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THE STUDY OF ONLINE HOSPITALITY EXCHANGE:
‘THE CASE OF COUCH SURFING NETWORK’

Unit (Business Economics and Tourism)

2015

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ABSTRACT

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Opinnäytetyön nimi:	Tutkimus vieraanvaraisuuden vaihto: "kyseessä CouchSurfing"
Vuosi:	2015
Kieli:	Englanti
Sivumäärä:	62
Ohjaaja:	Thomas Sabel

Työ esitetään tässä ensinnäkin pyritään luomaan tietoisuutta koko käsite "sohvalla surfing," suhteellisen uusi ilmiö, kun haetaan "vaihtoehtoinen" ja edullisia tapoja matkustaa uusiin kohteisiin. Tämä erityisesti tutkimustyön hahmotellaan painopiste ja näkymiä vaihtoehtoisia tapoja matkustaa nykyään. Se sitten etenee selittää noin sohvalla surfing Idea, miten se toimii samoin kuin sen hyödyt ja kritiikkiä.

Teoreettinen viitekehys tutkimustyö perustuu motivaatio tekijöitä on-listuu matkoilla vaihtoehtoisesti luokittelemalla matkustajat käyttäytyminen, intressit ja kokemukset sekä tekijöitä kasvu suosio sosiaalisten verkossa vieraanvaraisuuden välisiä verkostoja osallistujien. Tutkimus toteutettiin avulla laadullisen tutkimuksen, Inter-katselu 8 aktiivinen sohvalla surfing jäseniä. Kyselylomake on laadittu ja toimitettu osallistujien, joka perustuu löytää tietoa heidän tietoisuuttaan matkustaa ominaisuuksia. Miten aikojen ydin päätelmät perustuivat motivoivaa ja sosiaalisen vaihdon tekijöitä mukana käyttäen sohvalla surfing sekä sen hyödyt. Tutkijan oma kokemus ja ajatuksia myös jaettu lyhyesti.

Tutkimuksen tulokset ja tutkimus osoittaa suurta innostusta ja luottaa kohti tällaista verkossa vieraanvaraisuuden verkkojen ja vaihtoehtoisia tapoja matkustaa (sohva surffaus) sekä kokous ja majoittuminen tuntemattomien matkoilla ulkomailla. Ehdotuksia saatiin myös osallistujien ja tutkijan siitä, miten saavuttaa positiivinen ja rikastuttava kokemus matkoilla ja käyttää sohvalla surfing verkkoon.

Avainsanat: *vaihtoehtoinen matkailu, sohva surffaus, luokittelu matkailijoille, motivaatio ja edut.*

ABSTRACT

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Title:	The study of hospitality exchange: 'The case of couchsurfing'
Year:	2015
Language:	English
Pages:	62
Name of Supervisor:	Thomas Sabel

The work presented here firstly aims at creating awareness about the whole concept of 'couch surfing,' relatively a new phenomenon when seeking 'alternative' and inexpensive ways to travel to new destinations. This particular research work outlines the emphasis and prospects of alternative ways to travel nowadays. It then progresses to explaining about the couch surfing idea, how it functions as well as its benefits and criticisms.

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the motivation factors that are involved when traveling in alternative ways, classifying the traveler's behavior, interests and experiences along with the factors behind the increase in popularity of social online hospitality networks amongst participants. The research was conducted by qualitative research, interviewing eight active couch surfing members. A questionnaire was prepared and provided to participants, which aimed at finding out their awareness of travel characteristics. However the core findings were based on the motivational and social exchange factors involved when using couch surfing along with its benefits. The researcher's own experience and thoughts were also shared briefly.

The results of the study and research indicate great enthusiasm and trust towards such online hospitality networks and alternative ways to travel (couch surfing) as well as meeting and staying with strangers while traveling abroad. Suggestions were also provided by the participants and the researcher as to how to achieve a positive and enriching experience when traveling and using the couch surfing network.

Key words: *alternative travel, couch surfing, classification of travelers, motivation & benefits.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background

“The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes “sight-seeing.” – Daniel J. Boorstin

We travel primarily for leisure, recreation or business/work purposes. Tourism as one of the biggest Industries worldwide consists of numerous tangible and intangible elements. Tangible include mainly accommodation, transportation, etc. The intangible ones include mainly the purpose or motivation to travel, integrating and meeting and connecting with new people while traveling, experiencing different cultures and traditions and more. (Introductory tourism: wiki-books)

The following research idea basically focuses on studying and explaining an alternative form of tourism which has gained immense popularity in the recent years. A social media or social networking based project known as ‘couch surfing.’ Alternative tourism contrasts itself with ‘traditional tourism.’

Dernoi (1981) primarily defined alternative tourism by accommodation type: “In alternative tourism (AT) the ‘client’ receives accommodation directly in or at the home of the host with, eventually other services and facilities offered there.”

“Alternative tourism is a process which promotes a just form of travel between members of different communities. It seeks to achieve mutual understanding, solidarity and equality amongst participants.” Holden (1984)

(Tourism Alternative; edited by Valene L.Smith, William R.adington)

The couch surfing project can be referred to as an ‘online social hospitality exchange network.’ This online social networking website cultivates offline relationships and contact in the form of non-monetary hospitality exchange. (‘Participate in creating a better world, one couch at a time’ by Peter Heesakkers). A more detailed account on ‘couch surfing’ will be presented in chapter 3, as well as an explanation and description of how the community functions.

The concept of hospitality exchange may refer to centrally organized social networks of individuals, generally those enthusiastic about traveling and staying connected with the online social media, who offer or seek to share their living space or accommodation without any monetary exchange. (couchwiki.org)

When joining a hospitality exchange network one gets the opportunity to stay at a couch surfing member’s (who is rather a stranger) home free of cost, which provides the convenience of interacting with them (the locals) and get their opinion on places to visit and what would be Interesting to try and experience in their hometown or nearby. Similarly, one can also host other members of the network and the ones with whom they have stayed with or couch surfed earlier. However nobody is obliged to host every time they have been requested for. (‘Hospitality Exchanges- Another great way to travel for free’ Keith Hajovsky: 2012)

Hospitality exchange tourism is a new form of niche tourism, being highly dependent on the internet and thus the social media. Social media thus could be considered as the backbone to all hospitality exchange networks. The hospitality industry can benefit immensely from social media to engage customers and fulfilling their needs, with the accessibility to interact with consumers before, during and after traveling experience. Social media and the Internet in general has the power to spread brand awareness of services/facilities promptly, gain attention of a massive audience and it is unquestionably affordable.

The experience of being online enables a more open two way communication and direct social interaction, where both parties can reply to and give feedback to each other. It is also fun, informative and easy to access. (‘The Effects of social media networks in the hospitality industry’ Wendy Lim: 2010)

Aims & Objectives

The goal of this dissertation is to clearly shed light over the motives as to why an Individual tends to choose alternative ways to travel such as via couch surfing as their preferred travel or lodging choice/criteria, instead of finding a place to stay at a hotel, hostel or choosing between other lodging options when deciding to travel. Why is it that many young adults are keen on expanding their cultural space, sharing their daily routine or activities with strangers they have just met online, whom they later welcome as their guests at their residence. To intensely understand the social contact and hospitality exchange between hosts and guests or more specifically amongst couch surfing members. This occurs during the process of couch surfing, before and after meeting each other. The main Idea to create awareness and improve knowledge about the couch surfing website/network, its terms, condition and usage to those who are not aware of its existence and value.

Finding out how it influence our well-being and social interaction/bond with hosts and other travelers while traveling to new destinations as well as meeting and living with strangers (hosts) during the journey. To discuss and share different couch surfing experiences and provide a genuine image of the network. Reflecting on both positive and negative experiences of other couch surfing members.

The mentioned above aims and objectives will be further discussed and elaborated in the rest of the chapters. Furthermore, this research work will be restricted to students and mainly those who are aware of couch surfing. To highlight my motivation and initiative as to why I decided to study and join an online hospitality networks, in this case the couch surfing webiste? My interaction and experience with other couch surfing members in brief.

2. Alternative tourism

The growth and impact of tourism both as a social phenomenon as well as from an economic and industrial point of view has been quite vast and massive during the last half of the twentieth century. Tourism is considered as one of the major forces in boosting a nation's economy, contributing to the employment rates and affects the lifestyle of those who can afford it. With the increase of touristic activities, it can be observed and studied the amount of significance it has brought to cultural, political, technological and environmental values in our daily lives. (Lecturer Narueporn Lertcharoenchoke: 'Alternative Tourism')

It is through tourism that a human seeks recreation and fulfills his/her need for adventure. The opportunity and luxury to explore and experience a different culture, meeting people from different backgrounds and to extend their hospitality to the guests visiting them from different parts of the globe, can be considered as a blessing created through means of travel and tourism. ('Introduction to Tourism' by The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region)

Research shows that since the end of World War two, tourism has gained great pace with advancement in mass transportation providing cheaper and faster access from one place to another, also enabling to reach out to meet more people. The tourism industry employs around 74 million people, along with the domestic and international tourism gross accounting for 9.3% of GNP worldwide. The hotel and airline industries are the major sources of businesses which generate the highest income from tourism, as tourists are mainly spending their money on the carrier and to accommodation. Train transportation, cruises/ships and the income generated by tours, travel operators and other businesses and conventional activities associated with travel and tourism in a region come secondary. ('Tourism and Alternative Tourism' by PGX Management Committee)

Many third world nations took the advantage of tourism as a rapid and convenient means of development. It became a vital source of foreign exchange and investment for their backward economy. Various projects arranged by organisations such as UNDP, WTO, etc expertise and help promote tourism in many third world regions. However with more and more developments and rise in the standard of living, social, economic and cultural life of many third world countries were exposed to widescale tourism and natural resources exploitation. ('Tourism and Alternative Tourism' by PGX Management Committee)

The phenomenon of 'alternative tourism' basically emerged from these third world nations as a reaction to the negative effects caused by tourism. With the increase in global concern for the environment, concepts of sustainable or eco-tourism emerged, focusing more on environmental practices while traveling. ('Tourism and Alternative Tourism' by PGX Management Committee)

Alternative tourism is a process that also promotes a fair means of travel amongst people from different communities, creating mutual understanding, solidarity and equality amongst people from all walks of life. ('Alternative Tourism and Ecotourism' - Holden, 1984, p.15: cited in Smith & Eadington, 1992. P.18)

In other words, it can also be broadly defined as the forms of tourism that are persistent with nature, social and community values and which allows both hosts and guests to experience and maintain a positive and meaningful interaction and mutual bonding. (Valene L. Smith and William R. Eadington- Tourism alternatives: Potentials and problems in the development of tourism)

Weaver 2006 states 'alternative tourism' emerged from the ideology that uncontrollable tourism development would result in undesirable high economic, environmental and sociocultural costs. Being aware of the impact of mass and conventional tourism development, alternative tourism may be viewed as an early form of recognition and adoption of sustainability ideas.

