as communicate, it will be widely used for several purposes, in addition to the previously mentioned; feedback and promotion of destinations, to name a few. (Buhalis & Costa 2006b, 66.) Growth in travel and building new hotels will be seen in Asia since people are interested in getting to know that area. There will also be new creations and designs to new emerging lifestyle groups for example boutique hotels and branding will become even more essential. Finally, the importance of crisis management and security will grow due to natural disasters and terrorism. (Buhalis & Costa 2006a, 195-198.)

Page (2009, 5.) claims that low-cost airlines make travelling to many destinations possible making the world an accessible place for cheaper prices. It is an excellent way for budget travellers to visit many countries without having to pay too much. Travellers are however charged for all extras such as food, checking in your luggage and if you want to board before others. They are also very strict about the carry-on sizes and its weight. (Page 2009, 237, 241.) Budget airlines include Ryanair, JetBlue, easyJet and Flybe, to name a few. Through low-cost airlines the amount of travelling has risen creating wider opportunities. In domestic travel flying has become more popular compared to using the trains and busses. (Buhalis 2003, 198.) The increasing use of Internet affects the buying habits of consumers. Nowadays more travel bookings are made via the World Wide Web which also makes travelling easy for CouchSurfers as well as easing the contact between members for information. Low-cost airlines also create new routes providing options of visiting places other than just the main cities while creating a demand for the route in long-term. (Page 2009, 12-13, 231.)

3 Travelling alone

There can be several reasons why someone wants to travel alone. It might be because they prefer travelling by themselves; it makes things easier since you get to do whatever you want whenever you want and do not have to compromise with anyone. Moreover being able to change your plans at any moment gives you the freedom to do it. When someone travels alone it is easier to approach them and get contact. Travelling alone does not immediately mean that the person wants to be alone. Company can be even more welcome than expected. When you do not have a big crowd around you it is easier to make new contacts and become friends with people of other nationalities since the step to approach someone is lower during those times. There is also the option that they do not have anyone to travel with. It might be a result of the travel location, lack of money, timing or any other reason. (Tarkiainen 2001, 22-26.)

When you are travelling alone extra caution is however recommendable. Choosing a host should maybe be a little bit pickier than usually. You may send a message to other solo travellers the member has met with just to inquire about their thoughts and experiences. You can always leave the situation if you feel uncomfortable by sleeping in a hostel instead or, on the other hand, asking guests to leave your home. In case you have a bad experience you should also share your knowledge in the reference you leave. (CouchSurfing 2011q.)

Finally, always have the directions to your host's house so you know how to get there and in case you get lost make sure you do not show it, it can make you look vulnerable and a target. You should also consider how the person's culture might view if you are staying with a member of the opposite sex, thus it is safer to stay with a family or a member of the same gender. (CouchSurfing 2011q.)

Travelling alone might be a scary thought when you really give fear the upper hand. Especially women who travel alone concentrate their fears in safety issues as well as getting assaulted sexually. However mostly the passion for travel is stronger than the fears and will prevent the scariness from taking over. (Tarkiainen 2001, 19.)

A Canadian living in South Africa is amazed of how CouchSurfing has made her feel “more comfortable with the world and visiting foreign countries. It is such a wonderful program and I hope that as it grows people remain to be honest, trustworthy and as friendly as they have been to me.” (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

Historically men used to do most of the travelling while women stayed at home taking care of the children and household. Women would basically only travel to meet with their families and relatives. Nowadays things are very different. Women can travel as part of their work just as much as out of their own interest. Seeing a woman who travels alone is not an unusual sight anymore and it is only getting more common. (Tarkiainen 2001, 11-13.) The dominance of women travellers in the business world is caused by people getting married later, which gives them a longer time to travel for pleasure also. (Page 2009, 538.)

Johanna Tarkiainen has written a book about female travelling habits through their personal experience and according to her research the most common issue to worry about is safety. (Tarkiainen 2001, 19.) Naturally, they want to be prepared for different situations as they leave their home country. Already being aware and prepared beforehand gives a little more comfort for a starter. Tarkiainen emphasizes that when women plan their journey they like to get other people’s opinions and clearly bring up the fact that they are travelling alone and often also mention the location they are heading to. The women who are asking others for advice might feel uncertain about their own decisions and afraid to fulfil their plans but at the same time they appear very brave by having already made the choice of travelling alone. (Tarkiainen 2001, 19.)

Another concern is the behaviour of men and how women should conduct themselves to avoid unwelcomed attention. Women might feel fine during the daytime but when it is dark it can be more likely to feel scared to walk in areas which are not so densely populated. Just a sight of a man on a quiet street can lift your pulse. The media has their share of scaring people by constantly bringing up the worst case scenarios in violence and accidents. Just by watching the news or reading the daily paper can scare

anyone. (Tarkiainen 2001, 23.) The media has so much power in building trust towards tourism destinations; they transmit both the positive and negative events to the public. (Buhalis & Costa 2006a, 67.)

Women might feel that men who whistle or shout comments at them invade their privacy, which can cause some kinds of fears or even affect their will to travel alone because they do not feel comfortable anymore. Of course there are also other factors which affect the fear women might feel such as their age and history. It is natural to be afraid if you have encountered personal negative experiences during your past. (Tarkiainen 2001, 25.)

A 29 year-old Chinese woman was raped during her trip to England. She had been CouchSurfing throughout Europe and had not come across any problems until she CouchSurfed in Leeds. The accused threatened her life and raped her. (Dailymail 2009a.) After the hearings the man was sentenced to 10 years in jail. Peter Collier, the recorder during the case, was horrified about the attack and points out that it was an “abuse of trust of those who sign up to the social networking site to come and stay in your home.” (Dailymail 2009b.)

It is very unfortunate that this happened to the victim and of course it resulted in a bad publicity to the network, however, mostly the experiences go smoothly without any serious problems. Out of over six million experiences the organization has created 99.83% positive encounters. (Time 2011.) And even if the experience is negative it does not mean that something dangerous occurred it might be about a disagreement or a differing opinion. CouchSurfing takes safety measures very seriously. Safety will be discussed in further detail, in chapter 6. According to the prosecutor Simon Phillips, CouchSurfing is a well known network and “there is nothing disreputable about it.” (Dailymail 2009a.) Usually the experiences are positive and without any trouble as “successful exchanges seem to be the rule rather than the exception.” (Matador 2008.)

The women in question in Tarkiainen’s book get all kinds of tips from other women; some believe travelling alone should not be an option at all and many also suggest that

going alone should not be ruled out just because there is nobody to go with. In the end, it is up to the individual to choose what to do. Good tips include familiarizing yourself with the culture and adjusting to it, for instance by wearing unprovoking clothes and nothing too revealing. Not highlighting your feminine characteristics too much, though it is not necessary to exaggerate anything either. In the end it is not up to you if something happens, it is just good to take precautionary measures.

(Tarkiainen 2001, 33.)

The women who gave advice through Internet were very trusting in the countries where they had travelled. According to them it is good to avoid eye contact and going to dark alleys, it is good to dress sensibly and you should always use common sense.

(Tarkiainen 2001, 35.)

Everyone who is planning to travel alone, especially women, are bound to feel nervous and insecure about some matters; safety, new culture and how people behave, to name a few. The first time is always the most nerve-breaking departure, however once you have experienced travelling by yourself for the first time, you get more confident for your future travels. Most people believe the experiences of others and what they have heard will affect their own thoughts about travelling alone and to certain countries or areas. (CouchSurfing 2011v.) If the experiences are mostly negative it will naturally affect their plans as well, however, once you have your own experiences and especially the positive ones will change your mind and change your prejudices. Finally, just because someone has had a bad experience does not mean that everyone will. The people who have had good personal experiences often encourage others to travel alone as well. Positive experiences lead to more confidence which leads to more strength to travel alone. (Tarkiainen 2001, 38-41.)

People who like to travel alone are confident with the idea of being on their own. Naturally, at first it is a scary thought and can affect the choices people make. A female member of CouchSurfing says:

As a solo female traveler, there are some chances just not worth taking, and staying with a complete stranger topped that list. But after a month of couch-hopping my way

through Southern France and Corsica, I now don't think twice about staying alone.
(World Hum 2008.)

Travelling in general requires open-mindedness; you need to adjust to the country's manners and lifestyle. Yet, travelling broadens your mind and makes you more tolerant and accepting to new things, cultures, people and lifestyles. CouchSurfing is a way to ease you into solitary travel. When you already know there is someone nice waiting for you and knows the culture, it will also be easier for you to experience a new country. You might explore the city alone during the daytime but you will still have a local person supporting you in need. (CouchSurfing 2011v.) Lifestyle is defined as an everyday pattern of your life and how you like to spend your time and money and it pinpoints the choices you make. People can have very different and unique lifestyles showing their individuality. Lifestyles can change throughout your life and also changing attitudes shape your current lifestyle. (Solomon et al. 2006, 558-559.)

4 CouchSurfing

In this chapter the concept of CouchSurfing is going to be presented. CouchSurfing (also known as CS among the members) is a web-based network for travellers who want to meet locals at their destination. It is a member driven community where every member makes a profile on the official pages which gives others' information about the person and her/his interests. (CouchSurfing 2011b.) Figure 1. shows a picture of the network's logo. As can be seen it combines both the world and a couch.



Figure 1. The official logo of CouchSurfing. (Poor Travel Blogger 2011.)

The idea of CouchSurfing is to bring people together from all nations of the world to share their culture and thoughts with each other. There are over a million members worldwide so it is very likely to find a likeminded host and a place to stay during your travels. The aim is to connect members throughout the world by offering free accommodation with the bonus of the member's company and tips. (Time 2011.) "There are thousands of amazing and beautiful people living in this busy world. Couchsurfing provides the opportunity to meet with them, share your life with them, understand them and most importantly have fun and laugh with them." says an Englishman. (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

The members are of all ages, there are single people as well as couples and even families. Furthermore, their jobs range from students to any occupation you can think of. According to Wikipedia there are also some famous CouchSurfers such as the singer-songwriter Daniel Bedingfield and Julian Assange. (Wikipedia 2011.) However, when the author tried to search them they were nowhere to be found. Also, it could be that they have some other username since they probably do not want to be requested to host just because of their celeb status.

Some families enjoy the network as well. According to a Belgian couple who has five children CouchSurfing is a great way to show your children about “respect, hospitality, cultural differences and different languages and religions” and they continue: “And yes, they love it!” The whole family has even had a surfing experience in France and really enjoyed it. (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

There are several million members who are located in over 230 countries and territories worldwide. Hosting someone will give you an opportunity to see your home area with new eyes. You can create new friendships even without leaving the comfort of your own home. (CouchSurfing 2011a.) A Philippines native, now living in Manhattan attempts to hosts three nights a week. He and fellow New York CouchSurfers meet on a weekly basis in a meeting downtown enjoying each others’ company as well as visitors’. “It’s a lifestyle and a commitment” he points out. (The New York Times 2007.)

CouchSurfing is a way of saving money; however that should not be the only reason people surf. You should always have some extra cash in case you need to sleep in a hostel. A member advises people to be interested in other people, having a open mind throughout your trip, appetite of meeting new people, being thankful for the things you are offered and remembering to say thank you. Some people consider CouchSurfing as a hobby, however, even having it as a lifestyle is quite common. (Plaza 2009.)

Staying with a local means that your experience will be more authentic and by communicating with locals your understanding of other cultures will improve. In CouchSurfing you can find all kinds of people; from singles to families, students to business men, people living in the city as well as the country side, teenagers to retirees. People of different political views, religious beliefs, and of course lifestyles. The thing they all have in common is the love for travelling and towards people from different countries. (BootsnAll 2009.) An Italian swears by CouchSurfing “Travelling just cannot be the same anymore after you found out about couchsurfing!” (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

CouchSurfing is neither for people who are looking for a date nor for freeloaders. Though there have been cases where members' chemistries have met and some gatherings have even lead to relationships including marriages and babies. Nevertheless, mostly it creates friendships. (The New York Times 2007.) Both sides are aware of the fact that when you are staying with the opposite sex, it is only about friendship and accommodation, not about anything else. (Yle 2012c.)

4.1 History and present

CouchSurfing was established by an American man Casey Fenton. He first thought about the idea in 1999 after a trip to Iceland. He bought a flight ticket from Boston to Iceland where he sent over a thousand e-mails to randomly picked students from the University of Iceland. He then received dozens of e-mails from people who accepted to accommodate him. On the way back to the United States he started developing the CouchSurfing concept. (Entrepreneur 2011.) "I knew it was how I wanted to travel", says Mr. Fenton and adds: "but I didn't know if other people would. I thought, I'll take a chance and see if there are other people like me. And, wow, do they exist." (The New York Times 2007.)

After his return he started looking for independent, trustworthy, hardworking and experienced people who could help him make his ideas reality. Furthermore, he wanted to work with people who shared his passion towards travelling and other cultures. Mr. Fenton then discovered he already knew such people; Daniel Hoffer who had plenty of experience of doing business, Sebastien Le Tuan who could take care of the communications and Leonardo Bassani da Silveira who could design the layout of the web pages. They all gave their personal expertise during the years to make the project become reality and to improve the cause further. (CouchSurfing 2011d.)

Mr. Fenton was the inspirer of CouchSurfing but not until 2005 started working full time for CouchSurfing. He was the creator of the original web pages until 2009 using his own computer programming skills. He also participated in the strategic expertise of each department. Nowadays he concentrates in dealing with the community and aims

towards the CouchSurfing vision while making executive decisions. (CouchSurfing 2011d.)

Daniel Hoffer is the co-founder and started operating as the Chief Executive Officer in autumn 2011. (Entrepreneur 2011.) He also has great knowledge about Internet security thanks to his experiences working for Symantec. Another co-founder Sebastien Le Tuan, a native Frenchman, moved to Silicon Valley and his love for travelling and cultures simply kept growing with CouchSurfing. He takes care of the “high-level vision and mission, making sure things stay on track, and occasionally gets involved in design and research-related projects.” The self-taught Leonardo Bassani da Silveira creates the web pages appearance and shares general advice. (CouchSurfing 2011d.)

The corporation has an office in San Francisco. It started as a non-profit social network in January 2003, however, is nowadays a for-profit organization. It finally became a public site in the beginning of 2004. It is a hospitality service which allows you to register for free. The service is also free of charge, only the verification process obliges a donation, however, it is not mandatory. (International Business Times 2011.)

The network became a for-profit corporation in 2011. It changed to a benefit corporation after being denied tax-exempt. The establishment was also required to use its money for charitable funds. They decided to use their assets for the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation which shows their appreciation towards different cultures. Especially the ones that help children and young people are favoured. The NH Charitable Foundation informed that the money will be spent for schools, non-profit groups and communities. According to one of the co-founders, Daniel Hoffer: “The company has raised \$7.6 million in investor money”, which they use to hire more work staff, improve the website and create new applications. Some CouchSurfers are not satisfied with the changes; however, Hoffer insists that it will improve the network. Due to the extra money they have the chance to “put that money to use in facilitating the life-changing and inspiring experiences for which we are known”, he continues. (Seattle Pi 2011.)

Their goal is not to make money, though they charge \$25 for the verification process, their approach is to serve their mission better as a non-profit corporation. A great part of CouchSurfing is how people connect and share their lives and travel stories. You get to compare yourself with the other members and their experiences. Surfers who continuously stay at other people's houses in a way make the couch their new home. (The New York Times 2007.) The official mission of the organization is to seek to internationally network people and places, spread tolerance, raise collective consciousness, create educational exchanges and facilitate cultural understanding. (Squidoo 2012.)

4.2 Mission

Their aim is to “create inspiring experiences”. Learning about other cultures improves tolerance towards different nationalities and increases knowledge, so making friends from all over the world is a huge benefit. The fun ways people can connect through CouchSurfing give an encouraging reason to explore new cultures and people with all sorts of lifestyles. When you get to experience CouchSurfing personally you can grow as a person. (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

There are three kinds of experiences CouchSurfing can produce; magnetic experiences, growth experiences and inspiring experiences. Magnetic experiences are the most common situations experienced through CouchSurfing. It means that the experiences you undergo keep you drawn in. Furthermore, you have great and fun times with fellow CouchSurfers which encourage you to continue exploring other ways with CouchSurfing; hosting, surfing and attending meetings, for example. Your pleasing connections with CouchSurfers allure you to meet with new people and get their point of views about life and help bond with others as well. (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

According to the CouchSurfing web page “This strong and positive foundation prepares us for more challenging Growth Experiences.” Growth experiences represent the times when you connect with members who are immensely different from you. These moments help you grow, overcome personal fears and become more comfortable around new cultures. Sometimes these kinds of contacts can be challenging con-

sidering you can be quite narrow-minded when it comes to your own ideas. Mostly you like to spend time with people who have similar opinions and interests as you. Conflicts can be caused by differing thoughts and beliefs, misunderstandings or cultural habits for example. Finally, with time and patience you can begin to see these situations as inevitable and realize and accept that people are unique without searching for rights and wrongs in matters. Instead you should try to enjoy all the different people you meet during your life. (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

Inspiring experiences are extremely powerful because they are a combination of both magnetic and growth experiences. These kinds of experiences help “overcome both our inhibitions about exploring and our resistance to differences.” During a fun time with other members you can increase your knowledge and develop as an individual while creating meaningful friendships. Being able to accept people for who they are is important and inspiring experiences support your understanding towards diversity. Furthermore, CouchSurfing aims to create this sort of experiences. All the partakers in the organization have an important role and they have the same objective; to create Inspiring Experiences. Their official Mission is to: “Participate in creating a better world, one couch at a time.” (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

4.3 Vision

The official vision statement of CouchSurfing is “A world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter.” It should make members feel part of a great project where they can help others by offering company, tips or a place to stay. The vision statement is how the CouchSurfing organization would like to see an ideal world in the future. Whether you travel the world or meet fellow members in your hometown you can explore different choices through CouchSurfing. (CouchSurfing 2011y.)

A world where everyone has an equal opportunity to explore their surroundings regardless of their culture, religion, ethnicity, motherland or financial situation would make the world a wonderful place to live. Furthermore, travelling around gives you a chance to explore various cultures and lifestyles as well as people which can help over-

come certain stereotypes and prejudices. It is easy to connect with people who are similar to you but CouchSurfing aims to also get you connected with people who are very different. You might not get in touch with totally different people if CouchSurfing did not give an opportunity to do that. When you share experiences with others you tend to become closer and with different people it can be even more challenging. According to the CouchSurfing web pages “Once we have developed a connection and feel safe and accepted, we can begin to view our differences with understanding and compassion. We can let go of our fears of the unfamiliar and our unconscious expectation that everyone should be just like us.” (CouchSurfing 2011y.)

Through these experiences you can accept more differences in the world and grow to be more respectful of diversity. “Imagine living in a world where we more fully appreciate unfamiliar perspectives and other people are more appreciative of ours. Imagine each of us being valued for our own individuality, for being exactly who we are”, is how CouchSurfing hopes people would see each other. Knowing that you can connect with a diversity of people from several different cultures builds up your confidence about getting along with people and adjusting anywhere you travel. Being able to help others and doing it with simple ways inspires others as well. Experiencing and appreciating diversity can inspire you to preserve it the best you can. “We believe that relationships we build across continents and cultures can create a global community that values diversity and seeks understanding in times of disagreement.” (CouchSurfing 2011y.)

It can be easy to mix up the Mission Statement, Vision Statement and their Strategy, however, they should be kept apart without confusion. The Vision describes how their ideal world would look like in the future. The Mission describes the ways they try to accomplish their Vision, which gives guidelines to the staff and volunteers. The Strategy describes their targets and actions how to carry through. (CouchSurfing 2011y.)

4.4 Profile

In Yle (2012c) it is mentioned that every member must make a profile where they tell about themselves; the things they like to do and how they spend their time. You can tell anything you would like about yourself, your personality, hobbies and interests, travels et cetera. You can load pictures and join different pages on CouchSurfing to get more involved with other people with the same interests. You can add friends who are in CouchSurfing as well and write references about people you have met through CouchSurfing. (Youth Time 2011.)

Everyone has the right to make the rules for their own home and surfers should follow the guidelines in questions. Make sure you discuss the rules with your roommates if you live with someone. And also consider the common rules of silence et cetera which are meant for apartment buildings. If there is a certain time that you want it to be peaceful and quiet it should be mentioned in your profile, especially if it is already early in the evening. Or if it is a rare occasion then remember to mention it to the surfers during your communication via e-mail or once they arrive. CouchSurfers are not mind readers so if there something in particular you expect, say it out loud. (CouchSurfing 2011f.)

You can get subscribed to the news channels that interest you, different sports for example. There are also pages focused on cities, so just find yours or one that you will visit and they will have more information about the area and things that are going on there. You get to decide if you want to get the posted messages to your e-mail. There are also several applications that can be loaded in your profile such as the country counter of the people's nationalities who have stayed at your home. (CouchSurfing 2011g.)

There are some sections which are not visible for others. Furthermore, that is the place where you write your address and other contact information and a contact person's phone details. Those will only be used in case of an emergency or if you decide to get verified. (CouchSurfing 2011i.)

A profile gives the most information about an individual and what people think of her, so it is recommended to spend time writing and completing the profile. Be honest about describing yourself and write detailed information. (Poor Travel Blogger 2011.) Do not be afraid to show your personality, when you show it you will probably be more contacted by similar people or ones who will appreciate it. In case there is something someone must know about you it is good to mention it in your profile such as pets or religion (if you practise it actively and it might affect your surfers). It is likelier to receive and get accepted to surf other's couches if there is plenty of information in your own pages which shows you have taken the time to complete your profile. In need of inspiration you can search other profiles and get good hints what to write in yours. (The Daily Record 2012.)

Update the profile according to your current life situation. Check that the CouchStatus is correct. If you are travelling you most likely will not be accepting surfers so updating your status will inform others not to send your requests. Or if you do not want to host at all then choose "no" and that should give them the hint. Write enough information about your home so the surfers will know if they can come in pairs, whether you prefer women or men or if it does not matter, if they have to share the sleeping area with you, if your home is wheelchair accessible et cetera. Also let surfers know how much time you are able to spend with them or if you prefer more independent surfers. (Couch-Surfing 2011i.)

4.5 Getting started

In figure 2 (later in this chapter) guidelines to CouchSurfing can be seen for a quick overview. The beginning can be difficult since you do not have references or friends, however, once you get started with surfing and positive references, it gets easier and people will accept your requests faster. You can also attend meetings and meet other CouchSurfers that way and get them to write some positive comments about you. You should consider if you already know someone who is a CouchSurfer and can start by writing a comment on your profile. Once you get started it is easier to make contact with other members. (CouchSurfing 2011e.)

You can contact any member you want if you are looking for some tips about their country or personal interest or anything you can think of. CouchSurfing is not only about hosting and surfing, it can offer so much more; you can make new friends, connect with people, explore other cultures and lifestyles as well as learn new things. Subscribe to the groups near you or to the ones that interest you. You can give and get good advice from others in the group pages as well and there you might find answers to questions you might be wondering about or hear about something new that you had no idea about, like something in particular to visit which is only known among the locals. CouchSurfing offers you plenty of different options how to spend your free time. (CouchSurfing 2011g.)

