Hospitality Exchange:

Overcoming safety, trust, and gender concerns in the Couchsurfing community

By Clare Toeniskoetter

Senior Honors Thesis

December 2013

Department of Anthropology

University of Michigan – Ann Arbor

Advisors: Andrew Shryock, Kelly Kirby, and Erik Mueggler

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people
who helped make this thesis possible:

Dr. Andrew Shryock,
for your continuous support and suggestions.
You challenged me to think critically as an
anthropologist.

Dr. Kelly Kirby,
for your mentorship. You were a constant
source of encouragement, helping me
transform my ideas into writing.

Dr. Erik Mueggler,
for guiding all of us through the thesis-writing
process. You supported all of our unique
ideas and helped us focus our research topics.

My honors thesis cohort,
for your recommendations and reassurance
(and weekly snacks!) as we all struggled
through the ups and downs of our projects.

Everyone I interviewed,
for sharing your personal stories with me.
Without you, this thesis would not exist.

Table of Contents

Prologue

In May 2011, I arrived in Toronto without a hotel reservation or plans for my stay. I had only an address in my journal, along with the name Jorge, someone I met online. I knew a bit about him from his internet profile—originally from Brazil, Jorge moved to Toronto for college, where he was studying engineering. He lived in a large house not far from the downtown Toronto with a group of university students. Other than these details, Jorge was a complete stranger to me—and I would be staying on a spare mattress at this stranger's home for three nights.

I was traveling as a new member of Couchsurfing.org, or simply Couchsurfing, an online network of travelers and hosts around the world who share their homes with no monetary exchange. Users create an account online, add details to their profiles, and begin hosting, staying with, or just meeting up with other Couchsurfers. The website is similar to a social network, but with a focus on traveling and sharing culture through the creation of face-to-face interactions. On my trip to Toronto, I wanted to witness what it would be like to live there rather than limiting my exposure to heavy-traffic tourist areas, so I tried Couchsurfing for the first time. Like so many other users on the site, while the offer of free accommodation was appealing, I was Couchsurfing for a unique cultural experience. During my three day journey, I met Jorge's friends, went to a local art show with them, and visited nearby restaurants that I would have never found in a traditional guide book.

After this trip, I became an active Couchsurfer, opening my home to strangers visiting Ann Arbor, Michigan and favoring hosts over hostels whenever I went out-of -town. To some of my friends and family, however, the idea of Couchsurfing was worrisome. They were not

comfortable with my safety when meeting people from the website, and they cautioned me to avoid Couchsurfing altogether. My housemates often refused to allow Couchsurfers into our home, arguing, "Look at his profile, he could be a murderer!" or "We don't even know this girl, she could just want to steal my laptop." Whenever I opted to stay with Couchsurfing hosts while traveling, reactions from others immediately focused on safety concerns, followed by warnings that, especially as a woman, I was setting myself up for potentially dangerous situations.

Since I first joined Couchsurfing, and have subsequently had countless positive experiences, I deflected these safety questions repeatedly. At the same time, I found myself taking a step back and challenging my own use of the group. Why was I so trusting of complete strangers when they joined an online social network? Why were so many of my friends not willing to accept Couchsurfing? Why did being a woman make Couchsurfing so much more dangerous? Two years later, these questions evolved into my thesis. Why are there over 6 million Couchsurfers who are so trusting of strangers? How do they keep themselves safe? How do they perceive gender when Couchsurfing? These questions guided me throughout my research process. Today, I remain active on the site, but with a better understanding of what we as Couchsurfers do to keep ourselves safe, what could go wrong, and how we mitigate our fears through our sense of community.

Introduction: Literature Review

Before beginning an analysis of Couchsurfing, this literature review explores four topics: tourism, hospitality, bad hospitality, and hospitality exchange networks. The first section discusses the anthropology of tourism, where Couchsurfing does not fit in. The next section examines research surrounding hospitality and anthropology. Hospitality, the "generous and friendly treatment of visitors and guests," (Merriam-Webster 2004) is multi-faceted—it includes social, private, and commercial spheres (Lashley 2000). Hospitality is examined broadly, then, since this thesis looks at how Couchsurfing can go wrong, the "bad hospitality" section discusses studies of hostile hosts and guests. Finally, the fourth section shows where Couchsurfing fits into the hospitality discourse and examines other research on hospitality exchange networks.