The alternative tourism is nowadays generalized and put under the category of tourists who avoid taking the path of a normal or ordinary type of vacation. Some suggest anything other than mass tourism should be labelled as alternative. The common themes alternative tourism applies to are; eco or environmental friendly tourism, avoiding negative impacts caused by industrialization and large scale tourism developments. Secondly, small scale developments or attractions for tourists, arranged in villages or communities. Thirdly, certain kinds of tourism are called alternative because they benefit the local residents or the poorer communities. And finally a shared perspective with 'alternative development' is the emphasis on cultural sustainability, tourism that does not intend on harming the culture of the host community. . ('Alternative Tourism and Ecotourism' - de Kadt, 1990)

Alternative tourism is not a well-defined concept, however the term is considered to be increasingly used for various modes of travel such as: educational, historical trips, adventure related holidays, individual journeys, globe-trotting and many more. The core principle of alternative tourists is to keep themselves aside from the realms of mass tourism. Alternative tourists usually plan a trip in accordance with a destination which is less crowded or few have visited, they try to establish a better mode of interaction with the local population, utilizing the least amount of tourist infrastructure and staying closer to similar accommodation and transport facilities as the locals do. They intend to travel alone rather or then in smaller groups. ('The Overview of Tourism Impacts' - Krippendorf, 1987)

The emphasis on contact in relation with alternative tourism is explained as being more intense, involving more discussion and interaction, with the location bring much more sensitive and personal, for instance a guest's home compared with a hotel lobby. Alternative form of tourism gives more access to the personal space of residents/hosts, exposing and offering a more authentic, meaningful and satisfying experience for the tourist/visitor. Butler,1990 ('Alternative Tourism Journal' by Narueporn Lertcharoenchoke)

Dernoi (1981:253) initially defined alternative tourism via accommodation type: “In alternative tourism the ‘client’ receives accommodation directly in or at the home of the host with, eventually, other services and facilities offered there.”

The latter definition by Dernoi (1988:89) states: “community based tourism is a privately offered set of hospitality services (and features), extended to visitors by individuals, families, or a local community. A prime aim of community based tourism is to establish direct personal/cultural intercommunication and understanding between host and guest.” (Valene L.Smith and William R.Eadington- Tourism alternatives: Potentials and problems in the development of tourism)

Alternative tourism could also be signified through; a tourists specific motivations, characteristics/attitude, touristic practices, touristic product, level of technology and so on. (Valene L.Smith and William R.Eadington- Tourism alternatives: Potentials and problems in the development of tourism) Different forms of alternative tourism include; cultural heritage, fair trade, science and education, adventure tourism, farm based, nature tourism, volunteer tourism and pro-poor tourism. (Peter Robinson, Sine Heitmann and Dr. Peter Dieke: ‘Research themes for tourism)

3. THE COUCH SURFING NETWORK

3.1 The Idea & History

“My antidote to being some kid in a room without really anything, living paycheck to paycheck, no access to the world... was to create a website which would help me go and stay on people’s couches...give me access to the world, substantially lower the costs, and I’d be able to gain those important intense, frequent and diverse experiences.” – Casey Fenton founder of couchsurfing.org

In the following chapter, the researcher will further explain the concept and the main idea of the couch surfing project and how the community functions.

Basically couch surfing connects people at one single platform (online hospitality network) from different parts of the globe. It gives the traveler a bona fide local perspective through staying at the local’s (host) home and experience the town and get involved in activities recommended by their host. It is a completely free service. (Couch Surfing: a viable form of sustainable tourism? By Uday Balaji 2012)

Since it is a member driven community, each member creates a profile for himself/herself and thus other members of the community get to know about their background, hobbies and Interest for instance. Couchsurfing promotes a strong bond within local communities, forming a community itself. Almost every major and developing city has formed a city couchsurfing group. These groups may decide upon weekly meetings whereby various social activities and events can be participated in.

CouchSurfing is considerably the largest hospitality organization at the moment, with over a million members worldwide. The membership to it is free however there is an option to get registered and verified by donating \$25, for the security and maintenance of the website. (‘Hospitality Exchanges- Another great way to travel for free’ Keith Hajovsky: 2012)

In 1999, an American based traveler named Casey Fenton found a cheap flight to Iceland from Boston. Wanting to travel on a low budget he thought of sending about 1,500 emails to students at the University of Iceland, requesting to accommodate him. This resulted with positive responses (50 in number) willing to accommodate him. Later on his way back to his home he began developing the Idea and concept which we know term as 'couch surfing.' (CouchSurfing: a viable form of sustainable tourism? Uday Balaji: 2012)

"I knew it was how I wanted to travel, 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." Mr.Fenton states. (Penelope Green: New York Times, 2007)

"We've all worked very hard at our other jobs and we've paid the bills. Up till now the site has functioned passively. We want to understand how to do it more efficiently. It's complex, and its demographics are literally all over the map." Mr.Fenton states. (Penelope Green: New York Times, 2007)

Fenton, later went on searching for experienced and similar interest people to help him develop his Ideas and contribute towards a successful development of the project. He later found three experienced professionals; Daniel Hoffer an businessman, Sebastien Le Tuan; communications expert and Leonardo Bassani da Silveira; an expert on web designing.

Couchsurfing officially started off as a non-profit social network in January 2003, however In 2004 the project announced and launched its public online web site where everybody could register for free of charge. The network became a profit oriented corporation in 2011. ('Hospitality exchange and alternatives to the Hotel' - International Business Times)

3.2 Mission & Vision

“We envision a world made better by travel and travel made richer by connection. Couchsurfers share their lives with the people they encounter, fostering cultural exchange and mutual respect.” (Couchsurfing vision from couchsurfing.org website)

Couchsurfing’s mission as an organization is to allow freedom to easily get connected to an International network of people and places. With emphasis on cultural and educational exchange, building bonds and minimizing boundaries to improve tolerance and respect towards different ethnicities, cultures and personalities. Couchsurfing also tends to encourage each traveler to explore the world and their surroundings under an affordable budget, minimizing financial burden.

“We envision a world made better by travel and travel made richer by connection. Couch surfers share their lives with the people they encounter, fostering cultural exchange and mutual respect.” (Couchsurfing vision from couchsurfing.org website)

Getting connected and interacting with complete strangers makes the process or the experience even more fruitful, since it strengthens our sense of trust in each other, promotes acts of humanity and social responsibilities as well as gives us the opportunity to meet people who could help or be a source of betterment to our lives in future. It also helps to overcome certain stereotypes and prejudices. Overall it gives us the big picture of how people from different societies and background live and tend to have different norms and values than ourselves.

“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.org) “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.org)

3.3 Getting Started

Similar to any other social networking website couchsurfing.org is formed by creating a user profile which consists of basic information about the user's background such as age, sex, occupation, languages and a user profile picture/image.

Furthermore, there is an 'about me' section where the user may describe briefly about himself/herself. The 'about me' section includes; 1.current mission 2. about me 3.philosophy. The next step asks the user; 'why does I use couchsurfing?' which could also be taken in the same context as 'how do I participate in couchsurfing.' The following field allows the user to mention their 'Interest' where the user may also write about their hobbies, ambitions and talents they have achieved so far. The later part is similar, where the user can point out a few good movies, books and music that they have liked or been touched by. The next step where the user can mention 'one amazing thing they have done' be it something for the humanity for instance, a self-achievement,etc.

In the next part, the user may write what they would like to share, teach and learn from the experience of meeting people through couchsurfing and the community itself. Since couchsurfing also offers Its members the valuable exchange of education, knowledge and skills, which is why couchsurfing has a social purpose/image towards developing a productive and considerate society. The user can then answer the question; what he/she can offer to their host while surfing at their residence or couch? For instance; help with household chores, cleaning, preparing food together, etc. The last part of this section/page is where the user can mention the countries he/she has visited so far and which places they have lived for a longer time.

The next section contains information about the user's preferences when hosting a couchsurfing member. This includes: the maximum number of guests the user is able to host at a time, gender preference and whether their residence would be suitable for children and animals. The next part is where the user may fill in the information about his/her home arrangements or conditions such as whether or not they have any pets, children and accessibility to wheel chair.

This section also allows the user to give information about the sleeping arrangements, roommate or housemate situation, what kind of facilities or necessities they can offer as a host, information about public transportation access and any other additional information or suggestion they might feel is important to mention for their guests awareness, before their arrival.

The following section allows the user to upload unlimited number of photos of themselves, or their interests or perhaps about their trips/journeys during their couchsurfing experience.

The later section is quite substantial when a couchsurfing member is sending a request for someone to host him/her and when other couchmembers are looking for a suitable and trustworthy host. This particular section is titled as 'references.' It works in such a way that only when a couchsurfing member has hosted or has visited another member as a guest or 'surfing' in the couchsurfing context. It is after their meeting or farewell that either one of the member needs to send a friend request to the other member. It is the occasion where both parties need to write about how they both met, how many days did they travel, surf or hosted the other member and vice versa and finally give a 100 words description in the form of a reference or testimonial. This may be neutral, positive or negative depending on their experience. It also basically consists of the memorable moments or activities where both members participated together, any bit of appreciation or forgiveness members can freely confess it here in writing.

It is believed that the higher the number of positive references, the higher the chance of getting approval to surf as a guest at another couchsurfing member's residence as well as having the chance to participate as a host. Since there can be no actual reference provided by a stranger/couchsurfing member without hosting or surfing, it is very likely that users find their close friends or siblings on the website and write each other positive references and likewise support each other. The other alternative is to be active and attend couchsurfing meetings, this way one gets to meet and know other couchsurfing members and so on after the meeting members can add each other as friends on the couchsurfing website and write each other positive references.