Join different groups, meet people in events, offer nearby travellers to show them the city or take them for a coffee to share about your cultures. The activities mentioned before are some of the ways you can get references and gain experience and positive images about the project before starting to host and surf. (CouchSurfing 2011e.)

A Finnish girl shares her change of life and the challenges she faced as she moved to Spain. She realized she did not have a social circle of friends and decided to join CouchSurfing. She wanted to find out how fast she could make new friends through the network. Years before she could not have imagined meeting strangers on a weekly basis and doing different activities with them such as sharing a sauna with several foreigners. However she quickly learned to get to know many new people and made new friends by contacting some locals. And like she notices it is not just for young people also people on their forties have discovered CouchSurfing as well as business men and families. (Yle 2011.)

She recommends to start your own event when your new to the network. It can be anything you can think of from a night at the pub to a game of basketball. Being interested in the subject is all that matters and getting other members to join. Just make sure that you are aware of the culture and their usual meeting times, when in Rome do as the Romans do. In case you are not too sure about organizing your own event you can also take part in someone else's event. Especially if you are moving to another

country and do not know anyone making a new social network through CouchSurfing is fun and easy because everyone is there for the same reasons; to meet people. Wherever you are check out what the city has to offer; whether it is a weekly meeting or activities arranged by other members. Enjoy and keep yourself busy by getting involved with fellow CouchSurfers. (Yle 2011.)

A member describes her new travelling habits: “Couchsurfing has entirely changed my view on traveling and its value. I could not imagine visiting a new place without checking in with CS groups or members there.” The US citizen adds: “It's something that you never turn back from once you start.” (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

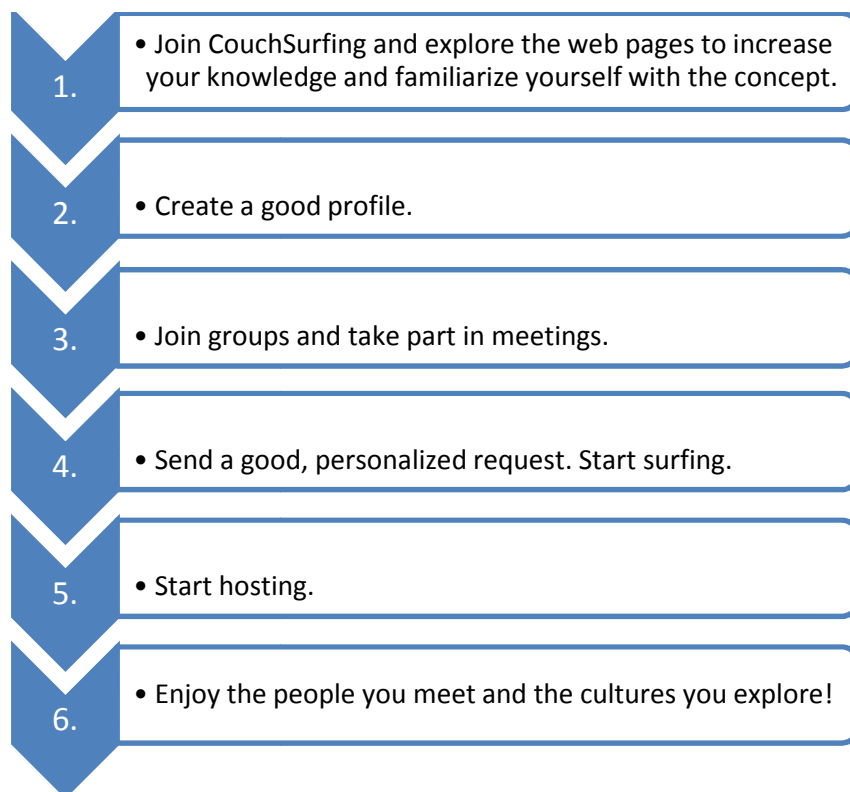


Figure 2. Guidelines to getting started. (CouchSurfing 2011v.)

4.6 How it works, tips for a successful experience

In this section there are tips to a good experience and the guidelines from figure 2 will be explained in further detail. When you join CouchSurfing you can participate in different areas. Later in this chapter you will find out some perspectives and tips for both

hosting (section 4.6.1) and surfing (4.6.2). It is easier to start by joining some of the online groups of your interests and taking part in events.

Through the groups you will find out what is going on in the city and with CouchSurfers in the area. Often they post messages about weekly meetings and parties et cetera. By browsing the categories for groups you can find something that interests you. Joining the group you are interested in for example scuba diving group you can share stories of your experiences in different countries and make new contacts. A good suggestion is also to attend a meeting. There are plenty of different activities that give you a chance to choose the one where you feel comfortable. (CouchSurfing 2011e.)

You can also start your own event, invite other CouchSurfers in your area and get a chance to meet people. Each year there are also New Year's parties arranged in European cities. You can find annual meetings and other gatherings in a search database on the web site. (CouchSurfing 2011e.)

4.6.1 When you are hosting

Remember to read the requests well, and furthermore, pay attention to signs that the members have read your profile. Some people send short and simple requests like "Any chance of crashing at your place?" which quite often can mean that they do not care who hosts them just as long as they get a free place to stay. Would you like to host a person like that? Think about it. When members write a personalized request they show that they have chosen you out of many people on your area. It is your choice who you want to host, and more importantly, do not feel obligated just because someone sent you a request. (CouchSurfing 2011w.)

Be sure you have checked with your roommates or family members that it is ok to host before you accept a request. Talk with them about the guidelines when there are exceptions to your regular rules and makes sure to tell your surfer about them. Talk with your surfer about arrival times and the length of their stay if you cannot host them for the whole period they are asking for. Remember to provide a phone number where they can reach you in need. (CouchSurfing 2011w.)

When the surfer has arrived tell them clearly what they can do and use in your house. To avoid misunderstandings you should let them know whether or not they are allowed to use your computer, and anything you consider important for them to know. (CouchSurfing 2011w.)

Depending on your own schedule it is nice if you make time for your surfers. Take them to see the sights in your city or hiking around the area. Ask about their interests and plan something according to that. Or if there is a spot that tourists do not know about it is a nice gesture to take the surfers there. After your surfer has left write a reference to their profile or send a friend request if you feel like there was a connection between you and the surfer. (CouchSurfing 2011w.)

4.6.2 When you are surfing

When you are looking for a couch to stay you can search with different criteria based on gender, age, exact location, languages they speak, how many they are willing to host at the same time et cetera. (CouchSurfing 2011p.) When you are searching for a host it is important to read through their profile carefully. A profile gives you a sense of the person and reading the profile will give you a lot of information. If you decide to skip the information and straight away send a request you might come across some very uncomfortable situations. To name a few, some people have pets and if you are allergic and not aware of the members' furry friend you are bound to get a really big surprise once you reach your destination. Another quite common thing is to send several members copy-paste messages while trying to find a host, especially if it is last-minute and you cannot wait long to get a reply. In those cases you usually do not spend much time reading their profiles. (CouchSurfing 2011c.) Some people put certain comments on their profiles to make sure you read it through before sending a request and you need to mention it in the request. If they notice that you have not taken the time to get to know their profile you can easily be turned down with your request. So make sure you read the profiles first. (CouchSurfing 2011h.)

The references tell you what other CouchSurfers think of them and what kind of experiences they have had. If there is a negative reference read both sides of the situation and consider the different events that may have led to the reference. In case there are many similar incidents then it might be something to take seriously. It could also be that the individuals just simply did not have the right chemistry or there could have been a clash of culture perhaps. It is good to note the negative references, however, to also use your common sense. Read through them and decide for yourself if it is something that would bother you or if you would give them a chance. It might not be something serious but instead something that did not match between the two people. You get to decide whether to accept their request or to send them one. (CouchSurfing 2011h.)

Pay attention to how people describe themselves and what other surfers think of them. If a member has a well informed and versatile profile then you can see that they have taken the time to fill it and want to give others' a great sense of who they are. Furthermore, it is wise to pick a member that has some mutual interests with you so you can connect better and get along easier. They might have visited a country where you are planning to travel and that can be a common topic for you. Check their photos, they can also teach you something; maybe you have similar ideas or they been to some places you would like to visit. The icons on a profile will give you a quick view of what to expect; if they are able to host, how their friends know them, if they are verified et cetera. (CouchSurfing 2011i.)

When you are writing a request it is recommended not to ask to stay for too long. A couple of days is ideal but do not expect to be allowed to stay for a week. First it is good to ask a host for a few days and maybe stay with several hosts during your travels. Then see how you get along and inquire politely if your host would be able to host you for a few extra days. Furthermore, it is never preferred to overstay your welcome so do not push your luck too much, in conclusion, it is better to have different places to stay or part of the time stay in a hotel/hostel. (CouchSurfing 2011v.) It also depends on the person how long beforehand they would prefer to get a request. In general it is good not to send it too much in advance, several months for example; it might be hard for

the person to know what their schedule is like during that time over a month in advance. However, if there is a big event or festival going on in the city it makes surfing harder. Many people like to make sure they have a place to stay and “reserve” their couch in time. During those days even hotels can be fully booked so it is advisable to check the Internet for big events while you are travelling. Usually hosts prefer getting requests approximately a week before arrival and even for you that is a good time because if their couch is not available you will still have time to ask other locals. (CouchSurfing 2011c.)

Sometimes people do not have exact plans as they leave so they might have to leave their requests to the last minute as they figure out their route. It can be hard to find a place the day before so there is always the option of leaving a message on the city’s “emergency couch request” group. (Poor Travel Blogger 2011.) You need to mention when you need the couch, for how long and how many travellers there are and by leaving your mobile phone number you where can be reached faster. Some people are more flexible than others, however, quite often a helping hand can be found as the CouchSurfers are a tight community of travellers and want to help according to their best abilities. (CouchSurfing 2011c.)

Put effort in the request you send and make it personalized. It does not have to be a novel, however, you should describe yourself with a few sentences, write a comment which tells that you have read through their profile or comment about a shared interest that you both have and remember to be polite. Members that are new to CouchSurfing might be less busy with hosting so consider sending them a request too if it starts looking bad with experienced members. Do not overlook them just because they are new. (CouchSurfing 2011c.)

Make sure that you can adjust to your host’s timetable; some people prefer the CouchSurfers to hit the city while they are away from home, others give the surfers a key so they can come and go as they wish. The surfer is the one who has to adjust to the host’s life so make sure you read the profile if there are some notes about their work schedule et cetera. Do not disturb your host’s daily routines, let them live their

life normally and spend some of their free time with you. That way you can also enjoy the everyday life of your host. Do not pick a host whose schedule will conflict your daily plans, such as partying late which might lead to negative experiences or an uncomfortable conversation with your host. CouchSurfing is supposed to make your travels even more memorable and you can easily contribute by picking the right host for you. (Pikkanen 2011.)

Make sure you are aware whether or not you need to bring your own sheets/ sleeping bag and towels. Do not expect anything in advance, if there is no notification on their profile then ask. Also agree on a meeting place or get the full address if you are meeting at their home. Ask about the public transportation and directions or look up the location so you know where you are going to. (CouchSurfing 2011v.) It is also a good idea to inform them about your arrival time so they know when to expect you. If your arrival is very late or early make sure the time is ok with your host. And have your host's phone number with you at all times in case of confusion or change of plans. (Pikkanen 2011.)

If you prefer staying overnight in a hotel you can just benefit from a local showing you attractions or meeting over coffee to get tips and get to know the local culture. Some older people prefer this as a way of using CouchSurfing. They get to know new people and cultures, however, would rather stay out of other people's way. An electrical engineer living in Toronto used to try finding interlocutors in bars with bad results when he travelled, however, nowadays he can have a better, deeper conversation with a member from CouchSurfing. (The New York Times 2007.) This is also a way to participate in CouchSurfing. You can invite a member for coffee and a chat anywhere you travel and start a meaningful friendship at the same time. The network is meant to strengthen friendships and also broaden your horizons while creating new contacts and seeing the world. (Poor Travel Blogger 2011.)

You may be treated to some homemade dishes, or other treats your host might offer to you, however, do not make the mistake of expecting anything other than a free couch and some time with your host. A nice souvenir from your own country or a small

present is a good way to thank your host for their friendliness to host you. You can cook them a meal or take them out for drinks or anything you would like but what ever it is do make them feel appreciated for what they have done for you. (CouchSurfing 2011v.) Being respectful towards your host is necessary. They have been kind enough to open their home to you so treat them well. (BootsnAll 2009.) Never bring outsiders to your host's home. Behave well and clean after yourself during your stay. Small gestures can also be highly appreciated such as doing the dishes. Common sense, good manners, open mind and flexible attitude are the main keys to a succesful CouchSurfing experience. (CouchSurfing 2011v.)

One of the ambassadors for CouchSurfing, points out that CouchSurfing is supposed to create new friendships, increase your knowledge of other cultures, and getting a free place to stay is just an added bonus. By taking interest in your host and the community you are showing that you care, and are not just after free accommodation. Areas which are popular travelling destinations may be full quite often so it is recommended to get used to rejection. It is common to get rejected during high season. By a properly filled profile you can increase your potential as a surfer in addition to a good, personalized request. If you want to be a good surfer then it is suggested to return the favor to your host. For example buying your host dinner or cooking a meal are nice ways to thank them for their generosity. There are many ways to show your appreciation. The least you can do is to clean up after yourself. (CNN GO, 2011.)

Once you find a host, make sure you inform the other members that you have sent a request to, not to expect you to show up in case several people accept your request. Furthermore, if your plans change for some reason, you need to inform your host right away. Follow up each time someone replies to your request. In case you send someone a request but they are not available for hosting you, it is still polite to thank them for replying. (CouchSurfing 2011c.)

Before you reach your destination make sure you and your host have the same thoughts and expectations on time spent together; if you want to spend a lot of time with your host find one that can fulfill your needs. Be flexible at all times and prepared

to change your plans according to your host, if there is a case where your host needs to cancel last-minute. It is good to have a map of the city and contact information of a hostel in case you need to stay there instead. CouchSurfing can create unexpected situations sometimes so having a back up plan and being prepared for all kinds of situations is advisable for your own comfort and safety. (CouchSurfing 2011v.)

After your stay remember to leave a reference about your experiences for others to read. If your experience was a great one it might also be nice to thank them with a postcard afterwards. (CouchSurfing 2011g.)

5 Safety while travelling with CouchSurfing

In this chapter the safety measures of CouchSurfing are going to be presented. Buhalis and Costa (2006b, 19-20, 25.) find that if people feel threatened or even unsafe they tend to alter their travel plans to an area where they feel safer. Crises and disasters can make people feel unsafe and can have an effect on changing or postponing plans. These can be divided to incidents caused by either people or the nature.

Media quite often magnifies the situation making it worse. Trust is a key factor and media has huge power over the image that people get of a destination. (Buhalis & Costa 2006b, 26, 67). People rather travel to areas where they feel safe and comfortable. Those factors have a huge impact on the destinations people choose. (Patterson 2006, 44.)

The thought of sharing a profile with millions of people around the world might be scary, however, there are some ways to make you feel safer. It is always a good idea to inform a friend or family member when you are staying with a CouchSurfer. It is not ideal to leave without telling someone where you are going, especially if you are travelling alone. Another good tip is to keep them up-to-date of your plans by sms or e-mail. Even a short sms to let them know you are doing well prevents them from worrying about your whereabouts. (CouchSurfing 2011k.)

The nervousness of the first encounter with a host or a surfer is probably nailbiting. Your thoughts might be surrounded around ideas like getting assaulted or killed, especially since it is a stranger you have met through the Internet. The risk always exists so the question is, is it worth taking the risk? Might be appealing to get a place to stay for free but at what cost? There are many ways which improve safety in the community: leaving references, getting verified and vouching. Using common sense is naturally the best safety measure, furthermore, do not give your contact information until you feel comfortable with the person. (Matador 2008.)

CouchSurfing is a tight community where travellers are important and everyone wants to feel safe and make others feel that way as well. It is the good in people that started the project in the first place and also makes it work. People do not want to jeopardize it. If a person has several negative references, you probably do not want to host them. (Poor Travel Blogger 2011.) “Because safety is of the utmost concern, our systems provide tools and tips to make the interaction a success and explain some practicalities we should attend to when embarking on an adventure.” (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

You do not have to worry about your address, it will not be shown on your profile page. When you accept a couch request, you choose whether you will give your address or if you would rather meet them and then show where you live. Also it is up to you if you want to give them the key or agree on a time to meet before heading back home. You are not obliged to let them stay at your home when you are not there, just need to inform CouchSurfers when you will be home or at what time you can meet them. (CouchSurfing 2011t.)

By writing a reference or vouching for someone you get a chance to affect the reputation of people, and give a better idea of the person in question. It is also necessary for people to be honest in their profiles and not write false information. That way you can also prevent from misunderstandings and other unnecessary conflicts. By being honest in your profile, and about yourself, you can meet likeminded people from all over the world. If you search for members that have common friends with you in CouchSurfing or other social networks it also helps to minimize any risks. (CouchSurfing 2011o.)

Usually staying with a local is the greatest way to see the area. According to a CouchSurfing member she got a tour of Bucharest by her host. In turn another member got to experience a drive around the whole island of Madeira with her host. So often the hosts are willing to do nice things for the surfers. The reasons for hosting cannot always be explained; some people want to share their knowledge, others are interested in inter-cultural exchange and some just simply like to help. There are a

minority of people who take advantage of the kindness of people, however, mainly the project is successful and it shows good will and trust. (Matador 2008.)

5.1 Leaving a Reference

References are a safety feature which everyone can use and write. They are feedback that you write after an experience with another member. You can write a reference based on meeting them in person or even if you have only had an online conversation with them. References appear on a members profile page both for the one it is meant for as well as the one who leaves it. A reference is not mandatory, however, it is recommended. (CouchSurfing 2011n.)

You can also get a pretty good impression of a person by the references people leave on their profile. By leaving a reference people share their knowledge and experiences. Every member has a chance to leave a comment of another member. Usually it is done after being hosted by them, however, also after meeting someone in a get together or any kind of contact with that person. If someone gets a negative reference then it can be a factor for others not to host that person nor to send them a request. No one wants to get a bad review from others, so people tend to behave well and treat others with respect. (CouchSurfing 2011n.) CouchSurfing has over 8,5 million member references which shows great commitment to the network. (CouchSurfing 2011k.)

There are three kinds of references; positive, neutral and negative. You should always choose the one that matches your experience the most. Even a negative reference might not tell that the person in question is a bad CouchSurfer, it is just information about a situation that might have been negative. It is up to the reader to evaluate the information and decide the importance of the reference. Before writing a negative reference it is recommended to talk to the person first. However, if you are not face-to-face with them any longer contact them via e-mail or phone. It might only be a misunderstanding that left you with a negative image. By hearing the other person you can see their point of view, communicate through the situation and solve the problem. Be open to the idea that cultures and ideologies are different and might sometimes cause disagreements. If the situation cannot be solved then at least be clear and mature

about the comment that you leave. The reference will also reflect on you, so do not leave a reference if you are angry. Sleep on it and when you can think clearly consider what to write. (CouchSurfing 2011n.)

In time you might get to know someone better and would like to update your thoughts on them. It is possible by editing the reference, it will then state update on the reference. You also have an option to change your reference type or even delete the reference you have written. This is not recommended though since reviews are meant to inform other members. (CouchSurfing 2011n.)

5.2 Verifying people

The verification process works really well. When people are willing to pay \$ 25.00 the CouchSurfing representatives will then send a postcard to the member's home address. It takes a couple of weeks for you to receive it. There is a code on the postcard, which you insert in the CouchSurfing web pages and get verified. It is a way for them to verify, that you are who you say you are and live in that particular address. (Wikipedia 2011.) When you are a verified member other CouchSurfers feel even more comfortable coming to your place. It shows other members that you are a true CouchSurfer, willing to donate and makes others more willing to host you. If you move, you just need to change your address and they will send you a new card. You only have to pay the \$ 25 once no matter how often you move. (CouchSurfing 2011x.)

Thanks to the verified members, there are no advertisement on the web pages and the project can run for free. It also makes CouchSurfing a safer place by strengthening the trust network. When you contribute to the network by paying \$ 25, you support the project and help make CouchSurfing safer. They then check that your name and address matches with the information you have provided when you first registered. And once you are verified you will have a verification icon on your profile showing others that you are an active member. You will also get special privileges, such as being able to mark your couch available for last-minute surfers. (CouchSurfing 2011x.)

Once you are verified you cannot change it. Not that it is a bad thing, of course. While writing about verification, the author noticed that even reading about it is not possible anymore. The writer is a verified member and when she tried to click on the verification page it automatically says that “You’re already a verified member! You don’t need to enter any more information...”, so she had to ask a non-verified member to send her the official information in order to write more about it.

5.3 Vouching

Cautiousness and common sense is necessary each time while surfing or hosting. Vouching is a way for a member to say they highly trust you. The vouching system helps members promote safety among the network. It is a way to recognize the members, who are active and trustworthy in other member’s eyes. (CouchSurfing 2011z.)

Getting vouched for is an honor, because it declares how extremely much the voucher trusts you. They must know each other well enough in person and you should only vouch for the people that they sincerely believe to be trustworthy. Nobody can vouch immediately, a member needs three people to vouch for them, before getting the chance to vouch for others. (CouchSurfing 2011z.)

5.4 Ambassadors

Ambassadors are active members in the community who also actively take part in supporting CouchSurfing. In addition to surfing and constantly hosting people they are the members who volunteer, keep things personal and keep the community tight. For starters they welcome the new members and inform them about the network. Ambassadors create different meetings and organize the events. They can advise visitors about places to visit and what to do in town and they also share answers in the FAQ (frequently asked questions) section. The location pages, where there are lots of travel tips about the area, are written by the ambassadors. (CouchSurfing 2011u.)

6 Statistics about CouchSurfing

In this chapter there are statistics about some of the basic information of CouchSurfing. All the information for the figures is gathered from the official CouchSurfing pages (CouchSurfing 2011r.) and the statistics were updated on 07.12.2011.

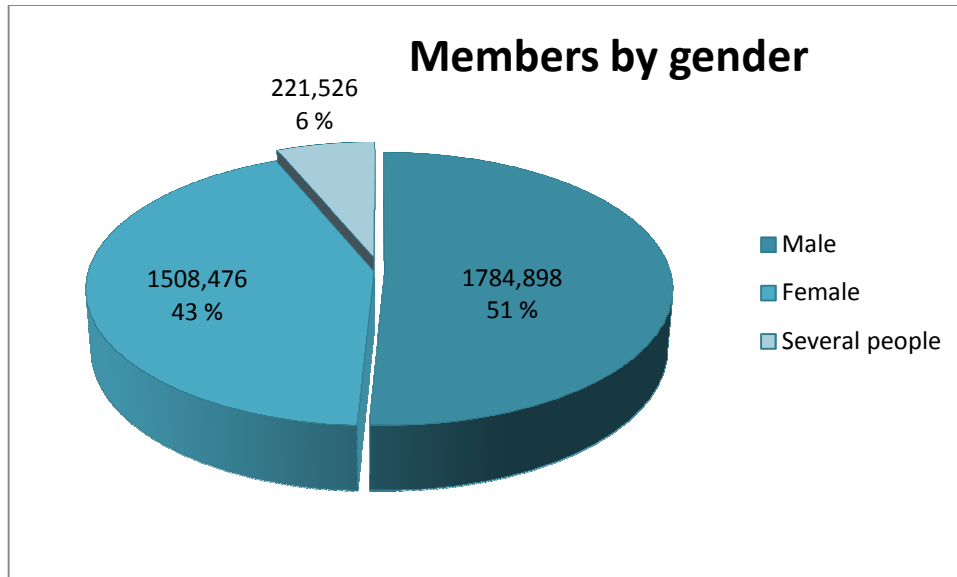


Figure 3. Members by gender.