Tourism Research

The anthropology of tourism is a growing field, with researchers focused on the various aspects of tourism. Some anthropologists analyze the negative side of tourism, seeing it as a system of cultural commoditization (Greenwoods 1977), a form of imperialism (Turner and Ash 1975, Mathieson and Wall 1982, Smith 1989), or a creator of dependency (Plange 1989). Others find beneficial aspects of tourism, including the preservation of a culture (Cohen 1988) or the development of a society (Harrison 1992, Lea 1988). Some of the research is focused on the effects in specific countries (Satyal 1988, Hepburn 2002), while other works are more cross-cultural, including research focused on the role and motivations of the tourist worldwide (MacCannell 1976).

Couchsurfing is an alternative to tourism; while there is extensive literature on the anthropology of tourism, very little has been done on explicit alternatives to international tourist cultures. Couchsurfing takes travelers outside of the traditional tourist sphere and into private homes, or hospitable spaces. Due to this key difference, Couchsurfing fits more into discussions of hospitality.

Hospitality Research

The discussion of hospitality begins long before the existence of the field of anthropology, dating back to the Ancient Greeks and Romans. The Greeks offered *xenia,* or guest-friendship, to strangers, which can be seen in Homer's *the Odyssey.* Greek hosts were expected to protect their guests by providing them with shelter, food, and gifts. Similarly, Ancient Roman hosts gave care and protection to strangers. Religious institutions continued traditions of hospitality, including the "Bringing in of strangers" or *hakhnasat orchim,* a Judaic form of hospitality, the Quran's encouragement to "Be kind to the neighbor who is a stranger," the Hindu teaching of treating the stranger as a god, and the generosity of the Buddha's influence on Buddhist followers (Hamington 2010:xiii). From Ancient Greeks and beyond, notions of hospitality are rooted in history.

Some academics describe hospitality as a perceived cultural necessity—hospitality introduces people to strangers and fuels the growth of societies. Anthropology Tom Selwyn describes, "There is a sense in which, unlike some forms of charity, hospitality is neither voluntary nor altruistic, but, in a particular sense, both necessary and compulsory. […] It appears as one of the means by which societies change, grow, renew, and reproduce themselves" (2000:34). There are many motivations for offering hospitality, including a sacred obligation

(Lynch et al 2011), building friendship and trust networks (Selwyn 2000), a moral obligation (Selwyn 2000), and hoping to receive reciprocity (Lynch et al 2011).

A discussion of hospitality often involves the ideas of two philosophers: Immanuel Kant and Jacques Derrida (Shryock 2008, Molz 2007, Benhabib 2004, Dikeç 2002, Jelloun 1999). In a 1795 essay, Kant designates three articles as a foundation for perpetual peace—every state must have a republican constitution, the rights of nations must be defined by an international constitution, and every stranger has the right to hospitality. This third article, the "The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality," urges states to be hospitable to strangers. Kant describes:

> Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another. One may refuse to receive him when this can be done without causing his destruction; but, so long as he peacefully occupies his place, one may not treat him with hostility. It is not the right to be a permanent visitor that one may demand. A special beneficent agreement would be needed in order to give an outsider a right to become a fellow inhabitant for a certain length of time. It is only a right of temporary sojourn, a right to associate, which all men have. They have it by virtue of their common possession of the surface of the earth, where, as a globe, they cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other.
>
> [Kant 1957:20, originally 1795]

Kant sees hospitality as an agreement of non-hostility between the host and guest. Yet, despite this being a "universal right," Kant's hospitality is conditional and temporal; his idea of hospitality is made possible by an agreement between states, and it is limited by time. Kant imagines the host with all the power—the host can reject the guest or force him to leave after a certain period of time. Kant's vision of "universal" hospitality is actually quite limited.

Derrida, on the other hand, critiques Kant's view of hospitality, pointing out its limitations. He describes absolute hospitality, where hosts are expected to welcome guests into their homes without any form of recompense. He writes:

> To put it in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner, but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the

place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.

<div align="right">[Derrida 2000:25]</div>

Derrida believes that the Kantian idea of conditional hospitality undermines the presumption of hospitality. Derrida wants to welcome "the Other," the guest, as if he is one of his own, while Kant identifies the Other as the Other, creating a hospitality that is somewhat hostile. Couchsurfing fits neither Kant's nor Derrida's visions of hospitality, a point I will return to towards the end of this introduction.

Bad Hospitality

Along with good hospitality, bad hospitality can be traced to the etymology of the word. Hospitality comes from the Latin term *hospes,* which is a compound of two words: *hostis* and *potis. Hostis* means guest, stranger, or enemy and *potis* means owner or master. Émile Benveniste, a French linguist, explained this history:

> The basic term, the Latin *hospes*, is an ancient compound. An analysis of its component elements illuminates two distinct notions which finally link up: *hospes* goes back to *hosti-pet-s*. The second component alternates with *pot-* which signifies 'master,' so that the literal sense of *hospes* is the 'guest-master'
>
> <div align="right">[Benveniste 1973:72]</div>

Simply in the etymology of the word, there exists tension of the host in a role of power as a "master."