Couchsurfing is sometimes confused as a source of surfing or hosting other members. Rather the community is also developed on the notion of the interaction between travelers or individuals situated at different corners of the world, whereby all have the opportunity to ask the other about any advice, suggestions or recommendations when visiting a particularly new destination. There is also the possibility of linking up with town/city/regional and interest groups on couchsurfing.

In addition, the couchsurfing community also encourages members to organize or create social gatherings or private events for members or a group. It may be based on certain occasions such as Halloween party or simply a random get together at a café/bar. It has been observed that in some forums or discussion groups on couchsurfing.org, members also take the opportunity to advertise or market for instance renting out their apartment or in the pursuit of promoting their shop or restaurant business and so on.

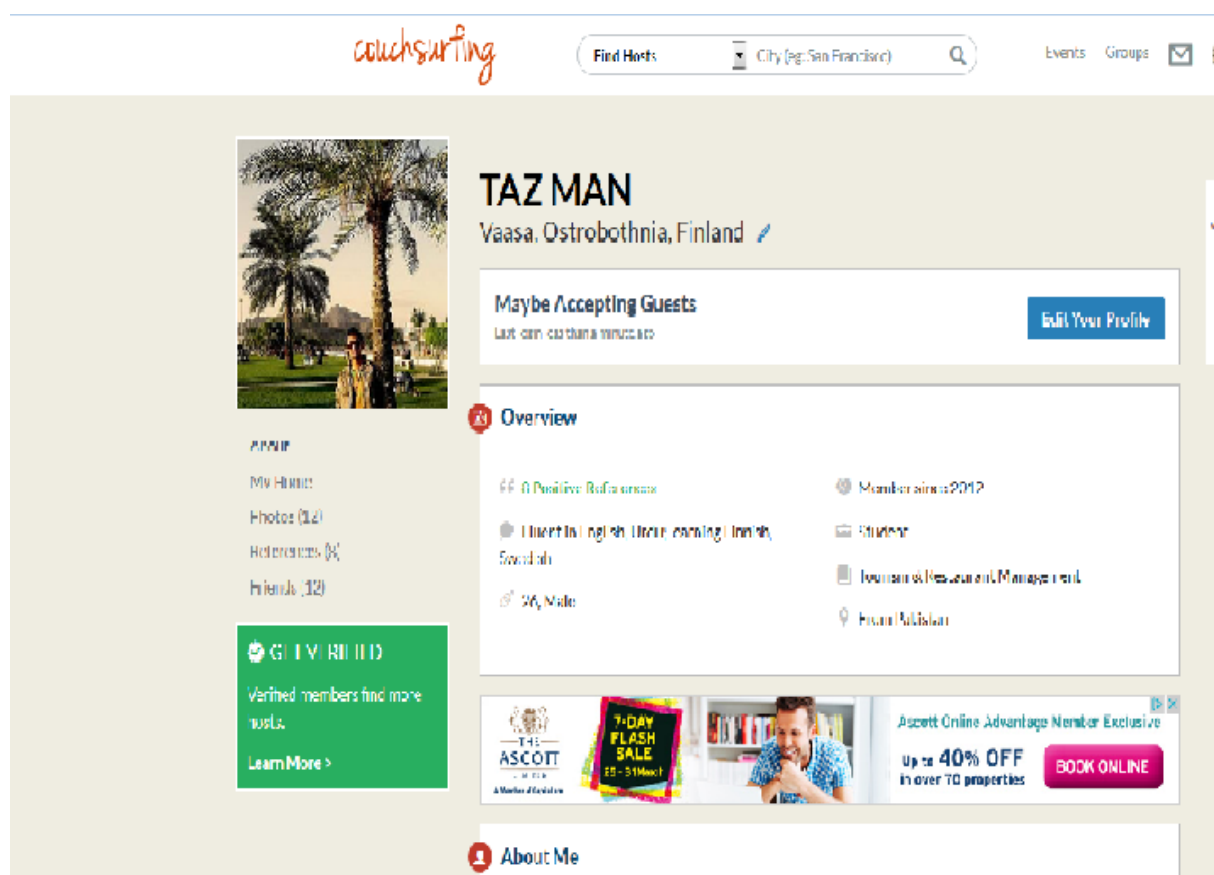


Figure: Couch surfing.org member profile page sample.

3.4 Trust and Safety

Trust is an integral factor of interaction which needs to be taken into consideration when studying online to offline social relationships and a successful community run by individuals.

“Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community.” (‘Trust: The Social Virtues and The Creation of Prosperity’ by Fukuyama; 1996)

Bradach and Eccles; 1989 quotes:

“Trust is an expectation that alleviates the fear that one’s exchange partner will act opportunistically.” (Knowledge Management: Current Issues and Challenges by Elayne Coakes)

Virtual or online relationships and friendships are mainly based on communication amongst individuals on a limited scale without any face to face or verbal contact. The concept and importance of trust over the internet is crucial in order to maintain the functioning and success of online communities. (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011; CouchSurfing: Belonging and trust in a globally cooperative online social network)

Putnam, 1993 states that hierarchical relationships in organizational structure where decisions are made one sided and arise through leadership and authority of one, distinguishing those of a lower rank. On the other hand in the case of couchsurfing, horizontal communication structure generates collaboration and level of trust, whereby all members are on an equal organizational level. (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011; CouchSurfing: Belonging and trust in a globally cooperative online social network)

Rohe, 2004 emphasizes that trust comes from the extent and content of interaction. The connection or the bond between individuals does not necessarily lead to trust. ‘Couchsurfing offers several indicators of a member’s engagement in the community, such as the length of membership, hosting others, couchsurfing with others, organizing gatherings, attending gatherings, volunteering at collectives and serving as an ambassador.

Since more attention needs to be put on the nature and content of the engagement and couchsurfing takes place in both online and offline settings, an area that has received little attention in the literature.’ (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson 2011; CouchSurfing: Belonging and trust in a globally cooperative online social network)

Rousseau et al explains that trust is “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.” (Jun-E Tan; ‘The leap of faith from online to offline: An Exploratory study of couchsurfing.org)

Following are the five key themes of how trust can be further conceptualized by Bhattacharya, Devinney and Pillutla. First and foremost trust exists in an ambiguous and risky setting, without which the concept would be insignificant. Secondly, trust emulates the expectancy of the trustee’s behavior. Thirdly, the strength and importance of trust must be clearly stated when defining trust. Fourthly, trust must be taken in accordance with the context of for instance of a particular situation or a specific person. And finally, the expected result of any trust oriented behavior is usually positive or neutral. (Jun-E Tan; ‘The leap of faith from online to offline: An Exploratory study of couchsurfing.org)

Couchsurfing members are requested to fill out the comprehensive profile page in order to display about themselves, their likes and dislikes and their opinions on certain aspects about couchsurfing. They also have the option to become a verified member, due to which their name and location have been confirmed to ensure an honest and positive user image to other community members. Also safety is ensured by the couchsurfing community via sharing information amongst users. Leaving references after having experiences with one another, connecting through other social networking website links such as facebook, by vouching for people they highly trust and by reporting abuse. (Couchsurfing.org)

3.5 Motivation to Travel Alternatively

“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” –
Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Travel teaches toleration” –Benjamin Disraeli

Initially, if we look back at the motivation of the creator of the couchsurfing phenomenon, according to the information on the website it shows that for Casey Fenton, his primary motivation of writing to over 1500 students in Iceland, requesting them If he could stay at one of their places, was mainly to travel on a budget and try to minimize his travel costs such as accommodation. His secondary motivation to travel in this form was to try to seek out to the locals in order to get some insights on travel tips via a local’s perspective and to keep distance from other tourists and the luxuries of a hotel environment with such a short trip.

In many circumstances couchsurfing has been referred to as a “freeloading” phenomenon where the traveler’s main intention is to find a shelter to stay for free and the host in return has nothing to gain from it. Instead, both hosts and surfers are motivated by specific interests and values that provoke them to participate and act as a volunteer in the couchsurfing community. Thereupon, the main motives for couchsurfing relationships are less inclined towards any financial gain or material consumption, rather the intentions are more directed towards creating social value, personal and emotional growth. (CiCi Siyue Liu: A CouchSurfing Ethnography: Traveling and Connection in a Commodified World)

Furthermore, in many circumstances people who intend on participating through couchsurfing share a desire to travel in an eccentric manner and try to stay away from the commercial paths of travel and tourism, such as organized tour packages/offers,etc. Couchsurfers also mainly share a common desire of experiencing the beauty and the essence of the place or their travel destination through the eyes of a local, making personal and authentic connections with people they meet during their journey and share the thrill and excitement of new uncertain and spontaneous encounters and adventures they come across while in the process. (CiCi Siyue Liu: A CouchSurfing Ethnography: Traveling and Connection in a Commodified World)

24-year old Finnish couchsurfing host and surfer, Maija shares her opinion and tells what she gains from hosting other travelers: “interesting knowledge of different cultures.. and practical knowledge such as baking and cooking different dishes. Also, often the surfers have visited other cultures and know about them, so then you can have this comparison between not just two cultures, but more.”

Another potential host/couchsurfer from Finland, Saila mentions that, “ it’s my way to keep up the traveling spirit. Even though I’m not traveling myself, I can host people who are traveling in Finland, so we can share traveling experiences. And of course, I get to keep up my language skills. It’s nice to help people to have a cheap place to stay, but not only that.. it is meeting the people and having the conversation that is my priority.”

When asked about any differences felt between the traditional or conventional mode of traveling and couchsurfing, Saila states her opinion, “you are lacking the actual connection to local people.. you’ll have a dinner several dinners in local restaurants, but you won’t get to know local persons probably. Well, you can know some salesman or something like that, but not the person how they live.

Furthermore, the issue of self-expression, giving and receiving testimonials in the form of references with couchsurfing, could be looked upon as self-achievements for oneself. The motivation to connect with likeminded people is quite evident in networks like couchsurfing. Wang & Fesenmaier (2004) stress on efficacy or value as the most important motivated, followed by “possibility of future reciprocation” and “community members can receive rewards for making constructive contributions.” (‘Consumer-generated web based tourism marketing’: Carmen Cox, Stephen Burgess, Carmine Sellitto, Jeremy Buultjens)

In recent years it has been observed that the mentalities of mostly the western societies have rapidly emerged towards becoming an environmental friendly society as well as being increasingly aware of social and economic crisis in the society. “In the United States and in other parts of the world, we are now moving in the other direction. I see signs of people becoming more community-minded as people are getting poorer.