Most members are male with 51% of all CouchSurfers. Nevertheless there are over 1,5 million females making it very popular among both genders. Over 220,000 members are part of a couple or a family which is rather common. Often couples have a shared member account and they also travel together.

CouchSurfing is the largest of the hospitality exchange organizations with altogether over 3,5 million members as seen in figure 3 whereas Hospitality Club only has a little over 300,000 members (Hospitality Club 2011a.) CouchSurfing has listed over 216,000 vouched users, almost 285,000 verified members, over 2,000 ambassadors and over 40,000 groups. Whereas in Finland there are 22,155 CouchSurfing members making it the 33rd country on the list of nations and Helsinki 60th on the city list with 7,849 surfers.

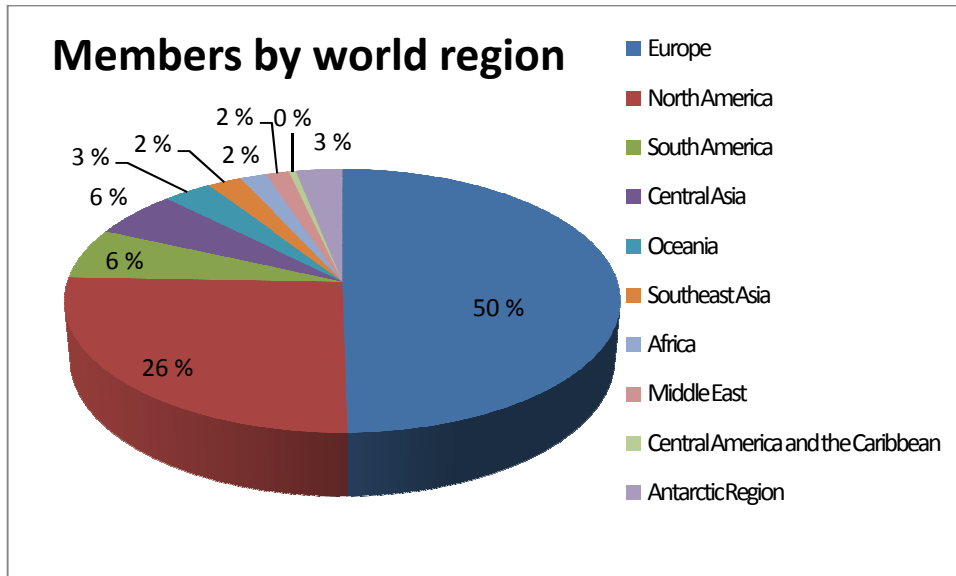


Figure 4. Member by continents.

As seen in figure 4 half of the CouchSurfing members are from Europe with 1 808,183 members. It could be explained by the huge population, being the 3rd largest continent in the world by its number of residents, with over 734 million inhabitants. (U.S. Census Bureau 2011.) Also the fact that it is a continent of developed countries makes a difference. North America comes second with 26% of members which is not surprising, considering it is the country where CouchSurfing was founded. The least amount of members are located in the Antarctic Region with 113 members.

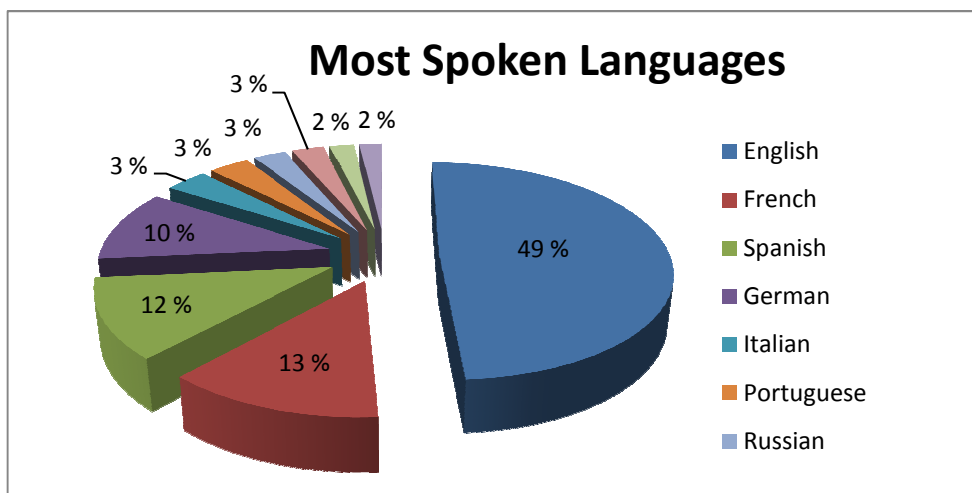


Figure 5. Most spoken languages.

The most spoken language among the members is English with 49%. English is spoken as a first language by over 300 million inhabitants in the world, which makes it

the 3rd most spoken language in the world barely after Spanish. (One World – Nations Online 2011.) French and Spanish were spoken by almost the same amount around 13% explaining that the three main member continents Europe, North America and South America (see figure 4) have plenty of Spanish and French speakers. As seen from figure 5, German is spoken by 10%.

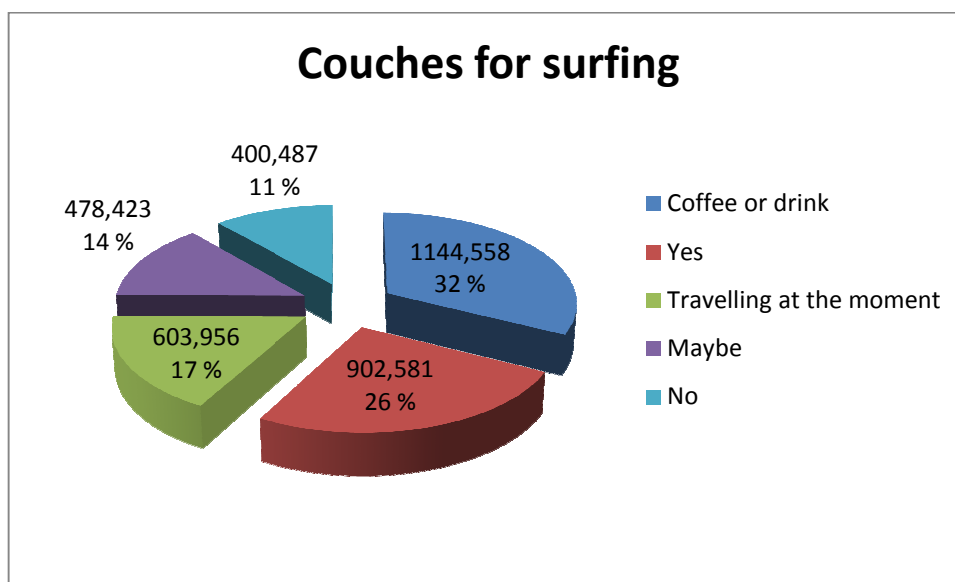


Figure 6. Couches for surfing.

In the beginning of December, 32% of members were available for meeting fellow members for coffee, chat and some activities. At the time being it was the most popular activity through CouchSurfing. Second came availability of a couch with 26%, meaning that a lot of hosts were available. People who were travelling consisted of 17% which naturally means it would be a waste of time sending them a request.

Some people preferred the option “maybe” with 14%, giving them a broader range of declining a request if needed as seen in figure 6. Only 11% did not have anything to offer to travellers at this time. December can be a hectic time since Christmas is getting closer, students have exams before the holidays and everything needs to be organized. Therefore there can be various reasons for only wanting to meet surfers if time permits it, however, not accepting to host them.

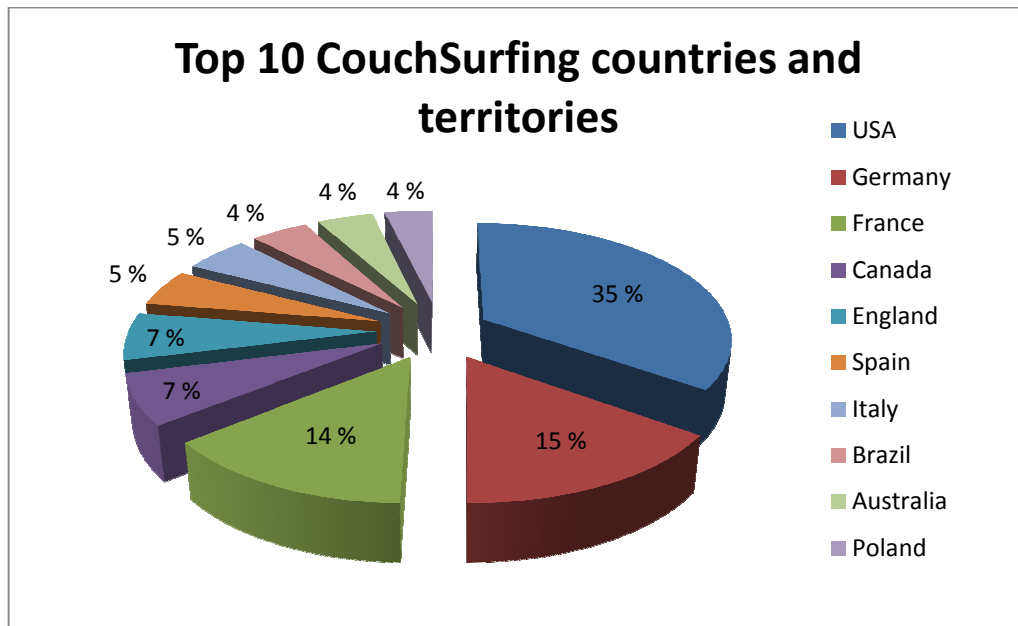


Figure 7. Top countries to surf.

Figure 7 shows that the United States of America is the most popular destination for surfing by 35%, which can also be seen from figure 8, with New York being the first choice by 18%. The United States have a lot of attractions both natural wonders and human built structures which seem to interest CouchSurfers. However, it could also be that Americans like to travel within their own country. Germany can offer plenty of castles, the Bavarian Alps, plenty of interesting cities with history and culture, vineyards, huge fairs like the Oktoberfest and a great deal more. (World Travel Guide 2011.) France is another very popular country to visit for its known areas such as Paris with plenty of attractions, the Cotê d'Azur, The Loire Valley et cetera. There are also several vineyards, fortresses and castles in addition to wonders of the nature. (Destination 360 2011.) So no wonder it is ranked as the third most visited country with 14% of members.

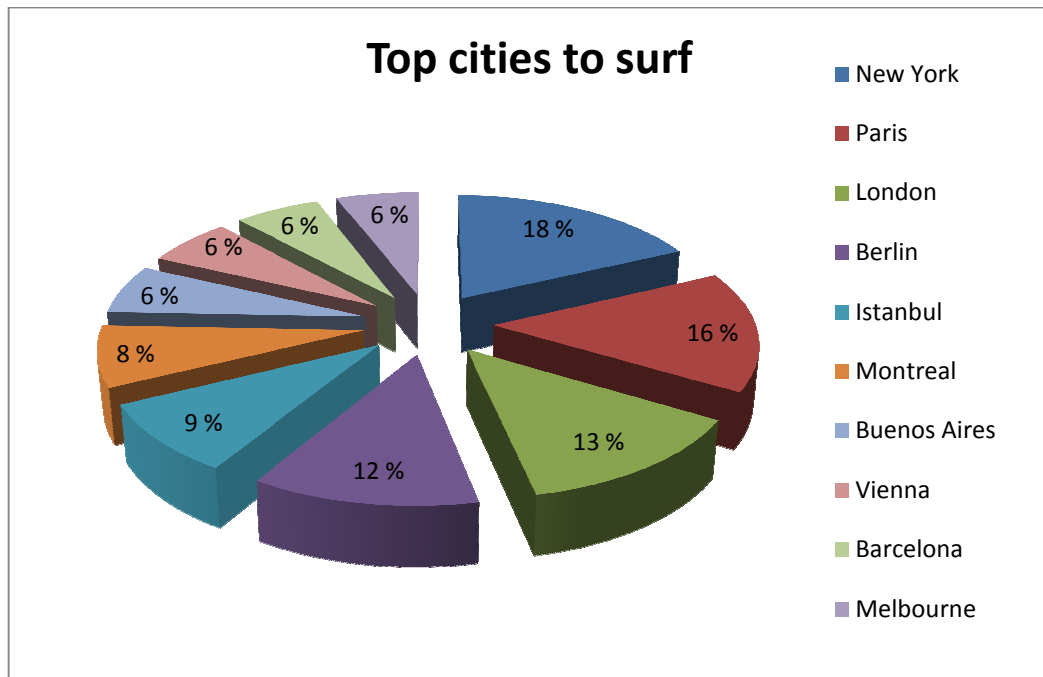


Figure 8. Top cities to surf.

New York is the number one destination in the world for CouchSurfers as seen from figure 8. That can be explained by the excitement and 24/7 life it has to offer. It is number six in the top10 cities of the United States according to the readers of Conde Nast. (Condé Nast Traveller 2011.) Paris came second with 16%, it is an all-time favourite city for romantics.

According to Business Insider New York, London and Paris are the top three cities to visit in the world and they also had Berlin, Istanbul and Buenos Aires listed on their Top 40 cities on Earth. (Business Insider 2011.)

The top cities to visit in 2011 were Montreal (on place 26), Istanbul (24), Berlin (15), Melbourne (8), Paris (7), London (5), New York (4), Buenos Aires (2), Barcelona (1) (Aol Travel 2011.) As seen from the figure 8, also CouchSurfers preferred visiting these destinations. Only Vienna was missing from the list. Also New York, Paris, London and Barcelona are part of the top 10 fashion cities of the world. (Reuters 2011.)

7 Experiences

7.1 From a hotel to a couch?

Still not convinced about CouchSurfing? The change from staying in a hotel to crashing on somebody's couch can sound pretty drastic so you might want to start by meeting with some members while you are travelling. After you realize what a wonderful concept it is you might become inspired to try surfing or hosting as well, or maybe it is not your cup of tea. Either way, the author suggests you try it and see for yourself. You just might be so into it that you get carried away, and addicted like so many members. Being a CouchSurfer does not mean that you are forced to host someone, instead you are still entitled to participate in any meeting or activity you want. In this chapter a variety of different CouchSurfing experiences will be described in order to get a better outlook of the concept as well as share individual's thoughts about prejudice.

People who have a passion for travelling tend to spend a lot, if not the most, of their money on visiting places. One individual, who is passionate for travelling, takes unpaid vacations to travel the globe and enjoys spending several months abroad at a time. He is also a member of CouchSurfing and considers CouchSurfing a better option for travelling rather than buying a package trip. He emphasizes that you get a completely different perspective of the destination when you meet the locals, instead of spending your time at the hotel. When you plan your own trip you meet more people in different circumstances. In addition to surfing he also enjoys hosting people in his home country. (Yle 2012a.)

Another member constantly keeps getting asked how it is possible for her to afford non-stop travelling. Her answer is always the same; CouchSurfing. In addition she does not own a house and has sold most of her belongings so she can travel light. She said: "While travelling I mostly had to worry about transport, lodging, and food." She liked that kind of living so she decided to get rid of most of her things. She first lived out of a backpack while travelling and spending a maximum of 2 000 US dollars. Then she started CouchSurfing more and saved even more money. Occasionally she would stay at a nice and fancy hotel but mostly enjoyed staying with members of CouchSurfing or

her foreign friends. The months she would actually pay for accommodation, cost approximately US \$600 for a month. She says: “Many people's first assumption is that traveling for an extended period of time must be very expensive. But this is just not so unless the words 'budget' or 'cheap' are not part of your vocabulary.” However, she considers the most costly expense to be transportation, and even that can be quite cheap at times with flexibility and especially if low-cost airlines are being used. Finally, she encourages people to travel:

So, don't let anyone scare you. Long term travel is totally doable and affordable. The fact that it cost me less to travel than to stay at home is a testament to that. And whatever savings I did spend, I certainly don't miss at all. (Huffington Post 2011b.)

7.2 Prejudices

Attitude is a way of seeing things; it is a lasting opinion or judgement towards another person, object or an issue. People can have the same attitudes towards objects for different reasons. (Solomon et al. 2006, 138-139.) Prejudice means assuming or judging a person or a thing usually it regards race, disability, religion or sexual orientation. Having prejudices can originate from many things; you might have had a bad experience in the past or some incident has made you have doubts about certain things. Prejudices can be revised by a change of attitude or experiencing positive moments while around the object of your prejudice. (Psychology 2011.)

People can easily have prejudice towards CouchSurfing when they do not have enough information about it. It is easier to judge the whole network rather than giving it a chance by trying. Especially safety issues cause prejudice among people. A Swedish member, praises CouchSurfing for changing some of the prejudices she had beforehand:

The most wonderful thing about CouchSurfing is the fact that CouchSurfing totally challenges all your prejudices! I have found friends through CouchSurfing that I would never have had the chance to meet otherwise, and although we're very different our friendship bridges those differences. (CouchSurfing 2011m.)

As she realized opinions can change, you just need to give them a chance. While another member admits that she had huge assumptions about Moldovan people. Her prejudices turned out to be ridiculous and the people were wonderful and fashionable. She also realized that the more you meet people, the less assumptions you have in the end. (Yle 2012c.)

A guy from the United States was sceptic when he first heard of CouchSurfing. He did not try the network until almost half a year later, however, when he did he was positively surprised. Nowadays he has hosted over a hundred CouchSurfers and is an active member. (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

A solo traveller claims: “Generally, most CouchSurfers seem to be seeking the same thing: to break down cultural barriers and spread an impassioned desire to know more about this vast world we all share.” (World Hum 2008.) While an Englishman considers CouchSurfing of being a “community spirited network”. He says:

I feel that it enriches the lives of everybody that uses it. By casting aside our stereotypes, our inhibitions and our prejudices we are all able to live in harmony, experience the world outside of our own box and make friendships worldwide. Life will never be the same, it'll be interesting, full of new experiences and friendship. (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

Another member admits that he was not too curious about the project at first: “Frankly, I approached CS with some scepticism.” However he decided to give it a chance and then continues “It turned out to be one of the most positive travel experiences I've had.” Mostly he enjoyed meeting people who according to him were “gracious, helpful, knowledgeable, and went out of their way to make my travel enjoyable and made me feel at home, even though hours before they had been a stranger.” He got to experience activities he might have not done without his hosts. In the future he plans to both surf and host and looks forward to making more long-lasting friends. (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

So in the end the people who had doubts about CouchSurfing at first, gained a lot of positive feelings, once they took the risk and gave it a chance. The author believes that majority of the people who join will be happy about the decision and experience wonderful moments with fellow CouchSurfers while exploring places they would not have known about without some useful tips from the locals.

7.3 Personal experiences

The author first heard about CouchSurfing in 2007. She thought the whole concept was absolutely insane; just the thought of letting someone in your home or spending the night with a complete stranger. “No, that’s never going to happen!” were her first thoughts. The author had never travelled alone, except by measures of transportation, and it was a new idea to her.

However, a few years later the writer was studying in France and decided to spend a weekend in Paris to see the sights. The hotels and hostels were very expensive, far too much for her budget so she thought about CouchSurfing and gave it a try. The author created a profile and tried to fill it the best she could with plenty of information. A French guy promised to host her for the weekend and she was happy to find a host so easily. Unfortunately he had to cancel at the last-minute. At first the writer was quite panicked because it was the night before her departure. She then had to post a message on the emergency couch request Paris group. It did not even take 10 minutes for her to get a reply and accepted to stay in two different places. The author checked both profiles to see what kind of people they were and then accepted the first place.

Her host was still working as she arrived in Paris. The writer was very nervous as it was her first experience and she was alone. It took some time to find his place, however, everything turned out great. Her host was a bit older and had plenty of experiences and travel stories to tell. He was a very genuine and polite host. He took the writer to a really nice café-restaurant which she would never have found on her own. He also gave her his bedroom to sleep in and slept on a mattress in the kitchen. That is how kind the members can be towards people they do not even know beforehand. During the

days the author explored the city and in the evenings we would have chats and visit a few nearby places.

After that experience travelling alone was not a problem for her anymore. Personally the author would recommend travelling with someone if it is your first time abroad. It gives you more confidence to explore new places when you first get used to the idea that you are in another country where they might not speak your language, especially if your mother tongue is not English. Finally, once you are a confident traveller it is easier to take the step to head off by yourself, however, you should never stop being careful. Some people make the mistake of being careless when they are abroad and because of it might get into perilous situations. Always take good care of your belongings as well as yourself. It is good to appear as a confident traveller even if you feel a bit cautious at times.

In the past few years, the writer has had plenty of wonderful encounters through CouchSurfing. She surfed plenty of places during that first year and also met some great people who showed her their favourite activities and a tour around the city. During the author's 2,5 years as a member she has surfed in France, England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Iceland, the USA, Canada, the Bahamas and the Caribbean. It has been a blast and made her more confident about travelling on her own. She recently started hosting and has had guests from Brazil, Germany, Australia, Latvia, Switzerland, Romania, Italy, Czech Republic, Poland and Turkey. The people have been wonderful, polite and thoughtful and not once has she had any doubts about any of them.

The author has had an amazing time ever since she joined CouchSurfing. In addition to surfing and hosting she has been on daytrips with other CouchSurfers, joined in road trips several times, participated in a meeting in New York, been on a scuba diving trip in Iceland, met surfers over coffee to share some information about Finland and much more. She has not yet taken part in any weekly meetings in Helsinki, however, is planning to do that in the future.

The writer has learned a lot about other lifestyles and cultures and feels like she is even more open minded now. She certainly has more trust in people though she always uses common sense when meeting another member. The author's opinion about the CouchSurfing project is that it is absolutely amazing, though she had doubts and prejudices at first, she is glad she took the risk and joined this wonderful world of genuine people. The writer has met some really great people, and has only experienced good and exciting moments with other CouchSurfers. She has been to places she did not even know existed and that is thanks to the hosts and people she has met along the way. The author has also seen a variety of lifestyles which have given a nice, unique touch to each experience. And finally, she has even tasted some foods she had never heard of before so the writer has definitely had experiences she would not change.

The author believes that thanks to CouchSurfing the world is more open for travellers since there is no place where individuals could go anymore. She probably would not travel alone, let's say to Russia, because she does not know the language at all, however, with CouchSurfing she could easily explore it with a local's help. They are the best people to show you the surroundings since they know the culture, how people behave, where to go and when and they speak the language so it does not cause any language barrier.