To a certain extent, the guest is a prisoner of the host, the "guest-master." The guest must conform to the host's expectations; he only has access to designated spaces in the home and he can only eat what the host offers him. Moreover, the host controls him and his actions. Yet, once the guest leaves, the positions switch; the guest is at power because he creates the host's reputation. Anthropologist Andrew Shryock summarizes this paradox through a Jordanian proverb:

Lazim al-mu'azzib yikhaf min al-dhayf. Luma yijlis howa dhayf. Luma yigum howa sha'ir
The host must fear the guest. When he sits [and shares your food], he is company. When he stands [and leaves your house], he is a poet.

[Shryock 2004:36]

Hospitality requires effort from both the host and the guest, and with this delicate balance of power, the encounter can quickly become adverse.

As a host, there exists a fine line between embracing the visitor and being uncomfortable with the visitor. One of Benjamin Franklin's proverbs from *Poor Richard's Almanack* alludes to this tipping point. The proverb, "Fish and visitors stink in three days" (Franklin, 1914:21), shows that while the guest may initially be wanted, he is only welcome for a certain period of time. If this time is exceeded, good hospitality may turn into bad hospitality.

Returning to Benveniste's analysis of the etymology of hospitality, there is another contradiction; that of *hostis*'s multiple meanings as guest, stranger, and enemy. Benveniste cites that this paradox does make sense, explaining that a favorable stranger becomes a guest, while a hostile stranger becomes an enemy (1973). In any hospitable action, hosts have the option of offering *hospitality* or *hostility*—by treating the stranger as a guest or an enemy—both rooted in the term "host."

Just as long as there have been stories of good hospitality, there have been stories of bad hospitality or hostility. As Selwyn states, "Feasts can sometimes turn into fights. Acceptance and incorporation may rapidly become transformed into hostility, rejection, and even expulsion" (2000:20). Returning to the Ancient Greeks, there were both good and bad hosts and guests in *the Odyssey*. This includes the suitors who take over Odysseus' palace, an extreme example of bad guests. The suitors harass Odysseus's wife, take on the role of the host, abuse Odysseus's servants, and plan to kill his son, which anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers analyzes as a violation of the rules of hospitality (1968). The bad guests are punished for their wrongdoings when

Odysseus kills them, resulting in restored peace and order. This is an extreme case of bad hospitality, resulting in death. Cases of bad hosts and bad guests in Couchsurfing are never this life-altering, but it is important to acknowledge that negative experiences exist nonetheless.

Research on Hospitality Exchange

With Couchsurfing having become widespread over the last decade, the number of research studies about the site and other hospitality exchange networks is limited. In one of these works, titled "Cosmopolitans on the Couch: Mobile Hospitality and the Internet," sociologist Jennie Germann Molz takes on hospitality exchange websites. She discusses three elements of hospitality exchange: reciprocal exchange, reputation system, and the paradox of a "global community" (2007). More so than the other researchers, Molz engages herself with the literature of Benveniste, Kant, and Derrida, analyzing how they would comment on hospitality exchange.

Molz refers to Benveniste's idea of hospitality, which requires reciprocity (Benveniste 1973). For a hospitality exchange community to function, the members must act as both hosts and guests, which is encouraged in the community policies. Their policies also help prevent guests from becoming "parasites" by overstaying their welcomes or abusing the generosity of the host. Returning to the discussion of bad hosts above, the encouragement of reciprocity in the guidelines of Couchsurfing helps prevent negative encounters.

Reciprocity of hosting and traveling is not the only exchange—members must also exchange trust, which is created through the reputation systems. As discussed in this chapter, Benveniste states that the traveler can be either a favorable stranger (a guest), or a hostile stranger (an enemy). To help members avoid the unwanted stranger-enemy, online hospitality sites use references. Molz also includes Derrida in her discussion of the reputation systems. In

his vision of absolute hospitality, Derrida argues that all encounters include risk, a risk that should be embraced. He thinks hospitality involves opening one's home to complete strangers, without even asking for their names, which exposes the host to the unknown (2000). Conversely, the reference system on Couchsurfing mitigates the position of the stranger. Molz says, "[The reference systems] bind the community even closer together as a 'safe' community in which the community is responsible for keeping itself safe" (2007:72). These reputation systems work to diminish risk by promoting the idea of community.