For example, former executives who are out of work are doing much more volunteering for nonprofit organizations, moving toward a focus on the common good.” points out UCLA professor of psychology Patricia Greenfield. (Ms.Rafaela Huonder, 2009 Couchsurfing: Traveling off the beaten track to a better world)

The increasing success of online hospitality networks such as couchsurfing is debatably the result of a new value system in our society shared by many individuals. Most couchsurfers are in search of real to life, authentic and interpersonal communication and interaction with people they have not met before as well as those who belong to different cultures and ethnicities. (Ms.Rafaela Huonder, 2009 Couchsurfing: Traveling off the beaten track to a better world)

It has also been understood that for many couchsurfing hosts the initial motive to host travelers or other couchsurfers is to gain an international experience and know about different cultures and traditions without having to travel to places. For instance, having the opportunity to learn or practice different world cuisines depending on where the traveler comes from. Hosts are usually keen on being proud of their culture, values and traditions of their home country which they take pride in sharing with people from different parts of the globe. Furthermore, hosts are also keen on creating awareness or share their views and opinions with such travelers who can potentially spread their message and perhaps give back to the community later on in life. (Ms.Rafaela Huonder, 2009 Couchsurfing: Traveling off the beaten track to a better world)

As humans we all have the urge or need to be part of a community in the society we live in. Couchsurfing although an online based network or a virtual community, indeed does provide the passage or medium of bringing people to meet from different corners to meet face to face after getting to know each other to some extent through online communication. (Ms.Rafaela Huonder, 2009 Couchsurfing: Traveling off the beaten track to a better world)

3.6 Criticisms and Negative Views

Unfortunately similar to any other social hospitality networking website where there is certainly a meeting or interaction involved after an online conversation and agreement between both parties, couch surfing has been a victim of a number of incidents and undesirable experiences reported by couch surfing members. There have also been various arguments by stakeholders, social media and by journalists, writers/bloggers about their view on couch surfing as a negative influence towards the society and perhaps more specially women who in most cases have been taken advantage of through the medium of couch surfing.

In 2012, the dailymail.co.uk reported an article about a Chinese tourist who had been raped after being offered a couch or place to stay for a night through meeting a guy from the couch surfing website. The lady was traveling across Europe and decided to couchsurfing as her mode of travel accommodation. However her brief stay in Leeds, United Kingdom turned into an unpleasant and terrifying part of her journey. On being threatened to kill her by her host, as she tried to escape, she literally had no choice but to surrender. The next morning she was allowed to leave his flat. (Chris Brooke: Daily mail)

Amongst other online hospitality networks couch surfing notably has acquired an attractive looking website and it is believed to have gained the most media coverage, however it comes with its disadvantages and risks of usage. By far the most common reason people make use of such websites is due to its attraction and benefit of saving money by staying with a host free of cost. Therefore meeting people while couch surfing may not be the primary goal but may lead to a positive consequence. Perhaps if those who can possibly afford to stay in hotels, would probably meet up for tea/coffee instead of staying at a stranger's residence. ('A criticism of Couch Surfing and review of alternatives' 2010)

It has been noticed that many couch surfers deny using the site for free stay. Even though students or adults who are unemployed, somehow fulfill their desire to travel the globe by the help of people hosting them and rather meeting new people and being exposed to new cultures comes secondary value for most. ('A criticism of Couch Surfing and review of alternatives' 2010)

The author then expresses the kind of pressure one might have to face when ‘hanging out’ with the people they meet or stay with during their couch surfing experience, which they would otherwise not do so due to reasons of not getting along well or a bad first impression. In most cases people tend to pretend how interested they are in meeting their host, since they get to know some information about the host and their lifestyle, browsing through their couch surfing profile page. Such information about oneself has not much relevance when sending a couch request to stay at another user’s place. Therefore chances of creating a fake profile tend to increase in order to get more couch requests accepted. To some extent it is much more natural and a better approach to talk to the hosts in person on arrival. Overall there should be no shame in admitting that due to a tight budget, one does take advantage of this site so they can have the luxury to travel to different places. (‘A criticism of Couch Surfing and review of alternatives’ 2010)

Moreover, the couch surfing organization has been a victim of significant controversies and accusations over the years. Pointing out their management of donation money, and the fact that they have specified themselves as both charity and a non-profit organization earlier misleading people. Having acquired a charity status is all what couch surfing did. They have never been active in any charitable causes neither do they provide any charitable services. Couchsurfing simply offers a website and utilizes the donation money to pay for basic living expenses for its staff members, such as food and rent. As a charity they are accountable to thousands of people who gave donations and became verified members on which their employees are fed and enjoy out a luxurious lifestyle. (‘A criticism of Couch Surfing and review of alternatives’ 2010) The verification system used by couchsurfing is considered to be a scam or fraud. Many deceitful people have been using the verification system to their advantage to portray themselves as honest and safe. This indeed led to a rape incident and the couchsurfing organization did not react seriously to it. Rather it is said that couchsurfing has not even bothered to remove the offenders whenever people reported their complaints or concerns against someone. A volunteer who felt he had to resign because of the dishonesty in the organization stated: “The push to hit up members within their first few hours of joining is an attempt to raise funds, not to make the system safer. Period. It’s for money.” (‘A criticism of CouchSurfing and review of alternatives’ 2010)

Collection of positive references has turned into an obsession for many users. People are encouraged to leave an overall positive reference for each other, even though their meeting lasted briefly or they just met for the first time at a couch surfing meeting event.

In many circumstances user accounts have been deleted without any explanation or approach where users can defend themselves. Couchsurfing not needs to be more democratic but also must be open and transparent to users, where they have the opportunity to appeal. (‘A criticism of Couch Surfing and review of alternatives’ 2010)

The couch surfing management has been immensely criticized over various issues. Don Shine and Justin Velandier Holt were two active couch surfing members whose accounts had been permanently deleted from the site. The CS management stated they both violated the site’s terms of service. They had served as official couch surfing ambassadors (unpaid volunteers who help unite and help towards building a stronger couch surfing community for a specific place) in Berlin and Chicago respectively. Many members acclaim the main cause of the termination being Shine and Holt’s harsh judgements of the couch surfing website’s recent redesign which even couch surfing staff admits made the site complicated to to use as well as lack of useful feedback from the management.

“I’m still in a state of shock. I’m heartbroken, more than anything. To immediately delete my profile without warning is galling.” Holt says

Based on my previous experiences, I would have expected some sort of interaction with the safety team. Their normal protocol is to contact someone who violates the terms of use, issue a warning, explain where they have violated the terms of use and if they repeat the offense it can lead to termination of the user’s account, depending on the seriousness of the violation.” Shine states. (‘Couchsurfing faces backlash from some members after censorship charges’ by Scott Shetler 2013)

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Motivation

The following chapter explains and discusses two key theoretical concepts to study the motivation to travel using an alternative mode of travel (couch surfing) as well as finding out how social interaction and social exchange theories have influenced or help determine the phenomenon of couch surfing and meeting strangers via the network. The theories support the core idea of conducting a research on the phenomenon of couch surfing and evaluating how motivation and social exchange/integration factors affect and influence members of the community.

To simply define motivation, it is the state of stimulation of a drive or energy, as well as the need which humans create and react to fulfill their desires and pursuits to achieve a goal or objective.

In order to intensely understand traveling or tourists behavior and the decision making process along with assessing and valuing the satisfaction of tourist's expectations, it is vital study and be aware of the motivational factors involved in the process. (Snepenger, Kind, Marshall, and Uysal, 2006 'Modeling Iso-Ahola's Motivation theory in tourism context.')

Tourist motivation could be defined as "the global integrating network of biological and cultural forces which gives value and direction to travel choices, behavior and experience." (Pearce, Morrison & Rutledge, 1998. 'Tourism: bridges across continents.')

Tourist motivators can be for instance, the human desire to travel and explore, the attraction and importance of a destination has to offer, indulge and experience new activities and walks of life. The physical factors include peace and rewinding of mind, body and health. Cultural factors; having interest and being open to other cultures, interpersonal factors; wanting to meet new people or friends and family and trying new experiences. Status/prestige factors; personal development, education and grooming of oneself, while getting attention and gain trust and respect from others. (Robinson et al. 2000, 5-6. "Motivations, Behaviour and Tourist Types.")

Gray's travel motivation theory highlights two main motives for travel. Firstly the desire to go from their surroundings or known place to an unknown place, termed in Gray's theory as 'wanderlust.' Secondly, there is the 'sunlust' which portrays a particular trip which can fulfill a traveler's desire to travel to a place unique from their own place of residence, providing a different cultural or recreational environment. (U.K essays.com)

Cohen (1972) emphasis to the fact that all tourists are in search of some element of uniqueness and strangeness consecutively with a combination of something known to them. Cohen categorized tourists using sociological principles into organized mass tourist, individual mass tourist, explorer and drifter. These groups are also categorized according to the contact with the tourist industry, with mass tourists being termed "institutionalized" and the more individualistic tourist as "non-institutionalised." (U.K essays.com)

Furthermore, Cohen's classifies a tourist experience based on five conditions: 1) the recreational mode; which emphasis on enjoyment, recreation and entertainment. This type of tourist does not seek out for an authentic true to life experience and is more of a kind of escapist from the hurdles and pressure of everyday life and surroundings. Secondly, the experiential mode; where the tourist is keen on searching a different experience or surroundings on temporary basis, away from home and one's society, however having the intention to return back home. Thirdly, the diversionary mode; whereby the tourist is withdrawn and alienated from their surroundings at home or abroad. The experimental mode; the tourist is searching for an alternative having lost interest in one's own society and surroundings, to try something new and different and may indulge in other's mode of living or lifestyle but not necessarily staying committed to it. Finally, the existential mode; this type of tourist seeks to fully indulge and commit to living away from their home/surroundings and never wanting to return home. (Cohen,E.1979. "A phenomenology of tourist experiences")

Life-tourists or life-travelers who consider tourism as a holistic experience, where a new exotic experience is linked with discovering the world around, where traveling is considered part of making an impact in the world or to other beings. The author also praises Cohen's typology as considerably important and meaningful since it emphasizes on life-travelers who submit themselves into traveling to gain a lifetime experience, whether it be through communication, getting intimate with strangers or real to life sensory interactions with a new environment. (Paula Bialski, 'Intimate Tourism Friendship in a state of mobility- The case of the online hospitality network ')