As a conclusion, CouchSurfing is a network for those who can open their minds to a new kind of concept and not judge people for their differences. Only the kind, genuine and giving people who truly care about others and a variety of cultures will enjoy the main idea of CouchSurfing, yet, the author does think everybody should try it once in their lives. Beware CouchSurfing is very addictive.

7.4 CouchSurfing member's experiences

Every experience is unique and the mood usually depends on what kind of people the members are and how they get along. There seems to be some kind of unspoken trust between members, as some people immediately give their keys to their surfers. Even though you might have exchanged only a few e-mails there is still the connection of

belonging to a tight community where members trust each other. According to Yle (2012b) trust and openness are important characteristics in participating.

According to a member, trusting a CouchSurfer is as natural as being introduced by a mutual friend even though they are strangers met through Internet. When he was new to CouchSurfing he verified himself to improve his chances with fellow CouchSurfers as it is hard to have your requests accepted at the beginning. He also experienced a few refusals which lead up to a last-minute emergency couch request. He finally got lucky with a local girl who promised to host him. And like so many people unaware of CouchSurfing are very skeptical at first about it the member also wonders about the reaction of his parents. They most likely would not be enthusiastic about him staying with total strangers when hostels are quite cheap nowadays. He reminds others that it is not about the free accommodation it is a completely new way to travel. According to him: “You get to see the world through local residents, not hotel concierges or guidebooks.” And then adds: “But what is most profound about the whole experience is the trust that naturally exists.” (Time 2011.) While a Brazilian guy said:

The first time I've surfed was totally crazy. A guy gave me the key of his house and it was new for me, stay alone at a stranger's house. So I understood the true spirit of Couch Surfing: Not free hosting simply, but friendship, help, cooperation... Couchsurfing changed me to better! =) (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

Another case was when the author sent the questionnaires and a CouchSurfer from Riga replied. The author thanked her for taking the time to help a stranger and her comment to it was: “we CouchSurfers are one big family rather than total strangers, right?” That shows just how close the community is and how willing people are to help. A Finnish member from Espoo considers CouchSurfing as a way to go to a stranger’s place and be treated as a friend instead. According to her you also get to hear exciting life experiences and learn about new matters. (Yle 2012c.) One member claims “Couch surfing gives you a greater sense of trust towards others” while another one says: “All in all, couch surfing has taught me about trust and generosity.” (Move 2008.)

In an article a former member from Finland mentions that at times the guys she met through CouchSurfing would hit on her. The correct way to handle the situation is to decline from the propositions politely which usually puts a stop to the situation. She even experienced getting proposed to by an Indian guy who hosted her. (Pikkanen 2011.) While another member says: “I surfed three different couches, my hosts were very friendly and helpful. I met my best friend through CS. And I also met a love of my life here.” (CouchSurfing 2011s.) So anything is possible, yet nothing is mandatory.

The USA is considered to be the “Couch Surfing capital of the world” being the nation that started the network, and hundreds of thousands of people, alone in the US soil, sharing their homes with other members. A teacher decides to travel around the US by car and four friends with only one intention; not paying for accommodation. Some of the trip they managed to stay with old friends but also got hosted through CouchSurfing. Their experience was full of great tips, local life and culture in addition to a great place to stay overnight and each of them felt like a resident throughout their trip. (Huffington Post 2011a.)

A nurse from Helsinki got fascinated about CouchSurfing when she first tried it in Croatia. She heard about CouchSurfing from a friend who arranged the couch in Croatia. She was picked up from the bus station by the Croatian boy who had agreed to host her. He took her to their summer cottage where a full table of foods was set up. She did not feel uncomfortable by staying with total strangers as she was welcomed with such warmth. She was only meant to stay for two nights but instead got to extend her stay by a day. During her stay she learnt about the history and the family’s personal experiences about those times. (Plaza 2009.)

Even though she got invited to a set table does not mean that everyone will. Surfers should not expect to be fed during their stay. It is a nice gesture though to offer to make a traditional dish to your guest or host. She believes that the most she has learnt about CouchSurfing is getting braver, making new friends, getting to know different cultures and improving your language skills, of course not forgetting the increase of tolerance. (Plaza 2009.)

Finally, one member comments: “Although at first the fact of receiving strangers in your house looks like something risky later on you realized that once you know the rules to use the site it is kind of safe.”

7.5 For and against CouchSurfing

A blog writer from Finland emphasizes on the advantage of getting to know a new culture with a local guide. In addition, she mentions that you will get a personal experience of seeing how the locals live and what kind of lifestyle they are leading where as a hotel room will pretty much look alike no matter where in the world you are. So you will get a unique experience each time you use CouchSurfing. Mostly the members are backpacker spirited types of travellers and broad-minded when it comes to meeting new people and cultures. (Rantapallo 2010.)

In an article, a guy refers to CouchSurfing as a possible future of backpacking. He recommends everyone to try something authentic with a local person to ensure a native experience. He thankfully recalls that even though another CouchSurfing did not have a chance to meet with him still he got great advice from him. So you can still be a big help by sharing your favourite places in town with a visitor. A trip is not only about the place but also mostly about the people you meet. It is them who make it a good or a bad experience. (The Guardian 2006.)

CouchSurfing has become a popular trend in the 21st century. Brian Thacker has written a book about his personal experiences CouchSurfing the world. It is called *Sleeping Around: A Couch Surfing Tour Of The Globe*. In his book he shares his thoughts about CouchSurfing and describes his own experiences. Mr. Thacker likes best spending time with the locals while having the opportunity to get free accommodation. He believes that reading the references people leave is an excellent way to get an image of the person in question. He enthuses about the trust there is between members even during the first time they meet: “The trust factor is amazing. After usually only a couple of email exchanges with a total stranger to ‘book’ your couch you are then often given the keys the moment you meet them!” (Travel Generation 2009.)

A member since 2006 has been glad to have the chance to see the website evolving: “The beginning it was almost exclusively just a hospitality exchange and now the possibilities for meaningful connections are endless.” She has had plenty of great experiences and could not imagine her life without CouchSurfing. “It embodies the true global village and an example of how sometimes globalization can be good thing.” she continues. (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

A blog writing couple used to love CouchSurfing, however, when more members started joining they felt that the network lost its spirit. They nowadays feel that people are not genuinely interested in each other anymore and just stick to small talk instead of a meaningful conversation. They consider the people sad since the useless talking makes people think they have made new friends while the truth is that the connection will probably end when the surfer leaves. They claimed that people only try to make a good impression of themselves in hopes of getting a good reference instead of a negative one. (Road Junky Travel 2011.)

An Iranian member believes that CouchSurfing has been a big factor in changing his life. “I have met some great people from all over the world, and have had lots of fun! The great thing about it is: open minded people willing to discuss anything, as well as always willing to go out to try out new things.” (CouchSurfing 2011s.) Another member mentions that it is not necessary to be very social and talkative to enjoy CouchSurfing, as long as you are interested in getting along with people and learning about other cultures. In the end it is about the natural hospitality within an individual. (Yle 2012c.)

A German citizen gladly shares her thoughts about CouchSurfing after being introduced by a friend: “The world of CS became one of the best parts of my travels!” She continues: “I met so many incredibly interesting globetrotters and with every new face I grew personally - the people are what traveling is really about - thanks to couchsurfing.org for bringing us all together! :)” (CouchSurfing 2011s.) Another member praises his experiences with CouchSurfing:

Through CouchSurfing, I've saved money, made friends (around my country and the world), and visited places I never would have known about. Maybe most excitingly, I've given other adventurers the chance to do the same, by introducing them to CS.
(CouchSurfing 2011s.)

One of the members has had negative experiences with men constantly hitting on her. When thinking of CouchSurfing she considers:

Couch Surfing is getting to be a bad name in my opinion. As a female I get to a new town an even if I have a host arranged, I get bombarded by people who live in the local area just watching to see who is in town. Got to love the meetup invites that someone would gladly show you there beautiful town and they will be free after 9 or 10 pm...at night...what kind of "town" do they think I want to see??? Even with reference checks and verification...this is not the cs I am use to....it has turned into a cheap hook up site!! In Berlin....it is known as the number one sex site...told to me by many people in Berlin!! As always be cautious and have at least two or three possible back up plans!!!
(CouchSurfing 2011s.)

While a Brazilian member's opinion is:

I've had one of the most amazing experiences of my life, by hosting people from all over the world, including from my own country! I intend to keep on using it for as much as I can, to exchange knowledge, peace, love, music, wine and happiness with all of you. (CouchSurfing 2011s.)

8 Competing networks

There are similar kinds of networks such as the Hospitality Club, Servas and Global Freeloaders. They all have their own benefits and unique characteristics.

Hospitality Club was founded in July 2000 by a German guy called Veit Kühne. For safety checks they check everyone's passport, they as well have a feedback system (basically the same as in CouchSurfing) and a spam mail protection system. It is a non-commercial site which believes in fostering friendships worldwide and increasing peace through cultural understanding. They have a volunteer organization where they are trying to get people to join in order to keep the network free and functional. They try to keep the Internet function up to date, yet, prefer to concentrate on creating face to face meetings. Their mission is to "make hospitality exchange a mainstream travel activity" in the future. (Hospitality Club 2011a.)

The web pages seem quite confusing and there is way too much information and advertisement on the main page. Since it is the first time visiting these pages, it is hard and takes a while to find basic information about the network. The sponsored links on the web page are definitely not regarding friendship (for finding a date) which can give a conflicting image of the network. (Hospitality Club 2011a.)

Servas is the oldest hospitality exchange program in the world. The organization was established in 1949 by Bob Luitweiler. (Servas International 2011d.) It is an organization recognized by the United Nations. (Servas International 2011a.) There are volunteers in over 100 countries making sure this multicultural network keeps running in the future as well. Their goal is to increase tolerance, international friendships, cultural exchange and peace. (Servas International 2011d.) The network works based on the willingness of the host to invite the person to stay for at least two nights. It used to work through mail, however, nowadays uses the Internet. You can also apply to be a day host, however, that requires an annual fee. (Servas International 2011c.) If you are looking to become a Servas Traveller then you can apply and get invited to an interview before being approved. The whole process will take over a month and there is

also a fee. Servas Travellers are also obligated to write a travel report after each trip. (Servas International 2011b.)

Global Freeloaders is a hospitality service which was founded by an Australian guy, Adam Staines. He had such a passion for travel, yet, did not want to spend too much money on accommodation, so he came up with the idea. The difference with this site is that the people who stay at other's houses as a guest are also expected to host the same amount of people. There is also a calendar where you can share your schedule with others by for example blocking a period of time when you cannot host anyone. It also works in 12 month periods and after a year you get to decide whether or not you want to continue as a member. (Global Freeloaders 2012.)

As can be read above, the social networks are very similar when it comes to the idea, yet, they all have their special characteristics which make them different. Servas and CouchSurfing are the only ones without any commercials/sponsor links on the web pages.

9 Conducting the research

The primary objective of the research was to find out what kind of prejudices people had towards CouchSurfing. To hear the opinions of people who heard about it for the first time while completing the questionnaire as well as the ones who already had heard about it or are members. The aim is to inform people more about CouchSurfing in order of giving them a better understanding of the whole concept and decreasing the impression they have. Another aim was to hear different kinds of experiences, both positive and negative, and bring an image as realistic as possible to the readers of this thesis.

Quantitative data collection method was used to gather information. The questionnaire was a way to collect experiences and opinions about CouchSurfing and the awareness people had of it. The questionnaire was directed to all people regardless of their awareness, gender, age, nationality, race or occupation. Some of the questions were open questions giving a better chance to answer with a proper sentence or a story, giving a more comprehensive picture of the experience.

The data collection was executed between October 28th and November 10th 2011 via Internet. The date was extended until the 12th since some CouchSurfers wanted to answer, yet, did not have the time for it within the time limit. The aim was to get at least 25 answers of each questionnaire. Finally, in the end the amount of replies exceeded way past the expectations with the total number of 52 (unaware) and 355 (aware) pieces.

The original plan was to interview the founder Casey Fenton through Skype or another software application. Furthermore, it would have given a chance to make a video call to him asking about the network in more depth. However, so much useful information could be found about him and his ideas through his CouchSurfing profile and Internet in general so the idea of an interview was skipped after all.

9.1 Questionnaire as a data collection method

Questionnaires are used for quantitative research, gathering information about a person's behaviour, values, opinions, beliefs, attitudes and facts too. It is a way to examine the feelings of people towards the issue in question. Often groups of people have similar views, yet, each individual is entitled to their own opinion. Understanding the reasons why certain groups feel one way and, furthermore, how they behave is a goal social science research tries to reach. Tendencies is what needs to be explored through a research and it is done by understanding attitudes and opinions. (Black 1999, 215-216.)

The collected data is presented in a standard way; asking all participants exactly the same questions in order to avoid affecting the answers. The participants form a group, resulting in a sample of the population. In order to get different opinions the questionnaire should be sent to a variety of different people. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 193.)

The advantage of a questionnaire is having the chance to get plenty of participants as well as asking many questions. By making the questions multiple choice it saves the researcher a lot of time when analysing the results. However, the weakness of a questionnaire is that the material is considered quite shallow, also it is hard to say whether the participants take the questionnaire seriously or just quickly try to answer and get rid of it, whether they are honest and accurate with their answers, and there can also be misunderstandings. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 195.)

When conducting the research, the examiner needs to take extra caution neither making extreme generalizations or stereotyping the participants which could result in wrong conclusions. (Black 1999, 215.) People's interest towards the questionnaire depends on the topic as well as the questions and their layout. A question that has a multiple choice as well as an option for something else where the person has to write an answer means that there can be other perspectives that the researcher did not think of. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 198-199.)

In qualitative research open questions are more commonly used. The benefit of open questions are that they do not propose any answers instead shows that the person is at least some what aware of the subject giving an opportunity to say exactly what a person thinks and what is considered important. The responses can also show the person's attitude towards the subject and some emotions. The individuals also have to think about the answer more thoroughly rather than quickly pick a multiple choice which can accidentally go in the wrong box. However, open questions can give a wide range of answers which can be hard to analyse and can be questionable regarding their reliability. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 200-201.)

Quite often qualitative research method is considered having to be in a near distance of the participants, however, that is not necessarily the case. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used for people close or far. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 194.) Questionnaires are often used by organizations to examine individual's general attitudes towards them. (Black 1999, 215-216.) Through the questionnaire opinions about CouchSurfing as well as attitudes towards such networks were explored.

Questionnaires can be sent via mail, e-mail or the Internet. Furthermore, they can also be handed out. Nowadays it is easy to make questionnaire since there are so many online survey softwares. Using them also cuts costs of sending them by mail and is faster and more efficient. Questionnaire also gives the choice for open answers and explanations to why people think one way. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 196.) In this research the questionnaires were sent via Internet, as mentioned before.

Making a questionnaire needs plenty of knowledge about the subject, the time to think and structure the questions properly before sending it forward. Finally, the cover letter should include a brief introduction to the subject and the importance of responses as well as an expiry date. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 204.)

9.2 CouchSurfing questionnaire

The questionnaire used for this research included both multiple choice questions as well as open questions. The multiple choice questions were in order to receive basic

information about the participants, such as their age, gender, who they travel with, and finally, how often and how they use CouchSurfing. The open questions examined their individual opinions and prejudices towards CouchSurfing as well as some experiences. The questionnaire was written in English since the members are mostly foreigners and also the thesis is written in English.

For starters the participants were asked to share some basic information about their demographic factors as well as travelling habits. Then continued to asking about how they had heard about CouchSurfing and their thoughts about. In order to get answers which were more comprehensively described, the open question format was used.

The answers in a questionnaire describe how a person observes the surroundings nevertheless it does not tell exactly what happens. Observation however gives information about what a person says and whether she behaves in the same way. The advantage of observing is receiving information about the natural and direct behaviour between people and organizations. It is well suited for qualitative research while examining interaction. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 212-213.)

10 Research results

Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara (2009, 221-222.) claim that the analysis, interpretation and conclusion are the most important element when doing a research. There is a lot of work in case of a qualitative research method since the answers can be long and broad.

At the beginning two different versions of the questionnaires were made. The first one was meant for the people who had not previously heard of CouchSurfing. Aiming to find out about the kinds of prejudices people may have beforehand. Knowing how sceptical I was and how I felt when I heard about CouchSurfing motivated me more to hear about other's opinions and trying to give them an honest and thorough picture of the social network. Hoping to get people to open their minds and trying CouchSurfing at least once in their life while getting rid of their prejudices is a hoped result. Answering the questionnaire took about 5-10 minutes.

The other questionnaire is divided in two parts; for the people who are aware of CouchSurfing which is meant for all respondents and the second part is only for members of CouchSurfing.org. It took approximately 15-20 minutes to fill in the whole questionnaire including the part for members.

In this chapter the results of unaware individuals are presented first, and then the people who are already aware of it, in section 10.2, and finally, the members of CouchSurfing in section 10.3.

The journey was not smooth; there were some misfortune along the way. First of all when asked for the Webropol login information from the person in charge of them in school turned out that she was out of the country for the time being. It took some time to receive the username et cetera. Thankfully it did not take much time to make the questionnaires since the questions had already been written while improving them. Once the questionnaires were ready to be sent, the channels used were the social network Facebook and school e-mail. An e-mail with both links was sent to all the con-

tacts in Facebook asking them to fill in the questionnaire suitable for each person. It turned out that neither of the links worked, even though both had been tried many times from a couple of different computers. Gladly a notice about the links was informed very quickly so a change of a few settings at the Webropol page could be made which got them to work. The next problem appeared during forwarding of the e-mail; to Finnish people it went easily without any trouble, however, to foreigners Facebook refused to send it again. Finally a few hours later re-sending was successful.

Likewise, the school of HAAGA-HELIA was asked to forward the questionnaire to students; however, no reply was received for several days so the school's correspondent was asked again. Finally that time they told that they had forgotten about the whole e-mail, however, said they would send it right away.

Another way of sharing the questionnaire was through CouchSurfing to both friends and random people. People were chosen by writing a country or city anywhere in the world trying to cover each continent by picking several countries and people to send it to. Two to three members were chosen from each search by the order they appeared by picking the first ones who had been online within 36 hours and who had a good reply rate of over 95% and English language skills regardless of their gender or age. Then a link of the questionnaire was sent to them by introducing me, some basic information about the studies and asking them kindly to take the time to answer.

A question that should have been asked in the questionnaire is to mention the respondents' nationality. Somehow asking it got completely forgotten. However dozens of CouchSurfers replied to the e-mail by telling they had answered the questionnaire so through that it could be figured out where the answers came from and they were definitely from all around the world. Antarctica was the only continent where from a reply was not received, however, could still be possible that somebody answered the questionnaire. Altogether 355 responses were received from the people who were aware of the project including 259 members. The amount of replies for the unaware questionnaire was a lot less, 52 pieces. Nevertheless the amount of responses was more than a double over the expectations of 25 units.

10.1 New to CouchSurfing

The aim was to determine what kind of thoughts unaware people would have about CouchSurfing without giving them too much information. The results are shown in the charts as amount of people.

Altogether there were 52 responses from people new to the idea; 38 women and 14 men, however, some questions were not answered by everyone.

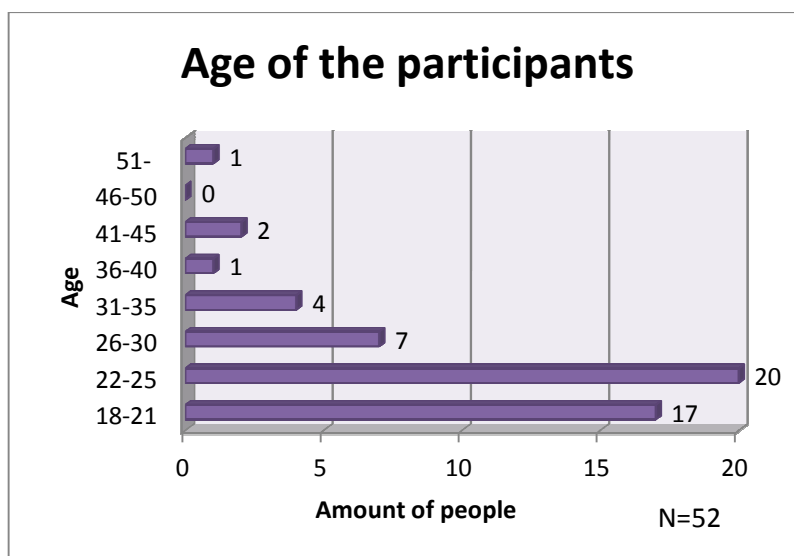


Figure 9. Participants by their age.

As seen in figure 9, the average age was between 22-25 years which was 38,5% the age of the respondents. The average age according the statistics is 28 years. (CouchSurfing 2011r.) In figure 9 the average age is 25 years. Based on the questionnaire the age is a little bit less yet also the people in my Facebook and the students of HAAGA-HELIA are younger so it makes sense. Second age group was 18-21 with 17% and then came 26-30 with 7%. Over 30 year olds there were altogether eight people. Having a range of different aged people gives a wider perspective of opinions. Also people who are more mature and have a longer life experience can have a different view of life and towards such concepts. Young people tend to be spontaneous and enjoy trying new, exciting

things so getting their attention with the concept of CouchSurfing might increase their appetite to learn more about the social network and maybe even join.

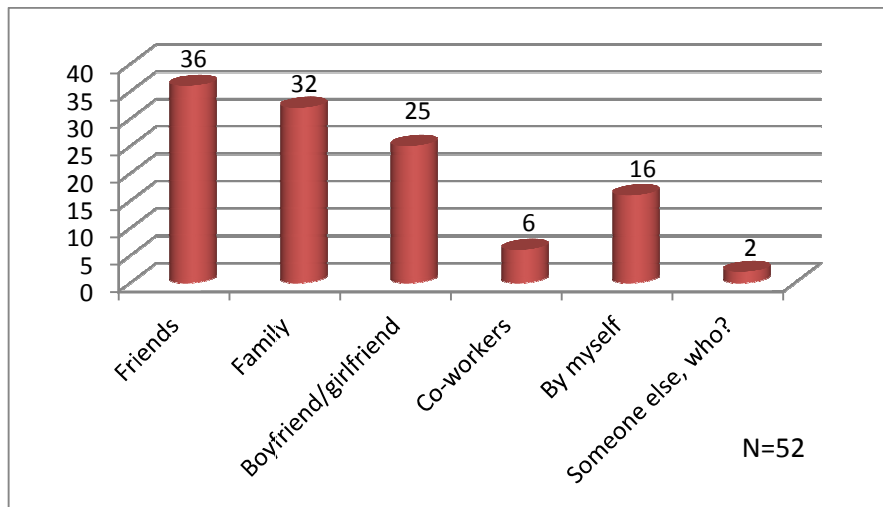


Figure 10. Preference of travelling company.

The most common company to travel with was considered to be either friends or family with almost the same amount around 30% as can be seen in figure 10. Taking into account that most people were aged 18-25 (figure 9) choosing friends is the greatest way to an awesome trip. At that age people are independent and want to have fun and enjoy their freedom so with a friend it is possible. Yet travelling with family (if by that they mean their parents) is nice because most parents do not let the children pay (at least not for everything; food, accommodation) and therefore the trip is more economical than with friends. Some 21% preferred travelling with their partner. The amount is quite low considering that people had the choice of picking several alternatives. Maybe the participants were mostly single which would explain why they would not like to travel with their boyfriend or girlfriend. Quite many also liked travelling alone the amount being 14%. One person mentioned travelling with school and another one said husband. Even though each participant answered they could also choose several options.