However, the idea of community brings up a new paradox; Couchsurfing touts itself as a global community, but what is a community? Who can join? If there are limits on who can join, how is this true hospitality? Molz references early studies of the Internet that envisioned utopian, unrestricted, open communities created on the web (Rheingold 1994, Stone 1996). In contrast, sociologist Irena Aristarkhova argues internet communities are exclusive groups that do not open up membership to anyone (1999). Couchsurfing appears to be the latter—although anyone can make a profile, a certain type of person is encouraged to join in the website's discourse. Molz describes the limits on the Couchsurfing community, stating, "These communities require their members to have a cosmopolitan disposition to the world and, specifically, to difference. Members are expected to be curious and open-minded. They are expected not just to tolerate difference, but to celebrate it" (2007:76). Although the users offer hospitality to other Couchsurfers, these people must meet specific requirements to join the community to begin with, making Couchsurfing a closed, conditional hospitality network. Returning to Derrida, Couchsurfers are not offering absolute hospitality since this is hospitality to a known stranger, a stranger who must join a particular community. Hospitality encounters on Couchsurfing are

conditional, like those idealized by Kant (although they do not involve the same conditions, making them radically different from the encounters Kant envisioned).

In her essay, Molz presents well thought-out ideas surrounding hospitality exchange networks, yet she does not engage with the Couchsurfing community itself. Like Molz, in my paper I will further explore the reference system and idea of community in Couchsurfing; but rather than focusing on how the organization would be perceived by hospitality philosophers, I rely on in-depth interviews and ethnographic data to understand how Couchsurfers themselves use and view the site.

Regarding other Couchsurfing research, most of the studies have been doctoral dissertations or master's theses, covering different aspects and locations of Couchsurfing. Some studies were limited to certain areas of the world, including anthropologist Sonja Buchberger's study on the difficulties of joining the Couchsurfing community in Morocco (2011) and sociologist Rory Bradbury's broad study of trends among Texas Couchsurfers (2013). Other projects have focused on Couchsurfing as a global phenomenon and analyzed a specific aspect of the encounters. Anthropologist Dennis Zuev evaluates the experience of sharing space between guest and host, and concludes that there is a rhythm to a Couchsurfing encounter (2011). Computer scientists Katherine Peterson and Katie Siek considered privacy and self-disclosure online and found that Couchsurfers generally are not concerned with the personal information they disclose in their profiles (2009). Many of the projects have looked into trust and reciprocity, including Chun-Yuen Teng et al.'s information technology study which found that vouches on Couchsurfing are usually reciprocated (2010), Debra Lauterbach et al.'s computer science study that concluded most Couchsurfer members act as both host and surfer and most reciprocate positive feedback (2009), and Jun-E Tan's communication and information study that found

Couchsurfers make a "leap of faith" from online to offline interactions only when they feel a sense of trust (2010). Sociologist Paula Bialski conducted the first extensive study of Couchsurfing, looking at friendship, trust, and intimacy on the site. She coined the term "intimate tourism" to describe the intense, fleeting relationships that develop when a Couchsurfer brings travelers into a host's domestic sphere (2012). According to Bialski, the term intimacy has no sexual connotations when it comes to Couchsurfing—something that I will challenge in Chapter 3 of this paper.

Like my project, these studies are engaged with Couchsurfing users themselves, both anthropologically and sociologically. However, I want to expand on some assumptions made in these essays. Many researchers call Couchsurfing a community without addressing what makes it a community, or why the users feel that they are a part of a community. In addition, some of these researchers have a utopian view of Couchsurfing, ignoring complicated issues of safety and gender. I hope to build on where previous research has left off, by analyzing interviews with Couchsurfers from across the world.

Methodology

In the past few decades, the Internet has completely infiltrated our society, changing our private, social, and professional lives. We use the Internet for everything—communicating with coworkers, staying in touch with friends and family, researching school projects, reading the daily news, and shopping for new clothes. The World Wide Web is constantly present in the background of everyday life. With the rise of the Internet, some anthropologists have turned away from traditional field sites and turned their research to online communities. Some of the communities are entirely on the Internet, like the virtual world game Second Life researched by anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2009) or the popular computer game World of Warcraft studied by Bonnie Nardi (2010), while others extend offline connections to the Internet like Facebook examined by Daniel Miller (2011). There are also websites that use online connections to create face-to-face encounters, like online dating, meet-up, and hospitality exchange networks.