Assistant professor Crompton's study on "Why people go on a pleasure vacation", concerning the motives of pleasure vacation seekers, influencing selection of a destination, empirically identifies nine motives, classified as socio-psychological. The seven push factors include: 'Escape from a perceived mundane environment, exploration and evaluation of self, relaxation, prestige, regression to childhood, enhancement of kinship relationships, and facilitation of social interaction.' Eight possible answers noticed were: seeing interesting sights of the world 14.19%, personal growth/personal development (learning about oneself and surroundings) 56.21%, meeting and building relationships with people from around the world 17.78%, to relax 1.56%, to escape daily responsibilities 1.12%, to see family 0.41%, for business 0.61%, other. (Paula Bialski, 'Intimate Tourism Friendship in a state of mobility- The case of the online hospitality network ')

Generally, it has been perceived that people who possess a greater need for achievement than the need for relationship or affiliation, power or a unique experience usually want to be isolated from others and fulfill their own needs, satisfaction or desires. These type of individuals are keen on setting goals for themselves which are neither easy or on the other hand impossible to achieve. In other words, tourists who possess a high need for achievement like to excel, consequently avoiding both low and high risk situations e.g traveling alone or to a high crime rate destination. (Prebensen, 2007:8. 'A Grammar of Motives for Understanding Individual Tourist Behaviour)

On contrary those who have a higher need for affiliation than other needs such as achievement, power, etc are seeking to gain contact and harmony in building relationships as well as inclined towards the attitudes, feelings, emotions or circumstances of others. Similar to the need for belongingness in Maslow's theory of needs, the need for affiliation in tourism is often linked with in terms of need for social experience, acquiring the need or want of spending quality time with peers and family members or wanting to meet and experience traveling with new people. (Prebensen, 2007:8. 'A Grammar of Motives for Understanding Individual Tourist Behaviour')

Upon studying online hospitality network communities on the subject of motivation to participate and support online communities, we can see very limited amount of research has been made on this issue. (Duque & lado, 2009). (Outi Pietilä,2011. 'Couch surfers motivations to host travelers in Spain')

Results from the study by (Gaston-Breton et al.2009) suggests the main motivations to participate in online communities include; support, identity, attachment, relationship and obligation. (Outi Pietilä,2011. 'Couch surfers motivations to host travelers in Spain')

Another research conducted by (Dholakia,Bagozzia & Pearob,2004) on studying social identification in virtual or online communities. The focus was particularly on people's motivations and needs to join online social networks, where the motivational factors include; emotional support and care, looking for new friends/company, meeting people of similar interests, etc. (Outi Pietilä,2011. 'Couchsurfers motivations to host travelers in Spain')

The willingness, time and effort people put to be part of online communities is mainly due to their motivational drive. Online communities play a key role in bringing together people from one corner of the world to another and forming trust and cooperation in the community. It is crucial to analyze how an online community is functioned, managed and the flexibility and the benefits it gives to its users, since this creates an influence of people's creativity and productivity with new ideas, updated content and other features on the web page that differentiates or makes the online community much more engaging and repetitive for people to access and grow the network. (Preece &Maloney-Krichmar 2000,3) . (Outi Pietilä,2011. 'Couchsurfers motivations to host travelers in Spain')

4.2 Reciprocracy and Social Exchange

Social exchange is considered as constitutional human activity which helps identifying and explains social behavior, social interaction and the entire process that involves exchanging values, knowledge, gestures, goods and services from one person to another. Besides the exchange of material goods of exchange, the participation and involvement in the system or process of social exchange creates an essence of social value, emotional attachment, togetherness and harmony between individuals or a community. (Airi Lampinen, Vilma Lehtinen, Coye Cheshire, Emmi Suhonen: 'Indebtedness and reciprocity in local online exchange')

Majority of empirical research carried out identify three key forms of social exchange: negotiated exchange, generalized exchange and reciprocal exchange. (Airi Lampinen, Vilma Lehtinen, Coye Cheshire, Emmi Suhonen: 'Indebtedness and reciprocity in local online exchange')

Negotiated exchange is based upon economic exchanges such as bargaining, agreements on trade or purchasing goods. Such agreements, duties and obligations are usually extensive and well understood. (Airi Lampinen, Vilma Lehtinen, Coye Cheshire, Emmi Suhonen: 'Indebtedness and reciprocity in local online exchange')

Generalized exchange is based upon indirect acts of exchange either in the form of collective goods whereby the individual may contribute to an event or matter which many can benefit from, or then networks of indirect gifts and favors where the doer or provider may not necessarily receive any benefit from the same beneficiary. Supposedly taking a situation for instance whereby helpless people or motorists on the highway help and assist one another to refrain from a difficult and stressful situation. (Airi Lampinen, Vilma Lehtinen, Coye Cheshire, Emmi Suhonen: 'Indebtedness and reciprocity in local online exchange')

'Reciprocracy' which comes from the term 'reciprocity' can referred to an act or situation in which mutual or cooperative exchange of favors, rewarding another with kind, positive actions, in response to helpful or friendly actions for the other and vice versa. (Wikipedia)

It is believed that online to offline social networks such as couchsurfing and airbnb have been a great influence on bringing together strangers to interact and get to know each other and meet in person, exchange skills and information, etc. Doing so has also led to exchange of the material resources of accommodation, building host-guest relations and thus practicing 'network hospitality'. (Jennie Germann Molz; 'Toward a network hospitality')

Gouldner (1960) explains reciprocity or repayment as well as known and best form of exchange or giving with exchange to something. Three types of reciprocity are explained and distinguished. Firstly, 'reciprocity as an interdependent exchanges' where there is a mutual state of dependency between two or more people. It is also considered as one of the characteristics of social exchange (Molm, 1994). This form of reciprocal behavior type emphasizes on unforeseen interpersonal agreement. An act of exchange or transaction by one person or party consequently leads to a response or reaction of kindness or appreciation by the other (Gergen, 1969). Due to this interdependence relation, the risk factor is reduced and cooperation is built stronger (Molm, 1994).

Secondly, 'reciprocity as a folk belief' which emphasizes more on the cultural expectation that people get what they deserve (Gouldner, 1960). Malinowski (1932) explains this type of reciprocal behavior in his descriptions of trade relationships between farming and fishing communities. Whereby the participants involved in such an interexchange relationship feel that over a period of time all exchanges are equally fair on both sides. Those who don't tend to be helpful or submissive will not be rewarded and rather be treated in a negative manner. And those who are supportive and helpful will be benefited and receive help in the future.

Thirdly, 'reciprocity as a norm and individual orientation' explaining the quality and standard that one must accept and behave according to, and those following these norms are expected to behave reciprocally (Gouldner 1960). Some social psychologists have further studied and state that individuals tend to differ in the level or degree of reciprocity they endorse (Clark & Mills, 1979; Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977).

Germann Molz, 2007 referred to 'couchsurfing' in terms of reciprocity in online communities and the idea of exchanging information and creating a bond when getting to know one another through online hospitality networks. He states that the foundation of the couchsurfing phenomenon is mainly based on the principle of reciprocity and hospitality exchange.

The statement on reciprocity clearly shows its impact on being true to hospitality networks, such as couchsurfing: "reciprocity is not strictly enforced on hospitality services, it is certainly encouraged as a community norm through statements on the sites as well as displays on member profiles that show how often a member travels and hosts and whether a reference has been reciprocated or not. From this feedback of users' activities, those who are obvious freeloaders and are using the service simply to find a free place to stay can be recognized as such." (Lauterbach, et al.2009,2) (Melanie Franz: 'Experiences, Reputation, References and Decision-making in an online hospitality network')

Reciprocity in hospitality online communities can be direct or general. Direct reciprocity meaning, "I surf your couch you surf mine." Observing this kind of reciprocity in approximately 12-18% of couchsurfing visits however this kind of behavior is not necessarily expected and references are often neglected or one-sided. On the other hand general reciprocity claims that "people offer help because others have helped them in the past and they expect others will help them again in the future" (Lauterbach et al. 2009)

Palapret and Brown (2010) have explained reciprocal exchange as a form an exchange where an 'ambiguous value' is that what is exchanged. The 'ambiguous value' is not something which has a certain price or monetary value and it does not imply similar treatment or expectations from the other person (host or guest). For instance it could be a gesture of kindness and showing care and dignity to the other. Molz (2007) argues that cultural exchange and hospitality should be considered itself as a reward within the hospitality context. "What is important is not an equivalence of value but rather that the requirements of reciprocity are met. Reciprocity exchanges can continue successfully even though they appear 'unequal' in some way or another" (Pelapret and Brown 2010,5)

Lampel and Bhalla (2007) discuss how self- motivation choices influence exchanging hospitality or cultural exchange. “Factors such as altruism, norms of reciprocity, the building of positive self-image, seeking status through reputation enhancement, and an interest in promoting certain products.”

Selfish motives can be observed and studied in terms of searching for a place to stay or spend some days at someone’s residence free of cost. Therefore there is a clear indication of a one-sided participation. Also, leaving a positive feedback, regardless of how the experience has impacted , expecting a positive reference would reciprocate with the intention of increasing the member’s own reputation. Such selfish motives could be linked to a theory of charity, where people contribute in order to self-benefit, boosting their social status. (Dellarocas, Fan and Wood 2004). (Melanie Franz: ‘Experiences, Reputation, References and Decision-making in an online hospitality network’)

Social exchange theory mainly focuses on the outcomes (positive: rewards and negative: costs) of relationships. People mainly tend to evaluate their relationship outcomes based on their comparison level which entitles to the outcome that people expect or assume they deserve to receive in a relationship.

Considerably one of the most important research work and contribution towards the formation and framework to describe the social exchange theory and thus social exchange relationships has been carried out by Peter Blau (1964) . Blau’s contribution was mainly studying and identifying the comparison between economic and social exchanges. He states that “the basic and the most crucial distinction is that social exchange entails unspecified obligations.” In addition , social exchange “involves favors that create diffuse future obligations... and the nature of the return cannot be bargained and only social exchange tends to engender feelings of personal obligations, gratitude, and trust; purely economic exchange as such does not.” He also argued, “the benefits involved in social exchange do not have an exact price in terms of a single quantitative medium of exchange.” (Russell Cropanzano and Marie S.Mitchell; Journal of Management 2005: Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review)

4.3 Social Interaction in Tourism

Tourism and traveling involves meeting people and thus results in vast means of social interaction between individuals from similar or different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as individuals with similar or different interests and personality types.