There were a wide range of thoughts that CouchSurfing awoke in people. Some were sure it would not suit them, others thought it was a great idea for meeting new people and locals, saving money, networking around the world and seeing the local lifestyle. Couple respondents got so excited about the project that they wrote comments like

“Very good idea! I should use this CouchSurfing in the future”, and one thought “I want to travel more, especially to places where there are CouchSurfers.” A few others also liked the idea yet at the same time were scared: “I think it's a good idea, good that it has been invented, but I don't think I would ever use this network, or at least wouldn't stay at someone's place“, and another opinion was:

I wouldn't actually feel that comfortable with staying over at a strange house owned by someone else. Other than that, the idea sounds kinda fresh. Meeting new people who know the place you are currently visiting could be fun and useful.

One person's comments were very positive; she found it great for solo travellers and even a small group of friends and would prefer CouchSurfing over travel agencies, especially during long-distance trips. As a couple she would prefer staying in a hotel. She thought CouchSurfing is very communal and all participants benefit from it. Another participant says: “I think couchsurfing fits to those who are open-minded and social human beings and want to connect new friendships”, however, then adds that it is not her thing. Several people find CouchSurfing a good way to travel if the members are reliable and will not let you down. One comment was: “Impressive but this concept can get problematic sometimes if the members are unreliable.”

Some answerers were concerned about it being risky if you do not have enough information about the person you are staying with especially if there are criminals. One participant wanted to know if the organization checked with the police for a criminal record before accepting them as a member. Also a member of a family was questioning the safety and states that she would not use the network while travelling with children.

Quite many answerers thought the idea is interesting and exciting even if they would not do it themselves. There were also a handful of people who thought it would not suit them at all.

When asking whether or not they would make a profile majority, 29 out of 52, said no, however, there were still 23 people who thought they would consider it. The reasons why people would not create a profile were because they were simply not interested.

Some thought the idea of sleeping in a stranger’s home is awkward and they would rather prefer to stay in a hotel. For a few people the reason was a bad timing, however, according to them would still consider doing it in the future while travelling and one person said she lives in a company’s dormitory which does not allow outsiders. There were some answers from people who do not travel much and when they do they prefer being by themselves or with their families. A couple people were also worried about their safety and possible risks and one respondent reckons she is not in the right age group to take part. People who are not familiar with CouchSurfing could easily say that they are not in the right segment. However this is not the case; CouchSurfing is meant for anyone over the age 18. There are people from all walks of life and even over 80 year olds.

The people who had doubts were mostly hesitant about the safety. They thought it was risky to host or surf with a person they do not know in advance. A few mentioned that they could consider hosting or surfing with someone if they could meet the person beforehand to find out what kind of a person they are dealing with.

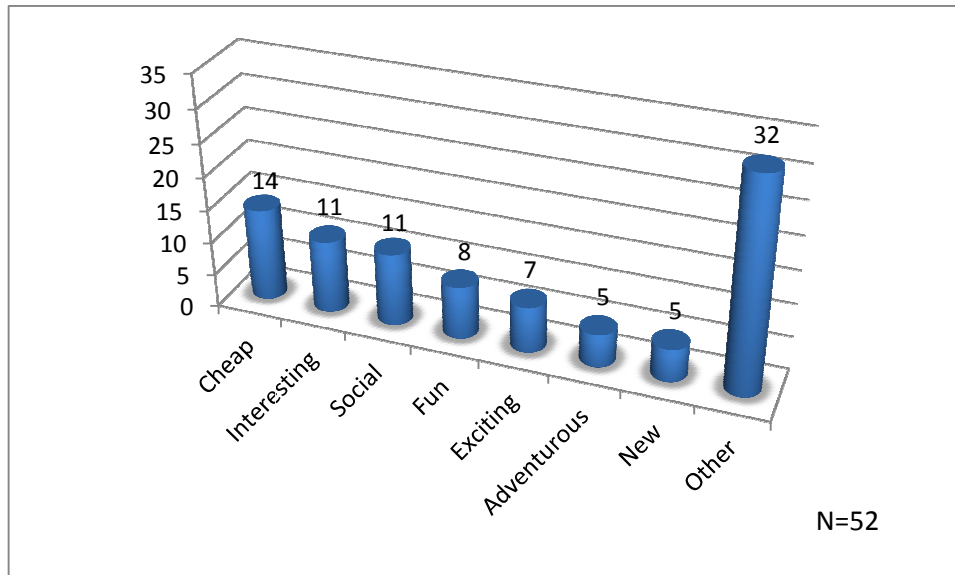


Figure 11. Adjectives that come to mind while thinking of CouchSurfing.

As seen from figure 11, the most common adjectives that came up were that Couch-Surfing is cheap (14 times), interesting (11), social (11), fun (8), exciting (7), adventurous and new (both 5 times). Other positive words that CouchSurfing evoked were

good for networking, awesome, convenient, friendly, open-minded, modern, world-wide, useful, helpful, educating, easy, functional, enthusiastic, brave, communal, practical, freedom, innovative, relaxed and comfort. Participants were also curious and thought it could lead to great experiences. Negative words were risky, scary, confusing, insecure, dirty, stealing, kidnapping, bums, lazy and nervous.

Some 71,2% (37 people) would not like to participate in CouchSurfing, however, the rest, 15 people, who were interested would prefer to surf someone's couch. Supposedly that way it feels more comfortable as you do not have to let anyone in your home or kick them out and if you do not like your host then you can always leave. It is also understandable that surfing was their choice as I started by surfing for a few years before hosting anyone. It is easier to get involved with the project when you first try surfing with someone who is experienced and when you can observe them and how the network works. There were also a few who would prefer to keep CouchSurfers' company in general or show them the sights and one person who would like to participate by hosting.

When asked what could you offer to travellers in your area? People mostly mentioned places regarding nature, such as taking the visitors to a lake or a beach or giving them an opportunity to experience going to a sauna. Interest in doing activities and sports was mentioned several times depending on both participants' schedule. They could give a tour around the city and to historic places, share their time doing activities such as going to the movies, exhibitions, museums and having dinner at home or a restaurant.

Other choices they could offer were information and recommendations of the local attractions, culture, history and anything the visitor was interested in, also via Internet. They would like to take travellers to see the nightlife, cafes, bars, restaurants and to enjoy the shopping areas.

Showing them the local culture, lifestyle and manners was a popular choice also. As well as giving a warm welcome and spending time in general was mentioned as well as

offering a place to sleep and the use of their home and kitchen. One respondent also said she would offer her couch at some point, however, not in the beginning. A few participants did not have any idea what they could offer.

What people expected to get while being hosted was a bed/couch/place to sleep, clean sheets, company, things to do, a warm welcome, use of a shower and kitchen, meeting local people, sightseeing, a guide, advice about the area, politeness, privacy while they were in the house, friendly and open-minded attitude. In addition to flexibility, someone who knows the area and its history, trustworthiness, cleanliness, reliability, hospitality, breakfast for a small charge, help if needed, a host who has planned something in advance, information about the local culture, fun stories to share, a smiley face and good behaviour. Some also mentioned bed and breakfast.

The point of this question was to find out exactly what people think they would get if they were part of CouchSurfing. Not getting answers, like food or a date was hoped, because you should only expect a couch, appropriate behaviour and some company. Only a few people mentioned expecting breakfast, which was a minority and since they were people who have not been aware of CouchSurfing means that they do not have much information and knowledge about the social network.

Out of 50 respondents 60% (30 people) got curious about CouchSurfing after they heard about the project in the questionnaire. Which means 40 %, making it 20 people, did not have curiosity towards the social network, reason being that they were a private person not wanting anyone in their personal space, wanting to relax during their travels by staying in hotels and exploring the area on their own, CouchSurfing is not their type of travelling, one considered it was meant for hippies, one thought CouchSurfing could not possibly offer him anything, a few preferred the old-fashioned way of travelling and staying in a hotel, one did not consider this the right time for CouchSurfing and most were not interested in general.

As a conclusion, it could be said that quite many had positive thoughts about CouchSurfing even if they were not interested in joining. The people who did not have any

interest towards CouchSurfing seemed to have a bit of an attitude and maybe they are not very open-minded to such concepts. Those people had a lot of suspicion and not much to offer visitors, and they preferred being on their own. Of course it is understandable that people are different and some do not want any random strangers to visit their homes while they try to relax after a day at work. Finally, everyone needs their personal space and time off when they feel like it.

10.2 Aware of CouchSurfing

People who had heard of CouchSurfing or are a part of it gave altogether 355 responses. Out of that amount 157 (44,2%) were men and 198 (55,8%) women. The difference is not so huge, however, in general women are mostly easier to persuade to answer questionnaires and are a bit more helpful than men. The reason could also be that the form was sent out randomly so it most likely was not distributed evenly.

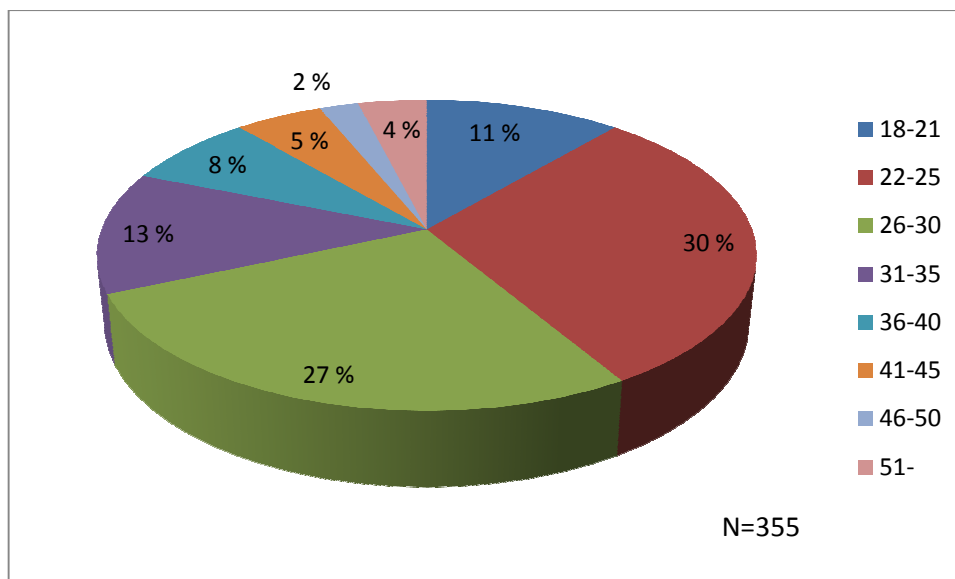


Figure 12. Age of the participants.

Mostly people were between 22 and 30 years old. In the questionnaire there was a choice for people under 18 years old. Gladly there were not any forms with an entry in that section since the Terms of use require the age of at least 18 years from each member. As seen in figure 12 the biggest group made up of 30% of all participants with the age of 22-25 making members quite young. The next group was between 26 and 30 with 27%. Participants aged 31-35 gathered 13% of the answers, 18-21 year olds fol-

lowing closely with 11%. People beyond age 36 were altogether 19% with 67 people. This shows that the web site is not only for young people but also people with a more mature age like to take part giving a wider chance of people to meet from all walks of life. The average age was 28 which is also the average in the web statistics.

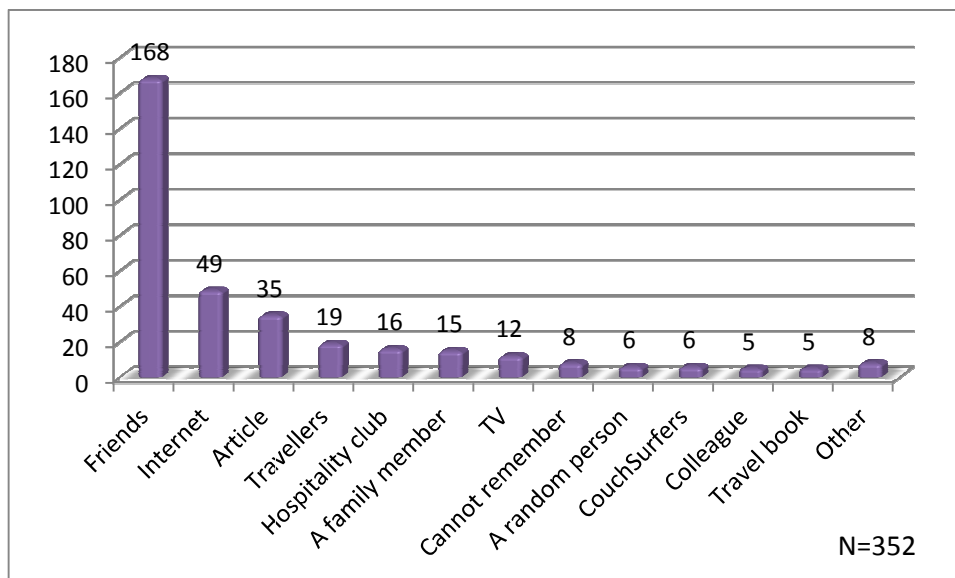


Figure 13. How did you hear about CS?

The most common way to hear about CouchSurfing was word of mouth from friends with almost half of all answers, 48%. It is understandable since people like to talk about how they spend their time and share their experiences. CouchSurfing is also the kind of concept which is probably given more trust if heard from a friend who has experience. The Internet was also a popular information channel with 14% as seen in figure 13. The people either came across it while looking at travel sites or by accident.

The media had quite an affect as well with a total of 15% showing programs on TV and writing articles in magazines and newspapers such as Helsingin Sanomat, the New York Times and the Guardian. Other travellers, CouchSurfers and random people informed altogether 31 people with 9%. Some 5% heard about CouchSurfing from the similar website Hospitality Club which was established earlier. Also a family member was a great source to tell about the social network whether it was a sibling, daughter or cousin. People who heard from their family were made up of 4%. Some could not remember anymore how they found out about CouchSurfing, a few heard it from a col-

league or read about it from a travel book like Brian Thacker's "Sleeping Around" for example. Other sources of information were through school or a presentation, some heard about it from a radio program and one person even knew the father of the founder Casey Fenton. There were altogether 352 answers which means three people did not answer at all.

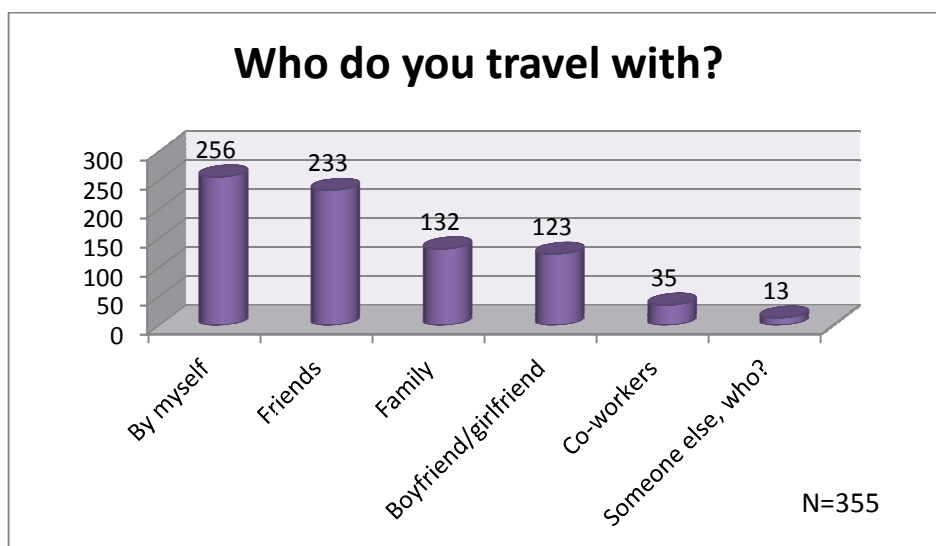


Figure 14. Travelling company

Vast majority, 32% of people, preferred to travel on their own since it is the best way to meet new people as seen in figure 14. Also not having to compromise about schedules and what to do with your potential travel partner makes it easier to change plans and gives you more freedom. It can be that CouchSurfing has made more people enjoy travelling alone since they will always find some company from fellow CouchSurfers at the destination.

A close second choice is to travel with friends, which was chosen by 29%. Having a friend to travel with is a safer choice especially if you are insecure or travelling to an area which is not the most tourist kind. Also, it gives you a chance to share your experiences with someone and look back on those days later in your life.

Family or a partner was chosen by approximately 16%. Family can consist of a sibling, parents, cousin or aunt for instance. It can be a usual way to spend time with the family during vacation times or holidays by taking a trip together. Co-workers were chosen by

4% meaning that they might do business trips together or like to spend time together after working hours too. People who chose other people mentioned CouchSurfers or people they meet along their travels both five times each and someone said a pet or school.

When asked about being part of CouchSurfing 72% were members and 28% were not. That can easily be since when I sent the link a lot of CouchSurfers sent me a message telling they had answered the questionnaire. The people who were not members said 75,4% would consider joining and only 24,6% were not interested for many different reasons. The main reasons were; no response (4), not my kind of travelling (2)/not my thing (2), at the moment not for me, it is not free (which is a false assumption), maybe in the future, do not rely on strangers (2), I do not have a place of my own, I have children, I like hotels, I would rather stay in a hostel (2), I live in a one-room flat, it is for young people (2) and too dangerous, maybe (2), no time, too small apartment (2), too scary, not right now – feels safer and easier in a hotel, not interested – rather stay in a hotel (2), “I’m sort of interested, but maybe a bit old to start with this. And my boyfriend has way too many prejudices.” A few people were interested in joining, however, did not have a couch to give in return.

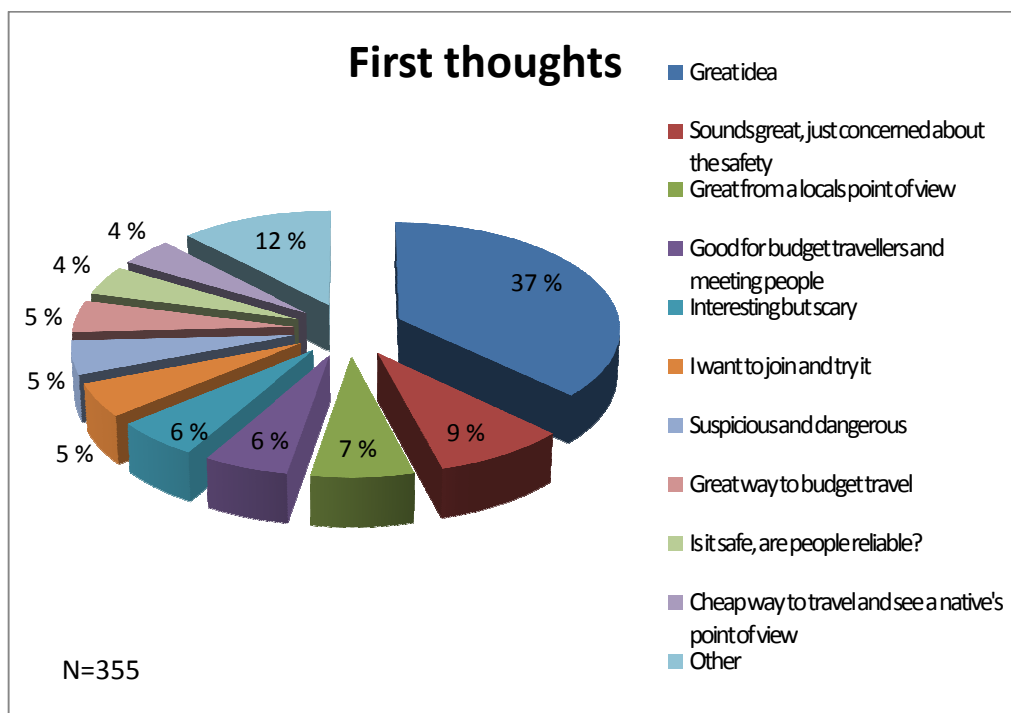


Figure 15. First thoughts about CouchSurfing.

Most participants had positive thoughts about the concept. Some 37% of people described their first thoughts with words like exciting, wonderful, awesome, great, interesting, good and excellent. One comment was: “Blown away! I thought and still think it is an outstanding concept!”, another person said: “First I thought it was a very innovative idea, sounded pretty cool and adventurous!”

Many people were very excited about meeting so many new people anywhere in the world: “I thought what an amazing way to meet people from other countries even while at home. It seemed like a fantastic way to experience a country when traveling too.” It seemed more a rule than an exception concentrating on the fact of making new friends. “Thought it was an amazing idea, being able to connect with people all over the world”, another participant enthuses: “First thought, awesome! Next, it would allow me to travel ANYWHERE and have instant friends to travel with :)” They seemed to have an open mind towards meeting random people and staying in their place for the night without hesitation.

As seen in the figure 15, there were also several who found the concept interesting and were drawn to it, however, still had some concerns about the safety policies. “I was a little cautious of sleeping at other people's houses without knowing them very well but I was excited by the idea of people being open, giving and trusting others.”, says one participant while another one comments: “Suspicious a bit but amazed by the concept.” A few said things like: “I was a little apprehensive at first, but then you get on and read all the profiles and positive experiences and it's easy to get excited about.” While one member admits: “Little scared about participating but most people have a fear of the unknown.” Those 9% of people were the second largest group with the same thoughts.

I thought the idea was great and interesting and it gives opportunity to see some real life style of the people living in destination country but there can always be some concerns about the real motives and personalities of the people participating to this.

There were 7% who considered it a great way to get the local's point of view about their hometown so they liked the authentic experience CouchSurfing could offer. “I

thought the idea of staying with locals was awesome. They can show you and tell you so much more about the area, food and culture you are in”, and according to another person: “I loved the idea. I was excited about the opportunity to meet people with a native perspective of a city. I liked the idea that people participated out of the kindness in their hearts.”

Some 6% would find the concept interesting, however, also scary. According to a participant: “I thought it was a great idea, great way to meet people and travel. But also thought of the potential risks of couch surfing.” While another one says:

Definitely positive, but it took me a long time to get registered (around 2 or 3 years since I heard about it for the first time). I don't remember what I was exactly thinking when I heard about it for the first time, but I guess there was a little bit of prejudice in my head (concerning safety and reliability of such thing).

Once people try something they often realize that their assumptions were different from the reality. “The first concern I had was about safety but once I got to know the website, the guidelines and the safety procedures and started going to meetings, exchanging experiences, hosting and being hosted I've got the hook of it.” Usually new ideas, like the CouchSurfing, arouse interest towards the subject yet the question of safety also pops up giving doubts and concerns about the whole concept. “nice thing, but would not do it by myself. Because of the safety reasons, and because i´m female.”

The same amount (6%) found it a great way for budget travellers and meeting new people while doing it.

I first heard it from a friend of mine, that stayed in Paris, dee pin the center for free, so my first thought was "REALLY? For F.R.E.E.?" to which my friend answered "yes, but the most important thing was not the being free thing, but the fact I created a new friendship!"... So when I first travelled on my own, I joined the community and did the same!

Another person said: "It's a great idea! Especially student do not have so much money in use so this is a perfect idea for people with low travel budget. It is also a great way to meet local people."

According to 5 % the idea was dangerous and suspicious and did not have interest in joining the network. A participant's thoughts were: "Hosting unknown people is dangerous", another one thought: "I was nervous about trusting complete strangers with my safety." One person said straight away: "No way, I will not stay at a stranger's home", while another one commented: "I hope they don't abuse female travellers or travellers don't steal from housekeepers."

At the same time 5% also were keen on joining and trying CouchSurfing. Comments like "Interesting, wanna try this at least once in my life. Wanna try to give place for someone and try to visit someone", or "That's a cool project for cheap traveling/accomodation, getting to know other people and other cultures, and I want to try it!", were similar answers by the 5% of people. One even considered joining right away: "Let s go home and sign up!!!" As imagined based on the answers a minority were really open to the idea of spending time with a complete stranger by hosting them or surfing with them.

There were of course some 5% of people who were only thinking that it was free so in that way a nice way to travel without much money. A few people said: "That it was an amazing idea to save money!", and comments like: "The first thought that pass through my mind was consider Couchsurfing as a tool I can use in order to have free couch." These comments show that some people immediately thought of ways to take advantage of the network and did not consider the people at all.

As seen from figure 15, some 4% were questioning if it is safe and can you really trust and rely on the members. "Great idea, but can you trust people, in particular as a host. Possibly dangerous - physical attack or stealing." Another participants said: "I was a little surprised that people can just go and spend a night at a strangers place." Also what kind of people would be interested in CouchSurfing, were the main question in

their minds. “I thought it was crazy. Who would ever like to sleep on someone stranger's couch!?”

The rest 12 % of the participants, a total of 43 people, had thoughts like sounds crazy, people must be insane to try something like that, nine people considered it a great way to connect people around the world, sounds quite intriguing but does it really work? A participant said: “I first thought that it was a good idea but it probably did not work because people would be too scared to host a stranger and in the same way a traveller will be too afraid to stay in someone's place.” The rest had no expectations or were wondering the trust people have for a stranger: “People who are involved must have a great deal of trust.” A few also thought it was risky, the greatest network ever, there was some curiosity towards the website and a couple could not remember what they thought originally.

Some people commented that the whole idea made them think of hippies which might really feel like it since people stay overnight at random people's homes. However the people that are part of CouchSurfing are people of all social classes and from every occupation you can think of, some hippies of course, however, not only them.

Some considered CouchSurfing exactly their thing: “cool.... exactly the thing that suits my way of life”, and others were very excited about the concept:

The minute I heard about CouchSurfing, I knew it was a concept and project that would fit me and my interests. My first thought was that I was disappointed that I hadn't heard about it before I studied abroad for a semester in England because I knew I could have put it to good use. I joined the website almost immediately after finding out about it.

On the other hand some made comments like: “The very first time I heard about it I thought 'Wow, you really let strangers into your house?' But a few months later I joined.” So even having prejudice about CouchSurfing changed quite quickly.

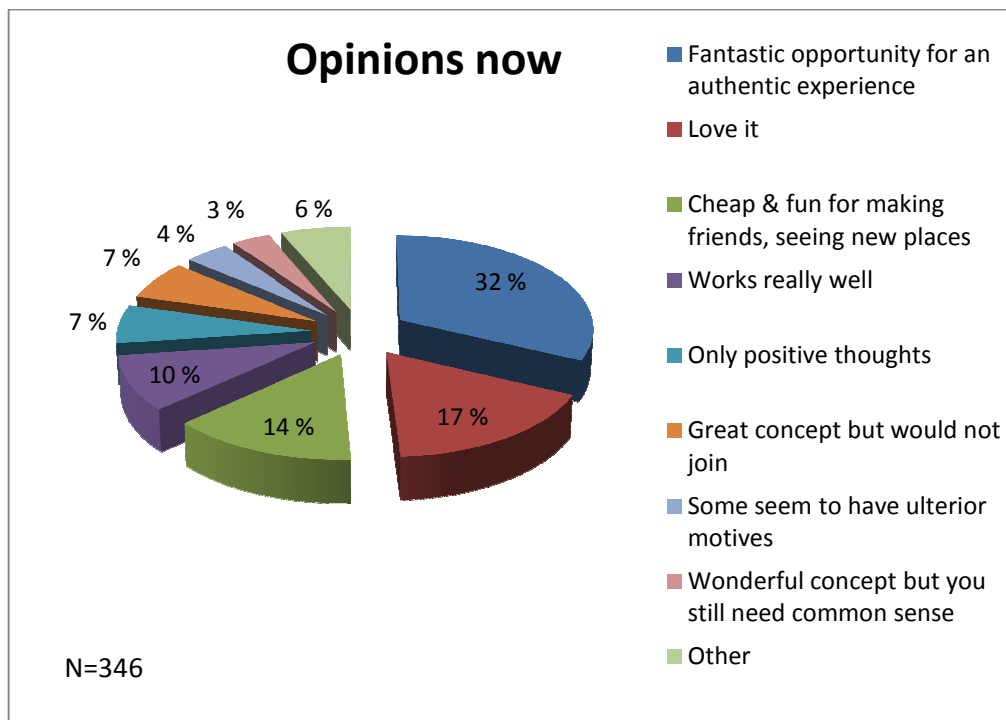


Figure 16. What do you think about CouchSurfing now?

As seen in figure 16 the majority (32%) of people thought that once they got to know the concept better and tried it there was a wonderful chance of getting a real authentic experience using CouchSurfing. It meant staying with the locals and seeing their lifestyle as well as everyday life and through it getting to learn about the culture as well. Conversations with the locals and making new friends were a big part of the experience. “I think it is a great way to learn about local culture and experience more local activities rather than just touristy types.” Through locals they also received knowledge and information about the area and the hidden spots. “It’s a great way to see less visited places. An important part of travelling for me is to see how people live their lives.” One participant mentions: “It is not just about having a free place to stay (in fact, when I have used CouchSurfing, I often spend almost the same as hostel accommodation by buying meals or gifts for hosts). The cultural exchange and instant friendships are important.” So even if you are staying with a CouchSurfer you still might spend money on the host though you do not pay for the couch. Members also found: “it’s useful for meeting people from around the world and breaking down the stereotypes”

Words “Love it” were used by 17%. Participants who considered it a great way to make new friends and see places around the world also enthused about the free ac-

accommodation. To those 14% getting to save money through it seemed to be important as well. “CS is an amazing organization that helps people that are alike, (enjoy traveling cheaper and spending time with host country nationals in the area)”, another one said: “i think its a great way to meet people, experience local culture where ever you go, travel cheap, and even make lifelong friends!”

According to 10% the concept works really well and there were no mentions of any complaints or doubts. There were 7% of only positive comments and thoughts. The 7% who found it a great and interesting concept still did not want to join for their own reasons. The people who felt like some members had ulterior motives, consisted of 4% of all participants. The ulterior motives mentioned before meant people who used CouchSurfing just for a free couch and did not have interest towards local people and the original idea of the network or used it for dating purposes. Some people were worried about the exploiters: “I think that is a great way of get travellers in touch with locals. Unfortunately there are some people that think that CS is just a way of getting an accommodation for free without caring about who's going to host you.” One considers that most CouchSurfers are only using the network for a free couch: “The majority of C/S are just looking for a free roof over their heads...”

The smallest single group of 3% had wonderful thoughts about CouchSurfing as long as you used common sense when meeting new people. That should make sense whenever you encounter a person you do not know in advance. People who had other thoughts were about

- it being great for budget travellers (9 people),
- there being a great chance of trying this great concept (7 people),
- uncomfortable feelings and no chance of staying with a stranger (5 people),
- being interested in meeting people, however, not staying overnight,
- thoughts changing from really positive to realistic after becoming a member.

Overall more than 80% had only good things to say about CouchSurfing. Even the ones who had some doubts still had good images as well. Just a minority of a few per cent only had fears and doubts towards the network. Everybody did not respond to

this question, there were 346 answers. The percentage and amounts mentioned here only consist of the answers received.

Table 1. What do you have to offer to travellers. Amount of people in the brackets. N=336

16% Sightseeing, tour around the city (151)	2% The use of my home (24)
14% A place to sleep (132)	2% Party (21)
11% Company, conversations (104)	2% Cook traditional food (20)
9% Information, recommendations, advice (90)	1% Entertainment (14)
9% Local lifestyle, culture, history, manners (89)	1% Activities depending on their interests (12)
6% Meeting in a cafe, restaurant, bar (58)	1% Transportation (9)
5% Insider's knowledge, sightseeing (49)	1% My life (everyday activities, friends, family etc.) (8)
5% Activities (45)	1% Exploring with others (8)
4% Nature (42)	1% Nothing (6)
3% Breakfast (28)	1% Everything they need if possible (6)
3% A tour guide (25)	<0% Sharing experiences and travel stories (4)
2% Hospitality, memories, friendship (24)	<0% Do not know (4)

In the table 1 you can see what people considered they could offer while a visitor was in town. Mostly people had the chance to offer some sightseeing or a city tour whether part of CouchSurfing or not. The 16% were willing to spend time showing the sights in the near area during a member's visit even if they were not available for hosting the person. There were 14% who could offer their couch or a sleeping possibility in their house.

Out of the respondents, 336 people, 11% were able to share their time with visitors whether it was just a conversation, some activities or spending time in general. Some

people (9%) were only available for giving information and recommendations of the local area and places to visit via CouchSurfing. The same amount wanted to give a local experience to the traveller; sharing their lifestyle, local history, cultural habits and everyday manners. Taking the CouchSurfer to the traditional places where they could get the best possible authentic experience while in the area. Some would happily meet with travellers over a cup of coffee or dinner while sharing knowledge and getting to know one another.

There were 5% who wanted to share their local knowledge and inform travellers of the hidden gems to give them a chance to see places where tourists do not usually visit or know about. They were also willing to take the surfers to these places if the time allowed it. Even some insider's tips are much appreciated by a visitor. The travel books do not always give the best (and authentic) places to see so hearing the local expert's recommendations can be a huge benefit.

Quite many (5%) were interested in doing a diversity of activities with the visitors from different sports to taking part in local events, museums to movies. Some people travel to a certain place in order to take part in festivals or other events and having company through CouchSurfing can be a good way to share the moment while making a new friend. Some 4% considered that the nature in their area was worth seeing; the beach, mountains, forests, lakes and the archipelago. They also would recommend taking the time to explore and enjoy what the nature had to offer.

Even though hosts are not obligated to feed the surfers 3% were still happy to offer breakfast or a traditional meal for the visitors for no charge. A local tour guide was promised by 3% as well. They wanted to take the surfers for a ride around the best spots in the area if the visitors were interested in such intents, which is a very nice gesture of the host. There are many hosts who go out of their way trying to make the surfer enjoy their stay and get the best experience:

My husband and I always cook for our surfers if we can swing it. If not, we like to take them out for some local Kansas City BBQ. If they want a tour of the city, we're more

than happy to do that, and of course, all of our facilities (shower, washer/dryer, Internet, TV, etc.) is available to use.

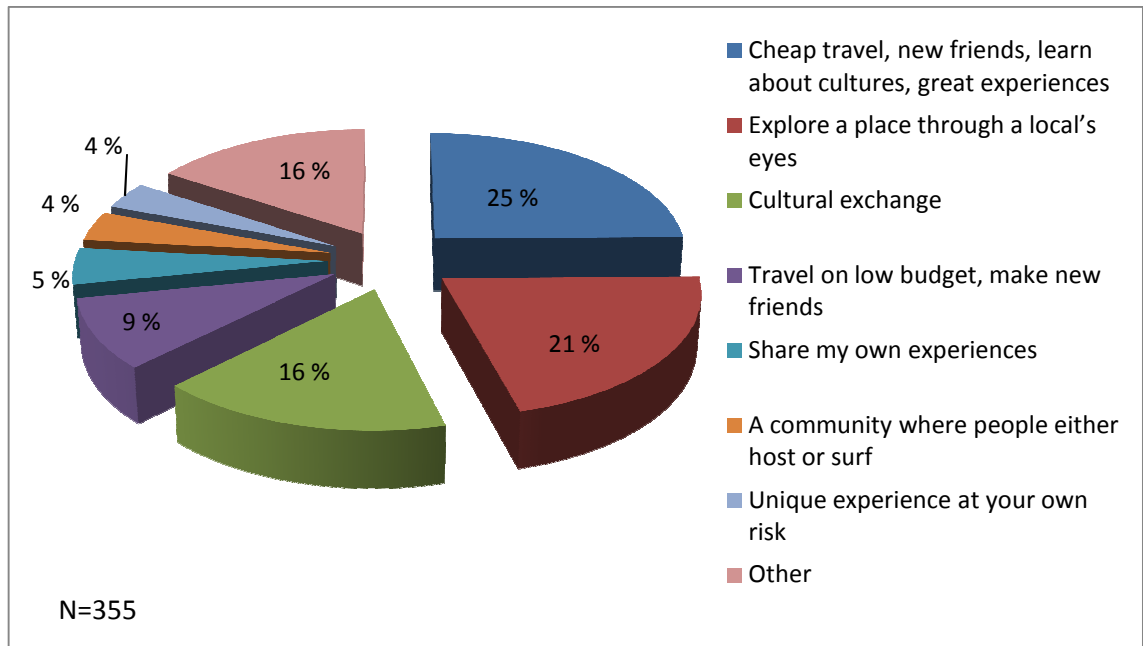


Figure 17. How to describe CouchSurfing to unaware people.

As seen in figure 17, the way 25% of people want to describe CouchSurfing is by telling that you can travel anywhere with a little money and during your trip you can make new friends worldwide and learn about their cultures having great experiences in the meanwhile. A way one participant described her opinion of CouchSurfing:

I would mention the cheap traveling, the aspect of meeting people of other cultures, a give and take relationship to other members, all the safety options, the uniqueness of the project and the situations you get into, that you can feel like traveling while you're at home thanks to your guests, and that it makes you happy!

According to another participant:

It's a way to not only travel for cheap, but to meet some of the most interesting people that you will ever meet. It's an opportunity to be reminded how inherently good and kind people are, and it gives you the ability to experience other lifestyles and cultures without the bias.

There were 21% who believe it should be described as getting to know the destination through a local's eyes. One's description was:

You want to travel and get the local experience? Advice, and friends in every place you visit? Join couchsurfing. The majority of the people are wonderful, kind, and open-minded. They give you advice, introduce you to their friends, and show you how much they love where they live. It really brings people together, and makes the world a smaller place. I love it.

While according to another participant:

As a good way to experience an area/culture from the point of view of the people living there, as well as seeing the main touristy stuff. You can meet some interesting people and can result in a good solid network of friends all around the world.

Do you like to travel? How would you like to meet locals and/or have a place to stay anywhere in the world, even Antarctica! Couchsurfing can open your world up to amazing experiences and people. People who want nothing more than to share their world with you.

How does this sound? According to 16% they would call it cultural exchange; when you travel to a place and learn about the culture there and at the same time you share your culture with your host.

I'd explain it as a community of travelers and hosts who use couchsurfer to travel, meet new people and share experiences. Couchsurfing is an excellent way to find out about an area from those who have great experience with it, whether you're travelling to Europe or just want to find likeminded people in your own town..

Travelling with a low budget and making new friends were described by 9%. There were comments such as "Want to meet new friends with an easy and budget-friendly way? Use CouchSurfing", showing that they did not care so much about the culture or local lifestyle whereas not having to pay much and getting international friends was more important.

From the figure 17 you can see that 5% said they preferred sharing their experiences instead of trying to describe how the concept works. Some 4% would say it is a community in the Internet where people either host or surf which works both ways. "I'd describe it as a way of hospitality exchange, where you get free accommodation but in return you have to be willing to accommodate travellers in your home, as well." However it is up to you to whether you only want to use if for one or the other. Maybe the respondent had understood wrong the idea or just wanted to describe it in that way in order to prevent people from taking advantage of the free accommodation.

A unique experience at your own risk would be the way described by 4%. By that they meant that you could have a wonderful experience with another member if you took the risk which of course exists. A participant would express it:

As a wonderful potential to have authentic experiences with people you'd otherwise never meet - broadening your horizon through taking the "risk" of opening up your home and heart to friends you just haven't met yet. A living breathing encyclopedia of the world - coming right to your living room and/or within reach of your every travel plan!

Other descriptions were

- A cheap way to travel (12)
- A way to discover the world (11)
- Just try it and see for yourself (8)
- Open your mind and home to a stranger like she was a family member (7)
- I would not describe it at all (5)
- I would invite them to one of the meetings (2)
- I don't know (3)
- It is not a dating site (2)
- Check the web pages (2)

Quite many people also mentioned that once they started talking about CouchSurfing to someone new they would observe their reaction and depending on it stop sharing or

if they seemed positively interested then they would continue telling more about the social network. It depends on the person in question whether it suits them. It really is not a thing for everyone. Some of those comments were:

I'd definitely only tell people who thinks it's worth & got the same spirit. I won't even bother to tell people who're narrow minded about the idea“ and "I let strangers come stay in my home, and I stay in theirs." If they look at me like I'm crazy, they should not be on CS, so I end my explanation. If they say "cool!!!", then I tell them how I can stay anywhere in the world without a hotel and with someone local who can provide travel tips and info. But chances are if I'm bothering to talk to a person, they are already cool enough to be on CS once they hear about it.

10.3 CouchSurfing members

The answers of this section are from the members of CouchSurfing.

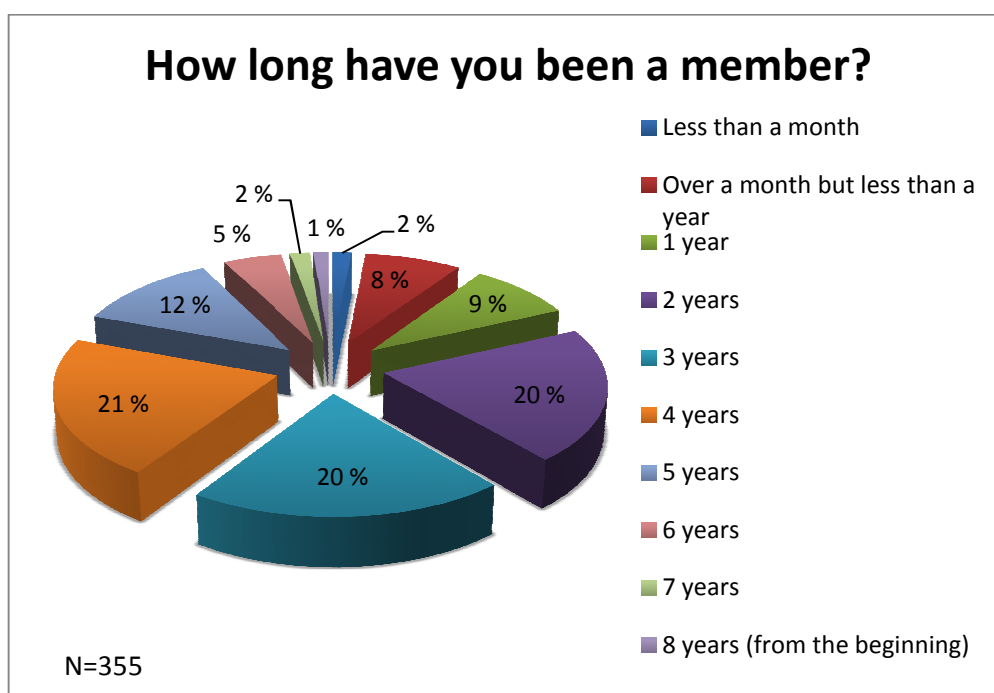


Figure 18. Length of membership.

Mostly members have been part of CouchSurfing between two and four years with total of 61% of the participants. Being a member for four years was the most common length at this point as seen in figure 18. There were also a handful of people who had

both been part since the beginning as well as less than a month. Based on the figure 17, you can tell that there are some very loyal members.

Out of the members 87% are active making only 13% non-active. Being active can mean many things; hosting or surfing, attending or organizing meetings, giving tips or any kind of activity with a member. It does not have to mean you have to participate on a weekly basis just as long as you do not have several months' breaks.

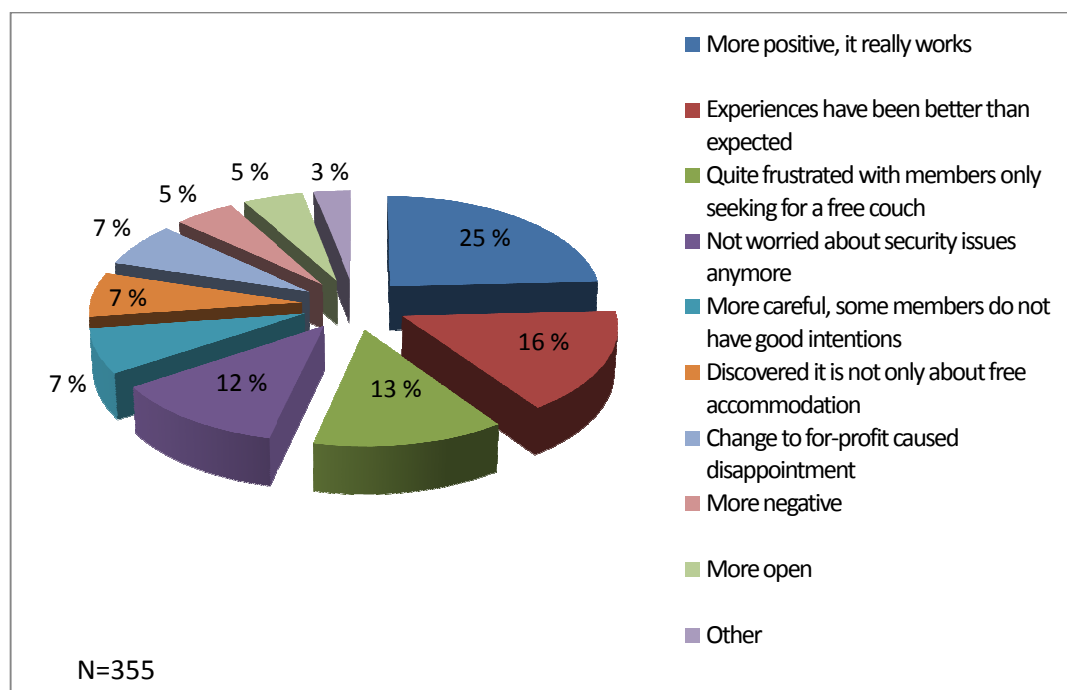


Figure 19. Change of opinions since joining CouchSurfing.

An amount of 61,9% considered that their thoughts had not changed after joining CouchSurfing. The 38,1% who would say there has been a change would describe it with several reasons. As seen from the figure 19, a quarter had realized that the concept really works. They had experienced good encounters with people and become more positive towards CouchSurfing.