Social Interaction as a concept could be described as a “personal association taking place under certain circumstances... and covers a wide range of behavior from observation of members of the other group without any communication, to prolonged intimate association” (Cook & Sellitz, 1955, pp. 52-53).

Social Interaction can occur in different forms and different situations. It could be in the form of friendly gesture of greetings, small talks or brief meetings, close relationships, online (web based) to offline (face to face) conversations and friendships. Social interactions may take place at work, home, school/universities, cafes and many more venues or settings of interaction between two or more individuals.

On the occasion of travel and tourism specifically, social interaction occurs as the tourist or traveler travels in planes, trains, buses and other modes of transport. Also when they stay over in a hotel, hostel, visiting pubs, restaurants, shopping malls, taking tour guides and so on. Overall there are different types of travelers or tourists, depending on their personality, interests, travel arrangements, form of travel, motivation to travel, preferences for the kind of activities they would like to indulge into, traveler's status, affordability and more. Following bullet points explain the characteristics and classifications of different types of tourists.

- Sunlust: Traveling for the purpose to rest and relax (Gray 1970).
- Wanderlust: Traveling for the purpose to learn and educate oneself (Gray 1970).
- Institutionalized: Traveler relies and enjoys the luxury to be taken care by the tourism industry and service facilities available around him/her. (Cohen 1972,1974)
- Organised mass tourist: Traveler prefers on opting for organized holiday/tour packages, keeping minimum contact with local community and unlikely to get involved in a tourist-host relationship. (Cohen 1972,1974)
- Individual tourist: Traveler is open to both organized packages, as well as those services that can be found from elsewhere. (Cohen 1972,1974)
- Non-Institutionalized: Wants to travel and explore by himself/herself, self-made decisions and keeping less contact with tourism industry. (Cohen 1972,1974)
- Explorer: Independent traveler, who seeks to have contact with local community. (Cohen 1972,1974)
- Drifter: Tries to avoid contact with other tourists and rather is keen on staying and experiencing to live with locals and host community. (Cohen 1972,1974)
- Pleasure seeker - recreationalist: Desires to travel in seek of entertainment, relaxation and so as to escape the chores of everyday life. (Cohen 1979).
- Experimental tourist: Seeks an authentic traveling experience abroad, with partially getting involved and indulging into a foreign culture, norms and values. (Cohen 1979)

- Eco tourists: Seeks to get involved with activity based upon wildlife tourism and other kinds of nature based tourism such as scenery, forests, etc. (Hvenegaard 2002)
- High activation-high energy (extrovert): Seeks variety of activities to choose from along with a non-touristic atmosphere. (Fiske and Maddi 1961)
- Low activation- low energy (introvert): prefers few activities, also similar to an organized mass tourist, packaged products and services are highly relied upon with comfort and familiarity of the destination, products and services. (Fiske and Maddi 1961)
- Psychocentric: Anxious, non-adventurous, inner-focused, low income level, seeking comfort and safety, prefers packaged tours and tourist occupied areas as well as to travel to short-haul destinations. (Plog 1974)
- Allocentric: Curious, adventurous, confident, outgoing, higher income level, seeks new experiences and challenges, willing to travel to long-haul destinations along with getting close to local culture. (Plog 1974)
- Pleasure-seeker: Demands luxury and comfort while traveling. (Plog 1974)
- Impulsive traveler: Takes quick decisions, does not plan and might not worry much about spending high amounts if need be. (Plog 1974)
- Self-confident: Challenges oneself on trying unique activities, products or services or perhaps choosing a unique destination to travel. (Plog 1974)
- Planful: Organised traveler who likes planning his/her trip in advance, seeking discounts and bargains for accommodation, tours, travel tickets and other activities. (Plog 1974)
- Masculine: Action-oriented, outgoing, adventurous and likes to travel with their belongings. (Plog 1974)

- Intellectualist: Takes interest in cultural activities, history, museums, arts, etc. Als likes to explore and discover new options and activities. (Plog 1974)
- People oriented: Enjoys being around people and being social. Seeks to educate oneself and immerse into a culture by contacting and communication with locals. (Plog 1974)
- Venturer: Intellectual, explorer, seeks excitement, achiever, values interest more than comfort, seeks new destinations, tries to adapt to local culture, habits, food, prefers any simple accommodation or place to stay,etc. (Plog 2002)
- Dependable: Indecisive, anxious, seeks for safety and comfort, prefers branded and recognised goods and services, might travel to same destination more than once, likes to eat out while traveling, listens to locals suggestions what to do or see around. (Plog 2002)
- Solitary traveler: Individualistic, self-oriented, independent traveler and is keen on pursuing ones own interests. (Mehmetoglu 2004)

(‘International Tourism- Cultures and Behaviour’ – Yvette Reisinger

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design – Qualitative Research

Since the beginning stages of this research work, the researcher had determined and had been advised to use the qualitative approach for retrieving the results. Upon studying behavior of other people, or in other terms, different couch surfing members and the researcher himself taking part in a non-participant observation, signifies the value and correlation of how the qualitative research method would be the most appropriate and reliable in order to provide a genuine and detailed account of the findings.

Denzin and Lincoln in their second edition of 'Handbook of Qualitative Research' (2000:3) define qualitative research:

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world it consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices ... turn the world into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”

The qualities mentioned above by Denzin and Lincoln are supported, widely accepted and consented by other researchers qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach that can be applied in order to understand the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc) within their social surroundings:

“The way in which people being studied and understand and interpret their social reality is one of the central motifs of qualitative research. (Bryman., 1988: 8)

“By the term ‘qualitative research’ we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:11)

Certainly, the qualitative research method aims at providing in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world and perspective of people being studied or participants by learning and interpreting their social and material conditions, experiences and interests. It focuses on viewing social life in terms of processes rather than in terms of statistic figures. It provides comprehensive perspective within explained contexts. It also gives a personal insight on the researcher's experience and opinion while taking a non-judgemental stance.

The researcher also follows an interpretivist approach to his findings. Immanuel Kant (1781) argued about ways of getting to know about the world other than direct observation. These consist of human perceptions that aren't related to our senses but to our interpretations of what our senses tell us. Qualitative research has been associated with beliefs that tend to place emphasis on human value, interpretative aspects of knowing about the social world and the importance of the researcher's own interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

5.2 Conducting the research

The primary objective of the research was to find out the about the awareness, motivational and beneficial aspect of participants (couch surfing members) to travel with couch surfing, an alternative way of traveling on a budget. It also emphasized finding out how they would behave with their guests and hosts and their intentions towards them. In other words the social integration that is formed when members meet from online contact (Internet) to offline real life contact.

The goal was to inform and provide a better understanding of the whole concept of the couch surfing network. Another aim was to hear about different experiences members have had with using the network online as well as in real life, displaying a positive image of the network.

All participants were chosen on a random basis. The researcher had posted a message on Vaasa city's official couch surfing group on facebook that mentioned about the Idea of the study in brief and that he is in search of a maximum number of ten active couch surfing members who would be Interested to discuss about the topic in detail, following a guided and semi-structured Interview for each.

In terms of limitations, when selecting the most appropriate sample, the following factors were taken into consideration; participant has experience hosting or surfing with couch surfing or has been an active member of the city group, attending couch surfing meetings,etc. Moreover, he/she should be between 20-30 years of age, since the research was more or less targeted towards young adults or college/university going students. People/couch surfing members from all nationalities,ethnic and religious backgrounds were welcome to participate. Therefore no racial or gender discrimination was applied or comprehended in the research sample and findings.

Qualitative method was used to collect data/information from participants. A questionnaire consisting of ten open-ended questions were formed by the researcher by himself.

When preparing a guided or semi structured interview, the researcher needs to make note of the outline of the topics, issues or themes regarding the participant, along with having the possibility to order or wordings of the questions in each interview. However this did not apply to two of the participants who responded via e-mail. Overall, this research technique has its benefits such as; being systematic, organized, comprehensive, while the stance of the interview flows in a fairly conversational and informal manner. (Päivi Eriksson & Anne Kovalainen (2008), 'Qualitative methods in business research')

All interviews were conducted at the library of University of Vaasa, within a time frame of one month. Almost all the interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Those participants, who were new or not familiar to the researcher/Interviewer, were asked to briefly give a short description of themselves and their interests and goals in life. All interviews were recorded using a recording device and participants were consented and asked if they were comfortable with recording their conversation, which the researcher promised to keep confidential and delete after analyzing the results.

If there would be any challenges to note and list while conducting the interviews for the researcher, it would probably be with getting the respondents discuss more openly about the issue and keeping them in track and interested to tell more about their experiences.

6. DATA ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION & RESULTS

6.1 Awareness

It was noted that all the participants first heard about the couch surfing network/website through their friends. It is very common to hear from other couch surfing members too, that the aware of the network has successfully spread through word of mouth, friends and getting to know it from other members while traveling and meeting people. However it has been observed that social media and online blogs have also played a key role in spreading the buzz and creating awareness about the phenomenon of couch surfing. If compared with other similar online social hospitality networks which are mainly based on the idea of providing accommodation and hospitality exchange such as hospitality club and airbnb, couch surfing could perhaps be considered the most talked about and much recognized amongst individuals, specially university and high school students.

6.2 Classification and Characteristics

It was also very essential to understand the background of the participants and what kind of personality and travel behavior they were most likely to be categorized under. Therefore after studying and getting to know about the different types of characteristics and classification of tourists from other well-known theorists and researchers, the researcher made an assumption before taking the interviews about what types would they be more likely to be categorized under. To make sure about the reliability of the results, participants were later provided with the literature which contained all typologies, explained briefly.