There were 16% who had exceeded their presumptions and the experiences had been better than imagined. A member said: "I have yet to have a negative couchsurfing experience, everything has gone much better than expected." However 13% were frustrated with the people who do not care about the cultural experience but rather are

only looking to get a free place to stay and exploit the hosts in that way. “I am getting more frustrated with the CS'ers that are clearly asking for the 'free' side of it”, was an opinion one member left. It is understandable to feel disappointed in a concept if people misuse it.

A dozen had become more comfortable with the safety after their thoughts in the beginning. They had realized that if you follow the safety measures you can have a good and safe experience majority of the time. Someone said that she felt silly how worried she was before joining, however, quickly realized how great things can be once more familiarized with the network. One participant comments: “I think now that it is safer than I thought before. But I am also aware that many, many people use CS, and that it is always good to be vigilant, without being suspicious.”

At the same time 7% thought cautiousness was more necessary since all members do not have good intentions. By that they meant that there are some people who use CouchSurfing to find a date or take advantage of goodhearted people. “Too many douchebags wanting to take advantage of others.” The same amount discovered that they had only used the network for an opportunity to get a free couch but realized that there is so much more to the concept. This group of people made a great discovery. “I discovered it wasn't just about free accommodation.” Another 7% group were disappointed that CouchSurfing turned into a for-profit organization and they are hoping it will change back to non-profit and were considering whether to continue as a member. One said: “I am growing increasingly wary of the direction the enterprise has taken, in particular its transition to a B Corp.”

There were of course a handful of people that were not satisfied with the social network; 5% had become doubtful towards the concept after having negative experiences. Meanwhile another 5% had grown as people and become more open to new ideas. “I'm more open, understanding and compassionate towards opinions that I may previously have thought were wrong”, realized a member after using the network. When asked how the thoughts had changed another member said: “Yes. Everything in reality changes your opinion. But coachsurfing makes you be more open minded, that's

for sure.” The other 3% had discovered that even if you write a great, personalized request it does not mean that you will be a good surfer, though doubtful at first one had realized that CouchSurfing is a great way to meet new people and one had started as being sceptical and nowadays repeatedly amazed. Based on these experiences you can tell that it really depends on both members and how they undergo their time together and certain moments.

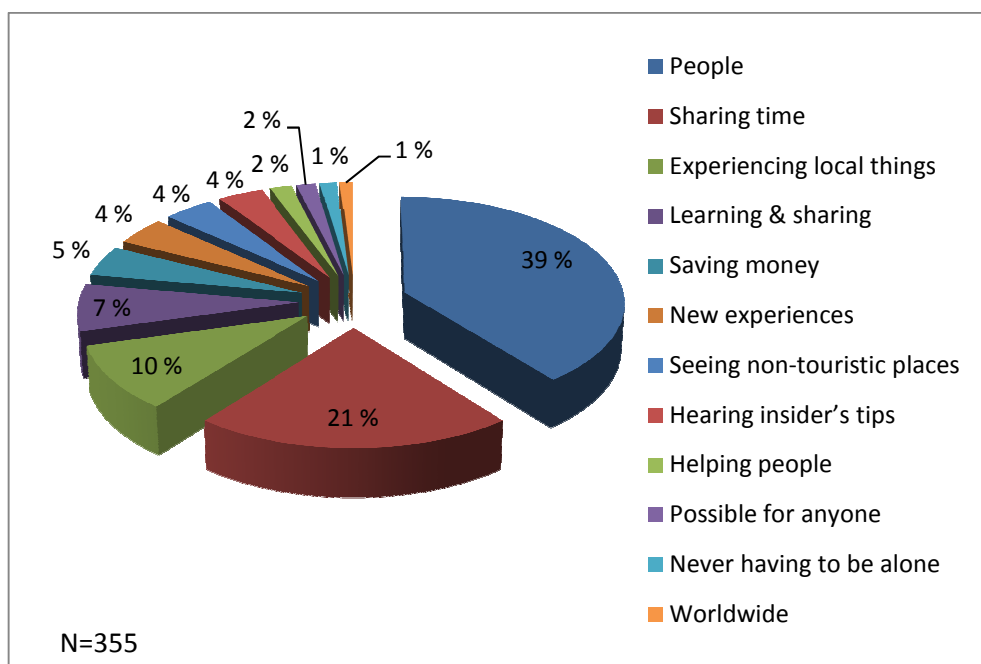


Figure 20. What is the greatest thing about CouchSurfing?

In this question the result was figured out by counting each member who mentioned the categories above. It seemed very hard just naming one quality therefore this method was used. As seen in figure 20 most members mentioned people, it was considered the best part of CouchSurfing by 39% of the participants: “For me it's the opportunity to meet and socialize with open and friendly people, and to learn about their way of living. It's also a way to enjoy places in your own city you might not otherwise see.” Another member said: “I love that I have the ability to travel anywhere and find like-minded (or not) new, interesting people. I love that there are still kind, trusting people in this world that open their doors to strangers.” While another participant was happy to find another member to rely on:

I was traveling alone in India and Nepal last year, and at one point I needed this "safety thing". Someone to rely on from time to time because of the fact I am a girl. I met CSer that completely fulfilled this need of mine and made my stay over there a-ma-zing!

Especially during longer trips company is necessary, it is hard to be alone in an unfamiliar country when travelling alone. Meeting a person to share everyday feelings and thoughts can be the turning point to making it a great trip. Another solo traveler shared her feelings. "Company when traveling alone (and being able to provide company for others when they travel alone) and the long lasting friendships that result."

Spending time, including conversations and activities was, enjoyed by 21% who found it the best thing while using the network. "I enjoy meeting new people and hearing the stories and sharing knowledge in a general sense. I like to look at different aspects of the world and how it works. Cultural nuances can be interesting." Making the effort to share time with each other is appreciated by both participants. That way learning is also possible and conversations can lead to a better understanding between people.

Meeting and learning from new people/cultures. Breaking down prejudices environmentally created due to ignorance. Then, on the other hand, re-enforcing current beliefs by meeting like minded people.

Getting to experience the local lifestyle and authentic moments were appreciated by 10%. What better way of learning first hand about a culture and the local lifestyle than staying with a local. "Getting in touch with different cultures with no prejudice" felt one member. Some 7% enjoyed sharing their culture with other nationalities and in return appreciated learning about various cultures. "Share cultures and expand your horizon."

Only 5% mentioned free accommodation or saving money. This can be drawn to a conclusion that people enjoyed more the facts that they could spend time talking to CouchSurfers and doing activities with them rather than travel just to get a free couch for the night. Approximately 1% was happy to travel anywhere knowing that they would not have to be alone although they travelled alone. A member who thought

travelling alone was great yet not being alone said: “That you are never alone, there are always others that offer to you their company, wherever you are.” CouchSurfing is a great way to travel as a couple or a group, however, it also gives a perfect opportunity to people who travel alone due to several reasons already mentioned in chapter 3.

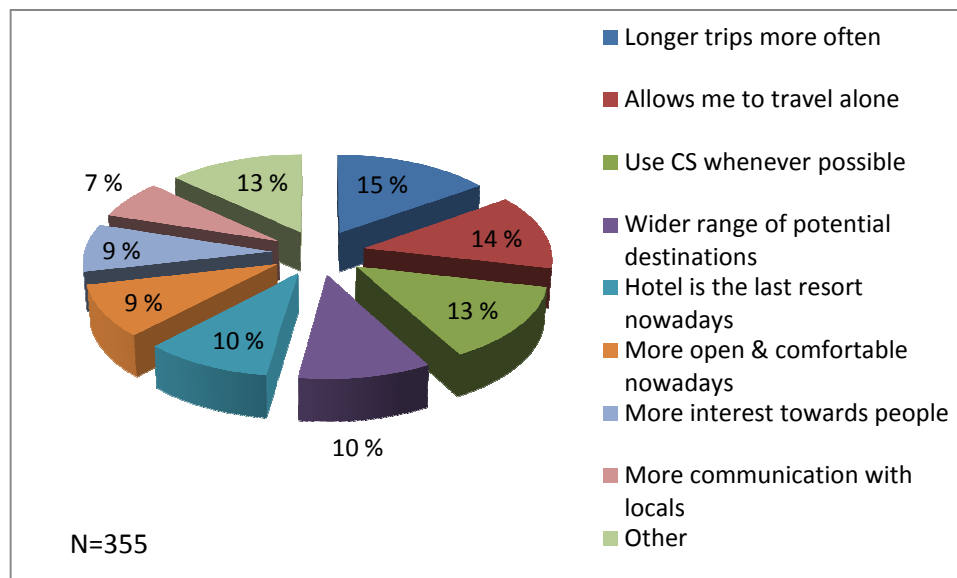


Figure 21. How has your travelling habits changed?

When asked “Has CouchSurfing changed your travelling habits?”, 32,9% said that it has not and majority 67,1% admitted that it has. They explained how it has affected their travelling habits and the results are distributed quite evenly.

- 15% Longer trips more often
- 14% Allows me to travel alone (without fear)
- 13% Use CS whenever possible
- 10% Wider range of potential destinations
- 10% Hotel is the last resort nowadays
- 9% More open & comfortable nowadays
- 9% More interest towards people rather than sights
- 7% More communication with locals
- 5% Enjoy travelling more by meeting CSers
- 3% Stay in hotels but meet CSers
- 3% More understanding of the place I visit

- 2% No plans in advance

People were glad to be able to travel alone knowing that there were great CouchSurfers everywhere who they could spend time with no matter where they were staying. One woman said: “I travel alone nowadays. Yet I might meet even more new people. I'm more confident.” Other members had gained confidence as well: “I'm more social, talkative and open minded than ever.” CouchSurfing has given them a chance of being themselves yet at the same time get accepted exactly for whom they are. The confidence can be gained from positive occasions.

About 13% attempted to use CouchSurfing as often as possible as seen in figure 21. By that a handful (3%) meant that they looked for company while visiting places: “More open to travelling. Travel to visit friends I've made in CS, and when travelling for work I will look up potential surfers to meet up where I go”, while others also hoped of getting a place to stay: “I no longer look for hotels, and more importantly, when I am planning to travel somewhere, I ask all relevant questions to the group related to that location. Then my travels are even more well-planned and enjoyable.” Some people also mentioned that they would try finding someone to stay with through CouchSurfing before even considering a hotel. It would be the last resort if they did not have any other choice.

There were 9% who had started enjoying the local company so much that their trips were nowadays more about the people than the sights. According to one respondent: “I tend to stay in one place for longer. A country's people and the chance to talk with them are now the main reasons why I visit a country, not seeing the sights.”

The people who said they did not make any plans anymore specified it by saying that they preferred staying with CouchSurfers and taking each day as it comes. Since you never know what people you meet along the way it is easier to adjust your schedule if you do not have any plans. They also enjoyed meeting new people and spontaneously continuing travels with people they got along with.

CouchSurfing also enabled people (15%) to travel more often since staying with hosts saved money and also make longer trips for the same reason. Travelling more also meant meeting more people through CouchSurfing which advances tolerance and adjustment. One member considered he had become: “more friendly, exposed to loads of cultures, have more respect for other people.” CouchSurfing also provided a wider range of countries to go to thought 10% of respondents. With the help of a local it is easier to adjust to the place and get to know how things work there. “Now I see as a real option that works. Before I thought it is something obscure and risky.”

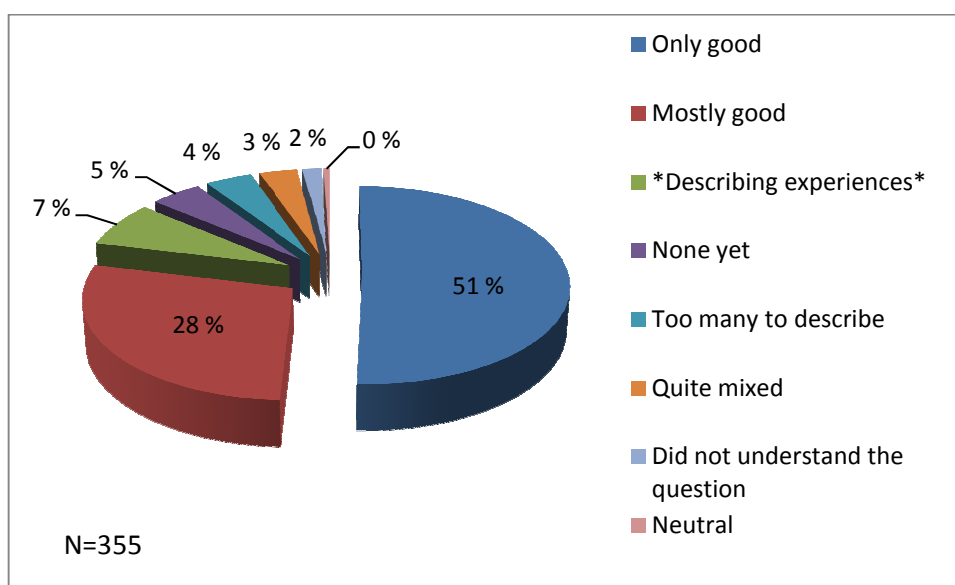


Figure 22. What kind of experiences have you had?

Over half of members have had only good experiences as seen in figure 22. Over a quarter felt that most of their CouchSurfing experiences had been mostly good. Those 28% mentioned they had undergone a few negative experiences, however, basically good ones. One member said: “Mostly good - just the odd person who doesn’t seem to know how to communicate”, while another member had a worse experience:

Almost all my experiences on couchsurfing were positive, except for one case when someone stole money from me (and it was my mistake that I trusted him so much and lent him money that he never gave back to me) and a few cases where I felt the guests who crashed at my place were not worthy of what I offered them.

Experiences like that can make people more cautious towards others yet it was good that the guy understood that he should not have lent any money in the first place. No matter how good the experience had been otherwise the stealing will always remind of the time shared.

Regarding experiences a member said that he had had: "Too many. Most good, some strange and some truly great. You hear horror stories, but a bit of common sense and caution you can avoid the worst." He was right about being cautious, by being sensible you can keep yourself away from situations you do not want to be in. Another participant said: "All positive, some very positive, some just not so positive, but all people I met were nice", so it also depends how you look at it. All gatherings cannot be great yet it does not mean that they are negative either. Getting along with someone does not mean that it is a bad experience if you did not "click". Of course there are occasions where the experience really is negative, however, mostly it depends on the attitude people have and how they behave. A misunderstanding can also be a reason for a bad experience.

"Few amazing, few good, a lot of average, with a handful that treat it like a free hostel, and a few below average experiences", is another good example of how people can think differently. Some people consider being exploited for a free couch as a negative experience while others consider it average. Of course the most important thing is that nobody got physically hurt. Maybe the host was offended by the surfer's behaviour which is understandable, nobody wants to be taken advantage of like that, and however, at least it was nothing bigger than that.

Some 7% gave a few samples by describing their past experiences quite closely. The new members must be the 5% who did not have any experiences yet. Only 3% had very mixed experiences. One member describes her experiences as:

Good and Horrible. I was once sexually harassed by my host, who kept me captive in his flat for several hours. I thought he was going to rape me or kill me.. or both. He was very drunk and would start touching me and I would have to yell at him and get his filthy hands off me. Finally I managed to escape with many kg of luggage and he started

chasing me. I had to hide for almost an hour behind some walls and then run to the next train stop. When the train came it broke on that station! We waited for half an hour (that seemed an eternity). The bad thing is that even though I sent a copy of a police report to CS, they never did anything! I never got a reply! I tried to contact them through several means! So the website is not safe in that sense.

Sounds like this member has been through a really bad experience and it is wrong that the organization did not do anything about it or at least nothing she is aware of. This kind of experiences should not happen but the way a member describes it: “You learn that despite all the good intentions of 99% of travellers there will always be one or two who are troublesome! But hey that’s life.” People are different and there is always an exception out there so it is just bad luck running into them and it does not mean everyone will have such an experience. Or as a member puts it: “70% great, 20% OK, 8% no need to stay in touch, 2% bad.”

Out of all participants there was just one who only had a neutral experience. Hard to say if the person was talking about a single event or if she had several neutral experiences. Of course all opinions depend on how a person processes the experience. You might see and react completely differently than the other person.

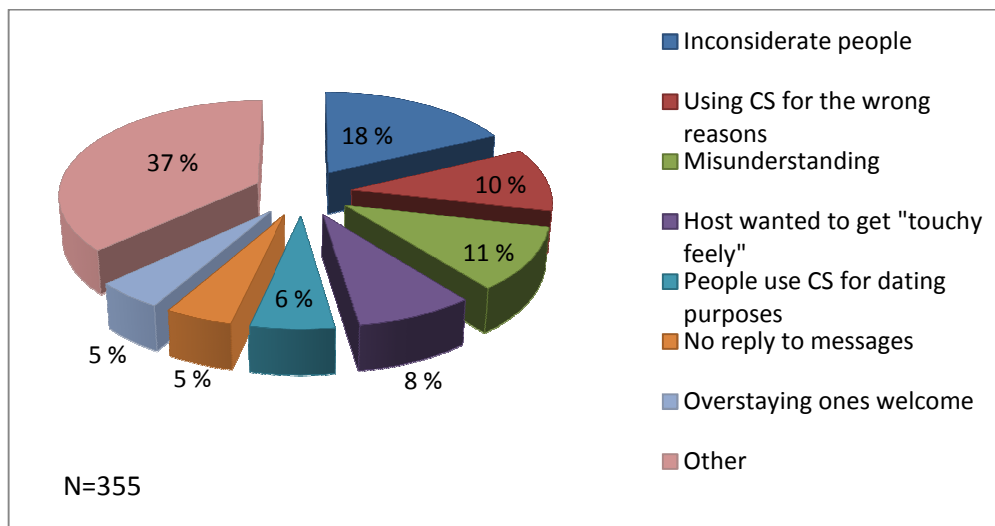


Figure 23. What kind of bad experiences have you had?

Most people, 68%, did not have any experiences of bad moments with CouchSurfers whereas 32% felt they had encountered bad experiences. Out of those people the ones

who had had bad experiences 18% were considered of being inconsiderate by not respecting the other or cleaning after themselves as seen in figure 23. That meant normal everyday impoliteness, such as not bothering to shower, leaving a place dirty, yet not leaving the host a reference, or not considering how the other individual would feel like, for example by not asking the host to join in activities.

Using CouchSurfing for just a free couch were considered wrong by 10%. Common misunderstandings and cultural misunderstandings made up for 11%. This group had plenty of little events where the cultures clashed or they could not understand each other's behaviour correctly. Difference between cultures can easily create situations where understanding is not mutual and at least one side can get the wrong idea.

Some 7% of members unfortunately experienced people who got too up close and personal. You should never feel pressured or uncomfortable being around the opposite sex while CouchSurfing. A few members also had too many expectations beforehand which lead to an disappointment and, finally, was considered as bad experience. A handful encountered untrustworthy individuals and there were the occasional lack of communication as well.

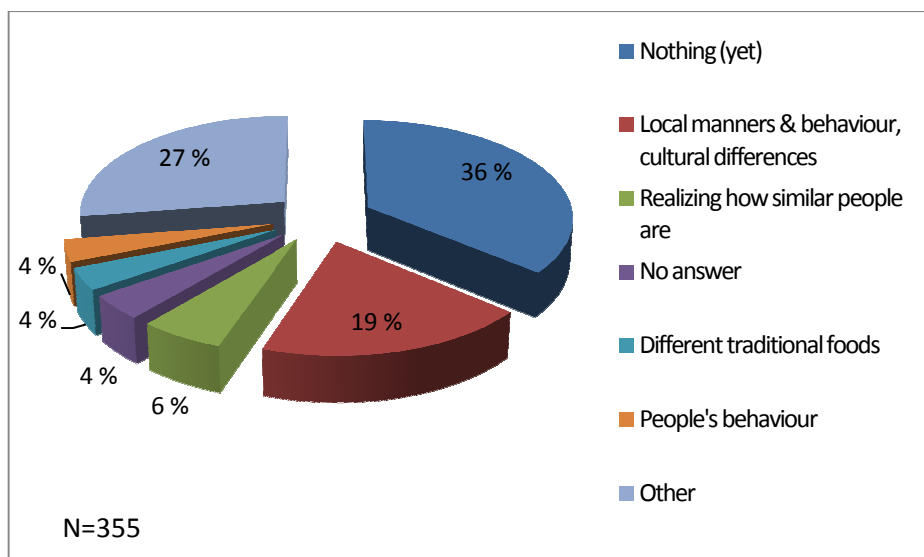


Figure 24. The most unusual experiences.

Unusual experiences were mostly regarding cultural differences. This was considered by 19% who found themselves in very interesting situations by meeting an individual

of another country. The fact that cultures, and also people, are different can often lead to a weird feeling about the other since not used to their culture. However, diversity should be recognized as an asset which can enrich life.

People's behaviour in general was also the reason for odd moments which consisted of 4% as seen in figure 24. The habits people have can seem strange, however, it also depends on how you look at it and what you are used to. Another eyebrow raiser was getting a chance to try the traditional dishes. Those 8% of people were offered a range of different foods like cow's lungs and sheep's head, for instance, however, the surfers still politely ate what was offered.

The biggest group, however, were the people who were not familiar with any unusual experiences with 36%. They had not come across any exceptional moments or considered being so open to everything that nothing would shock them.

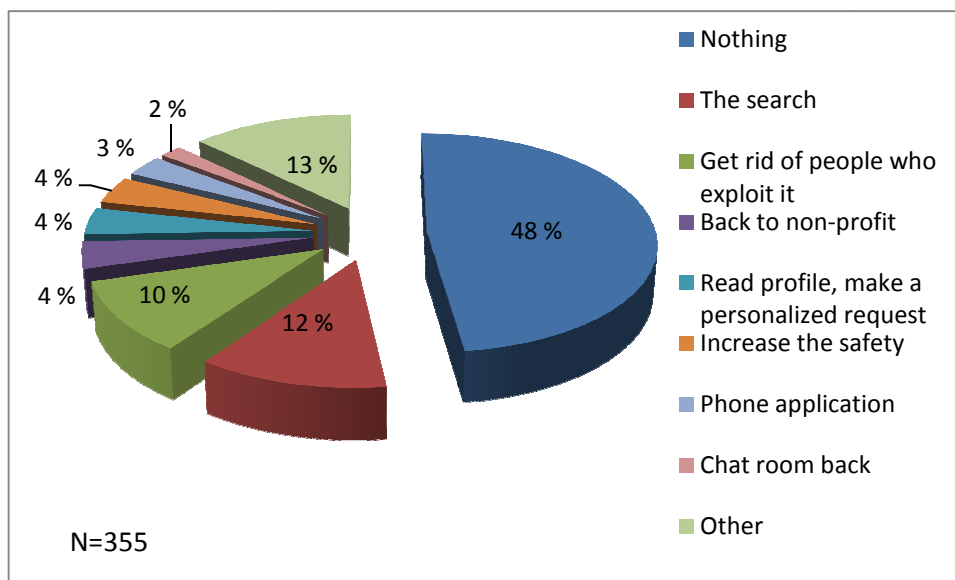


Figure 25. Improvement ideas.

Mostly CouchSurfers were happy the way the network is working at the moment, 48% said they would not change anything. The search button caused several comments, 12% were having a hard time finding what they wanted as seen in figure 25. They wish it would have a wider selection of categories and easier to find friends.

Some 10% had experienced being used for only their couch or guys trying to get dates out of the social network. The group of people would like the organization getting rid of those people who do not use it for the right reasons. Only 4% were worried about the safety issues and some were hoping for background checks on people before being able to start using the network properly.

There were 3% who were yearning for a mobile phone application which would make it a lot easier to use the web site while abroad or travelling in your native country. Other improvements would be changing the feedback system to making it a little easier to write a negative reference, add more information in the profile such as a smoker/non-smoker and, finally, someone mentioned it would be great to see the past events.

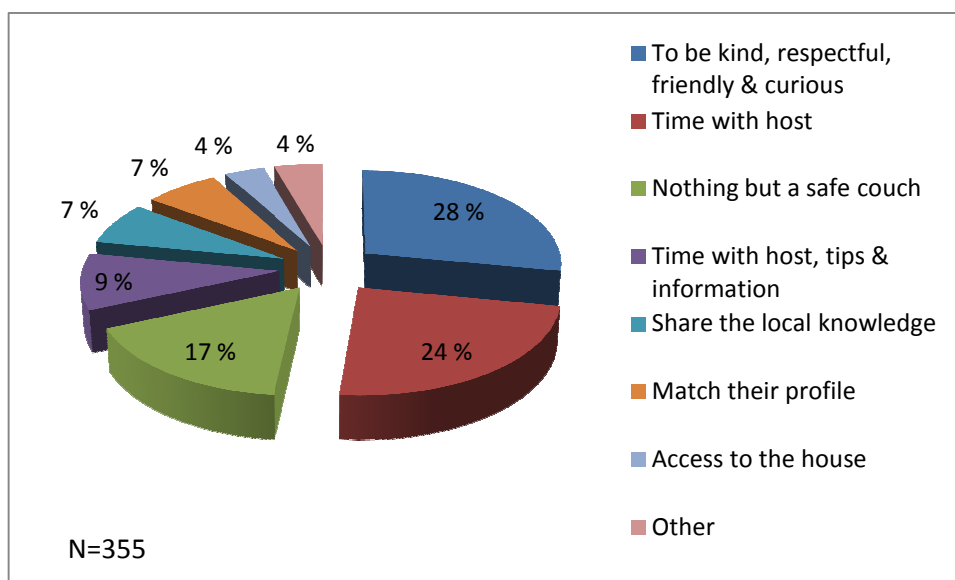


Figure 26. What people expect from a host in addition to a couch.

Most individuals were happy getting a nice host who would show some interest towards the surfer and respect the personal space. Those 28% would easily adapt to the host's schedule without expecting to get any sightseeing company. In social networks, like the CouchSurfing, as little as a friendly host who shows respect and kindness is very appreciated.

There were 24% who wanted to spend time with the host and expecting that to be arranged by the host. Quite many were also just happy getting a couch. As seen in figure 26, the group in question consisted of 17% who took everything else as a nice bonus. Access to the house was expected by 4% and by that they meant being able to use the bathroom and kitchen facilities, the keys were not mentioned by any of them. There was only one person in the other category expecting to receive keys right away and a few who thought food was part of the deal. Some were just looking for some company, however, preferred staying at a hotel during the nights.

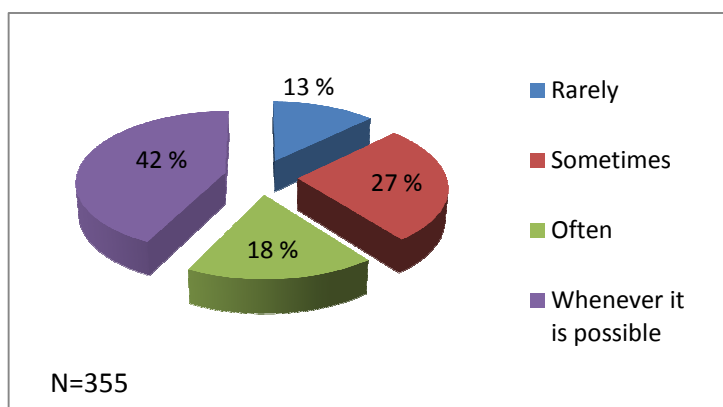


Figure 27. How often do people use CouchSurfing.

Whenever it is possible was definitely the most popular answer with 42%. The possibility might result from having a hard time finding a host in popular visiting areas, the company they are travelling with are not tolerate of the sleeping arrangement or the fact that many couples also prefer to use a hotel while travelling together. As seen in figure 27, 27% use CouchSurfing sometimes when they feel like it and 18% preferred to use it often. Rarely was chosen by 13% which could mean that they travel a lot, however, only at times use CouchSurfing during their trips or that they hardly ever travel but still pretty much all those times like to use CouchSurfing. Either way the outcome is that members are quite addicted to CouchSurfing and use it a lot of the time.

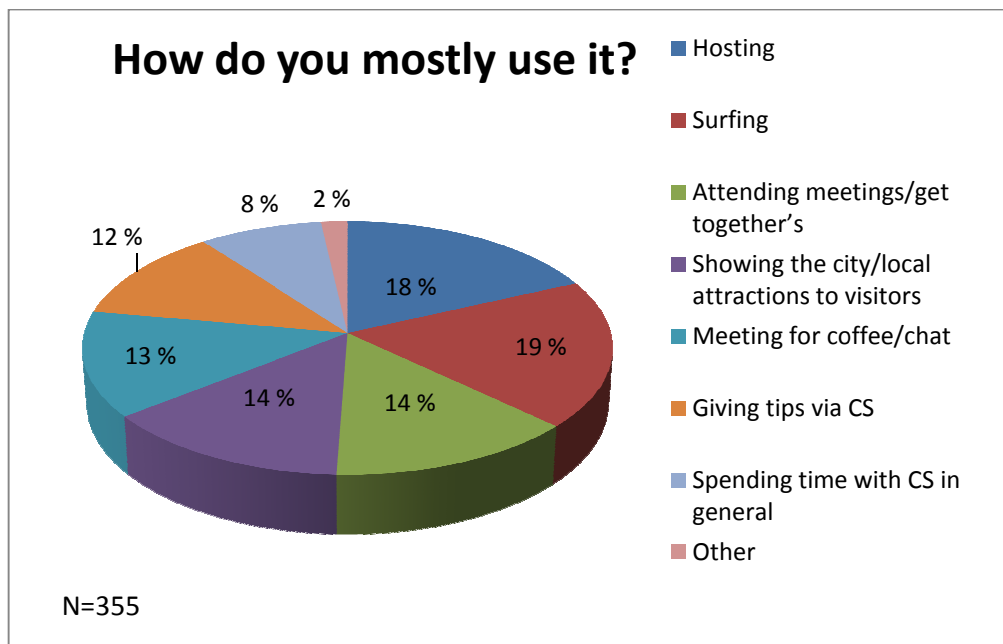


Figure 28. Spending time.

The most common activity was surfing which was preferred by 19% of the people. That could mean that they surf abroad while travelling or even enjoying a night in their hometown being able to meet other members by doing it. As seen in figure 28, 18% used it for hosting travellers. Those two activities were almost even. Many hosts like to show their hometown to visitors by taking them sightseeing or even to a few attractions if they have a limited timetable. Those 14% enjoy showing the best places to see which can be non-touristic yet wonderful and unique spots. Another 14% liked to participate in meetings and activities which members arrange very often depending on the place. The 2% consisted of people who liked to volunteer, organize meetings, start groups and ask for tips.

10.4 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are the two ways to measure the research's reliability. The two are separated, however, together they illustrate the measure of reliability. (Alkula, Pöntinen & Ylöstalo 1999, 89.) The researcher's proper knowledge of the subject also affects the reliability. On the other hand the knowledge can also weaken the results if the researcher's lack of objectivity shows. (Vilkka 2006, 103.) Being part of CouchSurfing might affect the interpretation of the open answers, however, the author's intention is to keep her opinions separated from the results and stay objective.

In quantitative research validity means it examines if the results match with the project's objectives. In order of getting truthful and reliable results it is important to measure exactly what needs to be measured. The outcome should not be similar due to a result from a coincident. Sometimes the researcher believes of researching something specific, however, instead turns out that the measuring methods are not the correct ones. This would be the case in a misunderstanding about the meaning of the question between what the researcher meant and how the participants understand the question. Therefore there is a weakness in the measurement. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 231.) In the "aware" questionnaire a few people had misunderstood the question 9) What can you offer to travellers in your area?, in other words there was a weakness in the measurement since everybody did not understand the question. The question should have been more clarified. Some were wondering what exactly was meant by the question; whether the author meant if they have a couch to offer, friendship, information or activities and tourguiding for example.

Reliability means that the results can be repeated. If the result is the same no matter who the researcher is then they are reliable. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 231.) Producing the same results from two different measures or different researchers signifies that the research is reliable. (Black 1999, 144.) The reliability is hardly ever absolut, however, still the research attempts to avoid mistakes. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 231.)

For the purpose of getting a good questionnaire it is required to use the following characteristics: using clarity, asking specific and short questions, avoiding questions with a double meaning, giving options such as "no opinion" or "does not apply to me", considering the order and amount of questions, using multiple choice questions, revising the the words used. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009 s. 202-203.) In the "aware" questionnaire of this research there were too many questions which were partly also a bit too similar such as comparing the answers of 7) What were your thoughts about CouchSurfing when you first heard of it? and 8) What do you think about CouchSurfing now? to the results of 13) Have your opinions changed after you first joined the network?

There were also questions which could have been a multiple choice instead of an open question, 3) How did you hear about CouchSurfing, and 14) What is the greatest thing about CouchSurfing, for instance. However, using open questions was to determine and get more insight about the opinions and experiences people have had. Learning from mistakes is inevitable, it is hard for the first time, however, gets easier with experiences.

Another change that would be made is making all the questions mandatory since not everyone answered each question. Being a bit afraid that if all questions were made compulsory some people might have decided not to answer the questionnaire at all or would have closed the link before completing it so that is why it was decided not to risk it. Now there are sections where some answers are missing, however, the result answers are quite similar so nothing crucial was probably missed that were not already there in the first place.

10.5 SWOT

There is definitely more good in CouchSurfing than bad. With some small improvements the social network could be made even more safer.

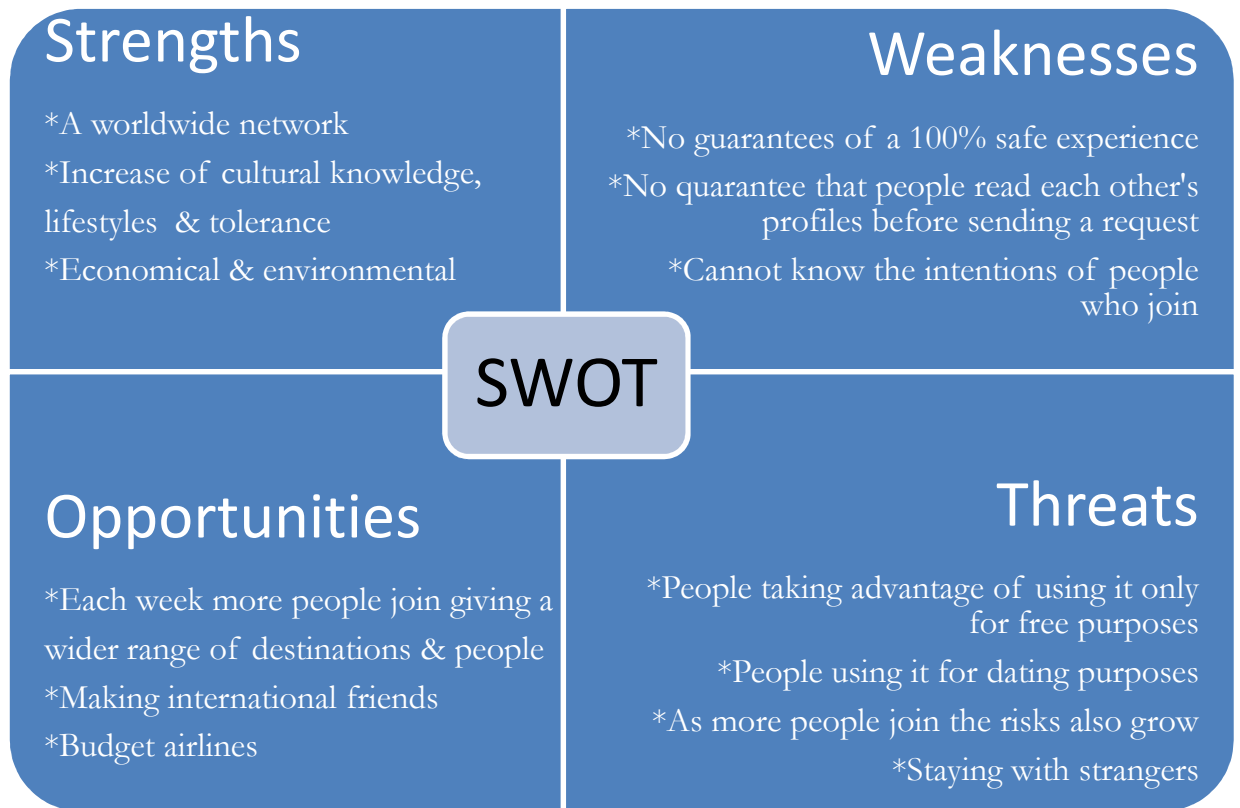


Figure 29. SWOT.

10.5.1 Strengths

There are over 3 million members who have joined CouchSurfing to help other travellers feel more comfortable and safe to travel around. Most members also leave a reference after meeting someone to give others an idea of the person.

The web pages are constantly changing and improving. The staff is making them very clear so it is easy to find what you are looking for. CouchSurfing has the strength of making people more tolerant towards other races, nationalities and people different in general as seen from figure 29. It is also free which makes it an economical choice for people who otherwise could not afford to travel.

10.5.2 Weaknesses

Sometimes, or rather often, when surfers are trying to find a host they send requests to several people. At times those requests are copy and paste versions which is definitely not recommended because it does not have any kind of personal touch to it. The surfer then might get more than one acceptance and if they are not fair they might accept one and keep the other one as a just-in-case –option.

There are also times when someone gets accepted, however then just simply do not show up without any kind of contact with the host. These cases can be rather common. Maybe they got another host or their trip was cancelled but either way they should always inform their host about what is going on instead of keeping them hanging.

People do not always read the profiles thoroughly and then there are disappointments if they do not get along with their host. That is why reading the whole profile and searching for signs of common interests is a small way of making the experience better.

It is not guaranteed that the experience will be completely safe, however, several safety measures are done to increase the safety and are constantly being improved. Common sense must be used each time meeting a new member.

10.5.3 Opportunities

The network can become even more popular as people hear about it. The more there are members the more chances there are to host and surf. When people from small communities join there are wider opportunities to travel to places that are not so common among travelers. However, in big cities there are more chances to get a couch unless there is a big event like a festival or conference going on. During those times it can be difficult to find a host because all the members have already promised their couches to someone else. In times like those more members would be needed, and through awareness more profiles can be made. However, growth of the network is also a threat since some people do not have the best intentions.

Nowadays when low-cost airlines are very popular, it is easier and cheaper to travel. However quite many ridiculously cheap flights arrive at the worst times such as very late in the night when the public transportation does not run that often anymore. That is the bad side of getting to your destination with cheap prices. Having a host makes the trip even cheaper, and it is easier to get to know the area through a locals eyes. You have a good chance of getting insider's tips of places to visit or restaurants to eat in and you have company too. You have a wonderful opportunity to get to know someone new and their culture.

10.5.4 Threats

People who do not have the nicest intentions in mind and anyone can make a profile. Nevertheless, there is always a risk that people do not behave well and might take advantage of the surfer/host. It is impossible to know what kind of intentions people have when they join. Mostly, however, the experiences have been positive, so most people are there for genuine reasons.

Staying with a stranger means taking a risk each time you meet a new member. That is why common sense must be used at all times. Minority of participants use the site for meeting members of the opposite sex for dating purposes. That is not the original point of CouchSurfing; it was established for creating new friendships with people from all over the world and learning about other cultures in addition to the free couch.

11 Conclusions

CouchSurfing is a network which helps travellers meet locals, get company and insiders' knowledge about the area, in addition to the possibility of free accommodation. It is common to travel alone which gives a better opportunity of getting to know more people and altering your travelling plans whenever necessary. Furthermore, even women feel more comfortable travelling alone due to the fact that there are members located all over the world who do not mind giving a helping hand in need. CouchSurfing also helps to get travelling company and tie new friendships throughout your travels. There are always like-minded travellers around who enjoy meeting new people.

A great part of CouchSurfing is that there is a mixture of members of all ages and occupations. There are singles, couples and even families who are part of the network. Reading the profile carefully before sending a request, is a way for people to find members who have common interests which increases the chances of having a nice experience and subjects to talk about.

Due to the cheap flights offered by multiple budget airlines, and staying with CouchSurfers, travelling has become more affordable for majority of people. Moreover, the people who could not travel to exotic destinations because of expensive flights and standard of living, can now save expenses on accommodation. Finally, even though the accommodation is free, the most important aspect of CouchSurfing is the new people you meet and the cultures you get to know. There is so much CouchSurfing can offer that money cannot buy.

CouchSurfing also favours sustainable tourism, since most of the members do not use hotel services or demand new, clean towels and sheets daily. Nevertheless, flying (especially long-distance) increases the carbon footprint which is not sustainable.

People have different reasons that motivate them to travel; it can be anything from an interest towards the destination's attractions, a personal interest, such as event or

hobby, to the pleasure of travelling. Some people have to travel for health reasons while others are motivated to get to know other cultures and people. CouchSurfing can advance motivation to travel. It gives an opportunity to travel anywhere and instantly have friends and people to lean on. Additionally, it is also a great benefit to the people who like to travel but do not have anyone to travel with. Furthermore, through CouchSurfing you can find fellow travellers to join your trip, or contact them and meet/stay with them at the destination. The opportunities are wider for anyone who enjoys traveling. Nothing is mandatory, and CouchSurfing can also be used for only meeting locals at the destinations, instead of using the free accommodation aspect. CouchSurfing is a network for open-minded people who can put aside their prejudices.

Staying at somebody else's home can be a motivator as well. Seeing other individuals' unique homes can be an exciting experience. Additionally, some people prefer to be accommodated in places like B&B or a guesthouse which provides a different kind of homestay. CouchSurfing could be compared to homestay accommodation as it offers the same, however, without having to pay.

As a conclusion to the research it can be said that each participant had their own opinion about CouchSurfing, however, quite many of them were very similar. The people who heard about CouchSurfing for the first time mostly were open to the idea and quite many also showed interest towards it. Naturally, some individuals did not get interested about the social network, instead preferred travelling traditionally. They were not as open-minded as others.

Though CouchSurfing evoked curiosity, it also made people question about the safety and trust they could have towards people. Many were worried that the members are not reliable and were not keen on travelling alone in case something happened. Mainly the prejudices people had were towards the reliability and trust, not against other nationalities and races. Instead participants were very interested in meeting people and joining them for sightseeing or a chat, nevertheless, not so keen on spending the night.

The participants who were already aware of CouchSurfing mostly were members. Many had been extremely interested in the concept and willing to give it a try without any doubts. There were also people who wanted to try, yet, were also concerned about the safety issues, which in some cases was the reason for not joining.

Overall, the opinions and prejudices people had had were divided in groups with likeminded thoughts. The experiences people had encountered were very diverse, yet, mostly positive in spite of some neutral or negative experiences people had had.

The research method used was quantitative and it was conducted by means of questionnaire. Though the answers were very similar, some questions arised some doubts and there were some problems understanding what the author had meant. Those can affect the results, however, most of the respondents had understood the questions correctly. There was a weakness in the measurement, that cannot be denied. In addition, some questions should have been thought about more in depth, since a few were very similar, giving quite similar answers.

The questionnaire seemed to evoke curiosity in several people, so maybe more people will join the social network for some cultural exchanges. CouchSurfing is for open-minded people, however, does not suit everyone. Furthermore, it is a way to make new friends anywhere in the world, share your culture and knowledge with them and learn about various lifestyles. For some members CouchSurfing is a lifestyle but for most it is a nice addition to their list of hobbies.

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Attachments

Attachment 1. Questionnaire: Not aware of CouchSurfing

CouchSurfing

1) Are you a male or a female?

Male Female

2) Please state your age.

-17 18-21 22-25 26-30 31-35
 36-40 41-45 46-50 51-

3) Who do you travel with?

Friends Family Boyfriend/girlfriend
 Co-workers By myself Someone else, who?

CouchSurfing is a web-based network where each member makes a profile. When travelling you have an opportunity to request to stay with another member located in that area for free. You can also host people travelling to your area whenever it is suitable for you. Nothing is mandatory and you can also choose just to meet with the CouchSurfers for coffee or other activities without hosting them. In bigger cities there are weekly meetings for CouchSurfers and some people also arrange activities to get a chance to meet new people.

4) What kind of thoughts does CouchSurfing awake in you?

5) Would you consider making a profile?

Yes No, why not?

6) Would you like to participate in CouchSurfing?

Yes, how?
 No

7) Please give five adjectives that come into your mind when thinking of CouchSurfing.

8) What could you offer to travellers in your area?

9) When travelling what would you expect from your host?

10) Based on the information you just received did you get curious about CouchSurfing?

Yes No, how come?

Thank you for taking the time to answer this questionnaire!

CouchSurfing (aware)

1) Are you a male or a female?

Male Female

2) Please state your age.

-17 18-21 22-25 26-30 31-35

36-40 41-45 46-50 51-

3) How did you hear of CouchSurfing?

4) Who do you travel with? (You can choose several)

Friends Family Boyfriend/girlfriend

Co-workers By myself Someone else, who?

5) Are you part of CouchSurfing?

Yes No

6) If not, would you consider joining?

Yes No, why not?

7) What were your thoughts about CouchSurfing when you first heard of it?

8) What do you think about CouchSurfing now?

9) What can you offer to travellers in your area?

10) How would you describe CouchSurfing to someone who is not aware of it?

11) How long have you been part of CouchSurfing?

- Less than a month Over a month but less than a year 1 year 2 years 3 years
 4 years 5 years 6 years 7 years 8 years (from the beginning)

12) Are you an active member?

- Yes No

13) Have your opinions changed after you first joined the network?

- Yes, how?
 No

14) What is the greatest thing about CouchSurfing?

15) Has CouchSurfing changed your travelling habits?

- Yes, how?
 No

16) What kind of experiences have you had?

17) Have you ever had any negative experiences while using CouchSurfing?

- No
 Yes, what kind?

18) What is the most unusual experience you have encountered culture wise?

19) What would you like to change/improve about the project?

20) When travelling what do you expect from your host?

21) When travelling how often do you use CouchSurfing?

- Rarely Sometimes Often Whenever it is possible

22) How do you mostly use it? (You can choose several)

Hosting

Surfing

Attending meetings/get together's

Showing the city/local attractions to visitors

Meeting for coffee/chat

Giving tips via CouchSurfing

Spending time with CouchSurfers in general

Other, what?

23) Please feel free to share any comments or thoughts about CouchSurfing or this questionnaire.

Thank you for taking the time to answer this questionnaire!

Thanks again!:)