It was distinguished that most of the participants did more or less select the typologies the researcher had guessed earlier before interviewing them. These include; 1) The wanderlust traveler: mainly those who travel for the purpose of learning and getting themselves educated about other cultures, skills or could be any aspect which has to do with developing self-intellect and knowledge about different parts of the globe. 2) Non-institutionalized traveler: they are those who seek to travel and explore by themselves, confident to make self-made decisions and organizing the trip on their own. They also tend to make less contact with the tourism industry, in this sense the hotels and other tour packages provided by different agencies. 3) Explorer: indeed, most participants wanted to travel to explore different towns, cities and countries which they have just heard about or seen in pictures. Also not just about exploring the sights, but it could be interest towards getting to know how people from other cultures live, what they eat, traditions, etc. 4) Drifter: with the motivation and intention to get closer with the locals or host community, to live with them to gain a deeper understanding of their culture, norms, values and interests. 5) Experimental travelers: seeking a genuine and authentic travel experience from the destination and its native people they would travel to. They want to try new experiences in life and by traveling abroad they can fulfill this desire. 6) High-activation/high-energy (extrovert): majority of participants considered themselves outgoing and extrovert personality types. They enjoy non-touristic atmosphere and the variety of activities they can indulge in while traveling such as not only traveling for the purpose of sight-seeing. 7) Allocentric: the curiosity, excitement and adventure that traveling alone as well as couch surfing induces in an individual. Participants were inspired to seek new experiences and try new activities do not mind taking the risks and challenges during the process if they need to. They are also willing to travel to long haul destinations and stay for a longer time with the locals or host community.

8) Planful traveler: most participants and other couch surfing members like planning ahead in time. This ensures they will be accepted by any particular host and thus will worry less about their accommodation. Besides accommodation, they like taking the advantage of purchasing cheap online flight or train tickets (e.g low-cost airlines) as well as other bargains and discounts they can find and early to book or purchase well in advance. This way they mentioned they get to travel more and spend less. 9) People-oriented: participants seemed to be friendly, outgoing and social in nature. For these couch surfing members, immersing into different cultures meant being open-minded, socially active with locals and other travelers while traveling abroad. It is through interaction and meeting other locals, we get the insights and can make our trip more enjoyable, since locals may give the best tips or advice as in what to do and what not during their stay. 10) Solitary traveler: like to travel independently or atleast with less people whom they already know. Since with couch surfing, the idea is not only to find a place to stay free of cost but also to find company of an individual or host while one travels by themselves.

6.3 Motivation and Benefits

Proceeding with the interviews for the qualitative research data to be collected from eight potential couch surfing members, the results or analysis were compiled and grouped under two major themes or headings. The first theme covers the main motivational factors involved when participants choose to travel with alternative options/means and being more specific with finding out why they choose to travel with couch surfing network.

Participants were encouraged to answer and describe their views or motivational factors step by step and openly discuss why they got involved with the couch surfing network, why they would like to continue being a member and how do they see it as a benefit for themselves and others while traveling abroad.

It was noted that all the participants first heard about the couch surfing network/website through their friends. It is very common to hear from other couch surfing members too, that the aware of the network has successfully spread through word of mouth, friends and getting to know it from other members while traveling and meeting people. However, it has been observed that social media and online blogs have also played a key role in spreading the buzz and creating awareness about the phenomenon of couch surfing. If compared with other similar online social hospitality networks which are mainly based on the idea of providing accommodation and hospitality exchange such as hospitality club and airbnb, couch surfing could perhaps be considered the most talked about and much recognized amongst individuals, especially university and high school students.

Nearly all participants mentioned the idea of ‘traveling on a budget’ when asked about their main intention to choose to travel with couch surfing. Couch surfing, is by far the most economic and almost can be considered as a means to accommodate oneself at a new destination totally free of cost. Since it does not involve any kind of monetary demands or exchange, the members see it as a ‘blessing’ to save up tons of cash they would otherwise spend on hotel or hostels. Also, considering the study was limited to young adult students, it was very obvious to comprehend that most of the students are keen towards traveling around alone or in groups.

With emergence of such hospitality networks they not only get to stay at different destinations for free of cost but also save up that money and spend it on other activities or even other get to travel more often. None of the participants were asked or categorized under how rich or poor they were and whether they would still opt for couch surfing if they still had the money to stay in a hotel or hostel.

Another feature or motive to travel alternatively and using couch surfing was the ambition to travel independently and wanting to enjoy their freedom while traveling to other places away from home. However, it should not be taken into the context of traveling all by themselves during the entire trip, but clearly what they meant here is to travel alone or by themselves from their own residence or home town and later when they reach their travel destination they get to meet and interact with new faces and perhaps get to travel around or stay with such strangers they meet instantly. Since all the participants were single or not committed to any relationship, they were more open and excited about traveling alone to newer places and get to meet and stay with strangers or other couch surfing members who could host them as well as provide company during their stay. All participants praised couch surfing, that it provides a platform to those who like solitary travel and later find new company or locals when they reach their new destination. This way they are flexible to organize and plan their trip according to their desires and not be abided to anyone.

Moreover, participants took couch surfing as a network that helps build and strengthen our self-development skills, such as encourages us to take risks and trust in meeting and staying with strangers. A participant mentioned after trying couch surfing for the first time, she allowed herself to be more social and open minded when meeting strangers or other travelers. One other participant suggested people can also make good use of the couch surfing network by meeting and interacting with those who are interested in language exchange or simply when one wants to visit a country and learn their native language, couch surfing can easily connect like-minded travelers.

Some participants mentioned about the idea of ‘spontaneous travel’ where one makes a sudden plan to travel somewhere, less likely to organize or plan their accommodation. Couch surfing in such cases helps these travelers to get connected with other couch surfing members or hosts who are ready to accommodate on an emergency basis as well. Majority of the city group pages on the couch surfing website, list a sub-group as the city emergency couch request group.

It may not be always possible to find a last minute host or couch, but participants stated they would always keep a backup option and at the same time hope that someone would contact them back them or host them right away after seeing their message.

For most, couch surfing network perfectly suited the kind of activities they would want to be involved when traveling. They intend to stay more outdoors when traveling, thus not preferring to stay at a hotel which would not only be expensive but they could be aroused by the comfort and luxury hotels tend to provide e.g spa and recreation. Also hotels are not recognized as the best places to meet locals and try much local cultural activities either. Therefore, all the participants when deciding or choosing to travel with couch surfing, do not put their comfort and relaxation while traveling on top priority.

6.4 Meeting and Interacting with Hosts and Guests (hospitality exchange)

The final aspect or theme to study and understand from this research was finding out what participants felt about hospitality and social exchange, in terms of staying or spending time with strangers or other couch surfing members. Since couch surfing network demands a two-sided approach, one that relates to hosting other couch surfing members at one's residence and while the other is the surfer or traveler's behavior towards his/her host. It was essential to find out both, their behavior and intentions as a surfer and that of as a host, in order to get a clear idea of how hospitality exchange takes place in this particular network.

Taking, the perspective of hosting with couch surfing or being a host to other travelers, all participants were asked to describe how would they as a host decide whether whom to host and whom not to and what would you suggest to other hosts? Their responses were quite straightforward and obvious, as to making sure first of all to check the member's profile, If they look decent and passionate about traveling and what they do in life, their skills, hobbies and interests, any photographs of them showing that they are interested in meeting people and traveling in general. Also reading the references, which although did not matter much to many since a new comer might not have any reference to their profile and still possible to accept their request. But overall, they mentioned the importance and value of the message other members write when they are in need of a host of place to stay. It can be easily determined by the message, if the member took out time to write it, read the host's profile well enough and is convincing about his trip and meeting others and not just looking for a place to crash or stay. Some stated that hosts should check and make sure with their flatmates or roommates if they are comfortable taking in guests as strangers, before accepting a request to host somebody. Although not compulsory but it is good to talk to the visitor/guest before they arrive, on skype or phone call and also try to get to know them better or more perhaps that is mentioned on their profile. Since all enthusiastic new comers or new members should be given a chance to surf for the first time, they should not be over looked at. It is also suggested to inform them about any home rules or regulations as soon as they arrive. It was also noted that both genders did not have any issues hosting opposite gender visitors. However a few female participants mentioned they would be more comfortable hosting couples instead of only men traveling alone. None of the participants had any issue against hosting travelers from any specific nationality or religious background.

Participants were then asked to tell more about their motivation and reasons to host visitors besides providing them a place to stay during their trip and how they would welcome them. Upon which many responded that it was good to have people from different cultures and walks of life. Some liked having visitors over to break boredom at home, since they live alone. A participant mentioned about the ease of connection and opportunity couch surfing brings to meet someone of the opposite sex and perhaps if there is any sign of interest with both members, it could then be considered a good idea to seek out for a date or, even more, a life partner.

Respondents praised couch surfing and the social exchange that takes place during the process, mentioning that it gave them a deeper understanding of the world and regain faith in humanity. It also somehow transforms oneself to become more tolerant to other ethnicities.

Participants were also asked to tell something about the hospitality exchange and what they could offer to travelers or their guests during the process. Although it might not always be possible to spend time with guests/surfers or then the other way round, the hosts might not be able to give time to their guests if they are having a busy schedule or plans with activities outdoors. However, they were all keen on implementing or carrying out some sort of social interaction, conversation or simply show kindness to one another. Other facilities participants could offer to their guests besides providing them a place to sleep and shelter, comprised a list of activities such as; taking them out for a walk around their hometown or neighborhood, taking them to beach or any other nature sights popular in that particular region, getting together to do any common hobbies they both would have in common, going to bars, cafes, taking guests along to visit their friends or attending an event or happening together. And getting together in the kitchen when they have the time at home to cook together was the most common response amongst all participants. It would also be a good idea to exchange cultural knowledge and behavior to guests visiting from other parts of the world.

Participants were also asked to give an account on their approach, expectations and experiences being a surfer or guest at another couch surfing member's home. Surely, it was noted that all participants have traveled and stayed as guests more than they have hosted. A majority of the participants chose their hosts on a very random basis from the page on the website where they can easily find hosts or residents of a particular city they would be visiting. Although most members are willing to host, however in some cases it is also possible to find out from their profile if they are currently not able to host due to some reason.

Therefore it takes a while to scan through profiles and make sure to send requests to a number of potential members, who would possibly make a good host. The information provided on the profile and references do make a significant difference when searching for hosts to stay with. A few participants spoke about the stress when finding hosts. It takes a while to go through more than one profile and on top of that many do not reply. While discussing challenges one most likely might go through when traveling or surfing, participants were not reluctant to mention more than one. A couple mentioned about the discipline and compromise required when managing time according to the host's schedule, such as being restricted to stay at home if the host is not around and does not trust their surfers with the home keys. Therefore a surfer might have to leave the home with their host and sometimes do not have the luxury to spend late nights outside, so that they are back well in time before their host go to bed. Most participants have had the experience of encountering hosts who have been too vague and did not guide and provide good enough instructions to their home and city. It was also disappointing for some when the hosts did not have anything in common with them and there was no communication at all and kept themselves close.

6.5 Personal View on Couch Surfing (researcher's experience)

“Traveling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. -Cesare Pavese

“Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I took the one less traveled by.” – Robert Frost

This particular research paper is also influenced by and designed based on the researcher's personal experience or his own narrative regarding his experience with couchsurfing so far.

Very similar to how other members first got familiar with couchsurfing, It happened to be a similar case for me. One of my friends who likes to travel often and had couchsurfed a couple of times already, strongly suggested me to create an account on the couchsurfing website and well in advance, nearly a month before I was supposed to travel to Oslo, only with the purpose to renew my passport.

It was then I realized that even If I travel to Oslo for a day, I would still have to spend much on staying at a hotel and the entire journey in general, also considering Oslo as one of the most expensive cities to visit. However, along with the initial purpose or my main motivation that had definitely been to reduce my travel expenditure as much as possible, it certainly got me wondering more. In particular, that it would be very interesting to connect with a local (A Norwegian or anyone who has lived in Oslo) and since I already planned on staying for two and a half days, with only a couple of hours to spare for my passport issue, it would make my trip much more livelier with a friendly company or host. Later on, it did happen to be an Interesting experience being accepted to stay with a Norwegian couple, who unfortunately were quite busy during my trip, however treated me well and gave me a few useful brochures and Oslo travel guide brochures. During the trip I also got the chance to attend the official couchsurfing meeting arranged by the members in Oslo.

It was indeed a turning point with regard to my travel motivation and considering I could possibly travel to and meet locals and allow myself to be hosted by strangers who could then possibly guide and provide me company while I am traveling to a particular place where I do not have any relatives or friends.

Being a member for nearly four years now, I have hosted twice and surfed or stayed with other couchsurfing members while traveling, in total six times. The destinations or places I have visited while couchsurfing include; Oslo, Helsinki, Porvoo, Umeå, Gdansk and Krakow. Out of these places I have stayed once with a couple and once with a family. I have personally enjoyed it more when staying with someone who lives alone and those who are more or less within my age group and likely to share at least some similar interest and willing to spare some time from their routine life.

I have made use of the network while traveling to a new destination to attend a summer festival, a work related trip and also while taking a day cruise to the other side of the sea (Sweden).

Staying with strangers (couchsurfing members) for a minimum period of a day or maximum a week has certainly boosted my confidence and trust in people from different backgrounds. It was through couchsurfing I got to stay with a Finn, Swede, Norwegian and Pole, getting to know their culture from a different angle. I did feel that it brought me closer to the locals in a very casual and simple way without spending much time or getting to know the person beforehand. I understood and appreciated the glory of this particular online network where one certainly gets to meet and interact with open-minded and welcoming people, who are also eager to show traveling about their own culture and believe in the spirit of volunteering, by simply providing a shelter to these travelers.

Coming from Asia and a country where in terms of hospitality and treating guests or visitors from elsewhere or other countries, the majority are known to be cautious about providing the best treatment to their guests and tend to be very generous and welcoming in nature. In Northern Europe, specifically in the Nordic countries it, It is not so common with families, couples and those staying by themselves to welcome, trust or invite strangers to one's home. Couchsurfing here plays a major role in eradicating such a stereotype amongst people who come from a different cultural background. It gives a positive sign that we human beings are after all hospitable in nature, want to socialize and build trust with strangers or fellow travelers.

Volunteer and work exchange programs do provide a variety of opportunities to see the world and stay with locals, in a very cost effective manner. However, there are limitations such as it is more time consuming, limited destinations and especially those that are located by countryside or having the requirement of physical work such as farming. Also it does restrict oneself to do other activities and sightseeing while traveling and requires one to be more disciplined and organized while planning the trip. Therefore, couchsurfing can be very suitable and motivating to those who are keen on traveling faster to more than one destination at a time, such as Inter-railing or hitch hiking. Also with the help of couchsurfing it is quite possible to find a place to stay or in other words find a host in a new destination right away, by putting an emergency message request on the couchsurfing city group page.

AWARENESS ABOUT COUCH SURFING	word of mouth , friends and social media.
AWARENESS ABOUT OTHER HOME-STAY NETWORKS	workaway.org, hospitality club, airbnb and woof.
TRAVEL CHARACTERISTICS AND INTERESTS	wanderlust, non-institutionalized, explorer, drifter, experimental, high energy, allocentric traveler.
MOTIVATION & OTHER BENEFITS	free accommodation, traveling on a budget, meeting and staying with locals, seeking company when traveling alone, host-tour guide, attend various couch surfing meetings/events, experience different and unique experience living with strangers, independent traveling, strengthen self-development skills, meeting other travelers/members with similar interests, networking and meeting people from different parts of the world.
HOSTING GUESTS/VISITORS	Instructing visitors about rules & regulations of the house or neighborhood, be cautious and alert if not comfortable with them, taking visitors out to show the town,etc.
TRAVELING AND STAYING WITH STRANGERS	be compromising and polite, help/contribute with groceries, respecting and being aware about host's time table and values, keeping the home clean and tidy, getting to know hosts much better, take a small gift or souvenir from home country for host, organize small day trip or eating out,etc.

Table 1. Research findings in brief

7. CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Taking into consideration, the new and alternative forms of traveling emerged during the recent years, the couch surfing project can proudly be listed as one of the potential and acclaimed ones. The couch surfing network which now consists of millions of users worldwide helps travelers meet and connect with locals, to find company and local tour guide if they happen to travel alone and most of all it benefits them to save up on hefty accommodation expenses led by hotels. Also, with the influence of low cost airlines, it makes it even more rewarding and affordable to travel more frequently for young travelers and especially students.

Couch surfing is not only about finding a place to stay with people or then hosting others. The network has also created weekly city couch surfing meet-ups, where locals can easily get connected to other locals in town and get together to organize different get together activities and events. Couch surfing happens to be a unique online network in a way that it builds up a strong bond or connection between its users no matter if they are oceans apart. The community and volunteer spirit remains strong amongst many members who take it seriously and are active members or group leaders of their hometown.

Although the research focused more on young adults between the age of 20-30, there can be found many members who host as well as travel as couples and even families. Even more interesting to determine that even those individuals, who can easily afford to stay at hotels, sometimes prefer traveling via couch surfing in search of company and a genuine cultural experience.

Couch surfing favors sustainable and volunteer tourism, in a way that it prevents us from using exclusive hotel services. In one way or the other every member can be considered as a volunteer by helping other travelers, providing them shelter and a different travel experience.

However, it may be complicated and challenging to travel via couch surfing when traveling with small/younger aged children or perhaps during a professional business trip where an individual might not be able to compromise on their busy schedule and might need privacy for their work related issues. Couch surfing encourages more independent and adventurous travelers who are out there ready to explore the world in short time and who are not just traveling in order to relax and can compromise on staying away from their comfort zone for a while. It does influence and shapes an individual's personality as they venture out to trust and live with strangers and allow themselves to be more broad minded when dealing with people from all walks of life.

People and more specifically couch surfing members might have different reasons that motivate and inspire them to travel with couch surfing. For many it most certainly is all about traveling on a budget and rather not having to spend a penny on their accommodation. Other reasons range from finding a local guide or company while traveling alone, to seek a genuine unique cultural experience by staying with locals, as well as getting a chance to meet like-minded people or other travelers.

People are curious about trying couch surfing every time, since it questions the safety and trust issue towards strangers whom they briefly know through online contact. Some members are very selective and cautious about hosting any random person, while some open their doors to as many as they can host at a time.

Overall, from the researcher's personal experience with couch surfing and analyzing the views of the eight potential participants, It is clear that not all but so far many students and young adults who do get to know about couch surfing, are interested in trying it out and making use of such an opportunity to save up more on travel costs. Although there are differences in the way how people think and react to such travel behavior, however after conducting the research, the findings showed some similarity between the participants and their approach towards the network. Mostly outgoing, social and open-minded people want to try new experiences like couch surfing.

The research initiated for this thesis has highlighted a number of issues and criteria on which further research and planning could be implemented by other researchers interested to study more about this particular theme.

Although, the whole idea and functioning behind the couch surfing project has been well explained in detail along with a member's experiences and views. What most possibly lacked in describing more about the network, would be some information and views from the administrators who have designed the network and the website, allowing more knowledge about its working staff, decision making and future plans.

Since the research was restricted to young adults and from those who seek independent travel, it could also be thought of to find out how couch surfing takes place with minorities, or in the sense that how some host families and older people who live alone and have the desire to host people from around the globe. A video on Youtube projects a clip on how a Mongolian family has been hosting travelers to their home to give them a unique experience of their culture and surroundings.

Besides the couch surfing network, other free home-stay networks and volunteer exchange networking websites could be studied more in depth to find out how this phenomenon of 'alternative travel' has been gaining popularity and encouraging more people to travel more than just for joy and recreation, but establishing more value to human connection when traveling abroad.

Furthermore, the research could bring more interest and authentic experience, if video documented, so as to show viewers how an experience would look like in real life, although every experience is different from another.

Couch surfing has been facing tons of criticisms regarding the design and inconvenience of its new webpage and how the communication aspect has transported from couch surfing to facebook. Carrying out more research regarding such fixtures in the networking and online marketing of the network could give a better impression of the overall challenges and ways to improve and build the network stronger amongst its users.

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The Couch Surfing Questionnaire:

- 1) How did you get to know (awareness) about the couch surfing network?
- 2) How would you classify yourself as a tourist/traveler?
- 3) Which characteristics could be applied to your personality and why?
- 4) What was your motivation to join, stay connected and try out traveling or hosting with couch surfing. Explain why?
- 5) What benefits do you get from being a member of couch surfing?
- 6) As a host member, how would you select and treat your guests or visitors?
- 7) Are there any suggestions you would like to make in order to participate as a good host?
- 8) As a surfer or traveler, how would you select your hosts and your expectations towards him/her?
- 9) What factors or qualities would make you a decent and enthusiastic surfer?
- 10) What challenges or difficulties one might go through will surfing at somebody's place.