Despite the rise of internet-related research in the social sciences, anthropologists have largely been ignoring internet communities, seeing them as a taboo subject for the field. Anthropologist Max Forte criticizes this neglect of the Internet in his article, "Another Revolution missed? Anthropology of Cyberspace" (2002). Forte found that in the top 50 US anthropology departments, only 1.38% of teaching and research staff was interested in anthropology of cyberspace and virtual ethnography and only 0.43% of courses had components related to the Internet. Similarly, when Gabriella Coleman decided to study online Hacker Communities for her doctorate at the University of Chicago, she was warned that limiting her research to an internet community would not help her find a job in an anthropology department

(2012). She voices her difficulties in the introduction of her book, describing how her intention

of studying hackers was constantly scrutinized by her peers. She explains:

> When I told peers of my plan to conduct fieldwork among hackers, many people, anthropologists and others, questioned it. How does one conduct fieldwork among hackers, given that they just hang out by themselves or on the Internet? […] Many of my peers not only questioned how I would gather data but also routinely suggested that my fieldwork would be "so easy" (or "much easier than theirs") because I was studying hackers in San Francisco and on the Internet.
>
> [Coleman 2012:5]

Despite criticism, Coleman went on to study hacker communities and has been praised for her

research—she won the Roy D. Albert Prize for the best master's thesis in Anthropology at the

University of Chicago, the Frederick K. Starr Lecturer award that allowed her to teach her own

course as a doctorate student, and the Gabriel Carras Research Award at New York University

for her book on the online hacking community.

Like Coleman, I decided to research a topic that has not always been encouraged by my

peers. An online hospitality exchange network is not a community similar to those studied in a

typical anthropology class at the University of Michigan, so my topic is often perceived with

alarm and reluctance. I designed my research project to answer Forte's call for anthropological

research on internet communities. Similarly, sociologist Paul Lynch urged researches to examine

the intersection of online communities and hospitality in his book "Hospitality: A Social Lens."

He writes:

> As social relations are increasingly conducted in mediated formats, hospitality provides a useful lens through which to explore the way humans interact with each other in virtual spaces and with new technologies in physical spaces. To date, surprisingly little research has applied a hospitality perspective to these emerging phenomena. Those authors who do engage the metaphor of hospitality in this context, however, reveal that bringing hospitality to bear on studies of human–machine interactions, online social networking and virtual communities enables us to ask important questions about belonging, exclusion, power and identity.
>
> [2007:12]

I am specifically interested in the study of online communities and hospitality through the lens of the Couchsurfing organization, a group of over 6 million people that use online connections to create in-person meetings. Some anthropologists and sociologists have researched Couchsurfing, but no one has looked closely at community, safety, trust, and gender within this organization.

Research Beginnings

I joined the Couchsurfing organization not as a researcher, but as a participant. In April 2011, I saw a short video documenting a user's first Couchsurfing experience. Fascinated with the idea, I read articles about the site and decided to become a user myself. After adding details to my profile and confirming the legitimacy of the site, I decided to try it out for the first time on a trip to Toronto, as described in my prologue.

I continued Couchsurfing, both as a host in Ann Arbor, Michigan and as a guest in other cities, for the next year. In January 2012, I enrolled in an "Ethnography of Everyday Life" class with Tom Fricke at the University of Michigan, which involved studying ethnographies and ultimately writing our own. During this course, I read Robert Emerson's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (2011) which provided me with a framework for taking fieldnotes, and I began writing about my everyday life. Since my life often included hosting Couchsurfers, many of my notes were about these experiences. As a final project for the class, I went on a week-long Couchsurfing road trip and wrote an intensive commentary on the organization.

Shortly after this trip, I continued questioning some aspects of Couchsurfing, especially questions of trust and safety for Couchsurfers. I looked into anthropological research that had already been done on Couchsurfing, and found very few articles. Determined to add more to this growing body of work, I decided to explore Couchsurfing as my senior honors thesis project.

Participant Observation

Since I wrote my ethnographic commentary in April 2012, I continued Couchsurfing and taking fieldnotes. Overall, my ethnographic data comes from having Couchsurfed with fourteen hosts in seven countries—the United States, Ecuador, Canada, Turkey, Denmark, England, and Iceland. I also hosted nine guests from the United States, France, Germany, Canada, and Australia at my home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. During all of my Couchsurfing experiences, I used a journal to document the details of the encounters.

I chose not to formally interview all but one of my hosts or surfers. I wanted to keep my interviews separate from my ethnographic data—I feared that identifying myself as a Couchsurfing researcher could make hosts or guests behave differently around me. Of course, if my work came up, I was honest about my Couchsurfing project and explained the reason for my journaling. This is how the one exception happened—a surfer I was hosting asked what I was working on, and because she was so excited with my thesis and eager to share her stories, I decided to interview her.

Interviews

The bulk of my research comes from one-on-one interviews, which I started after my project was approved. On June 12th, 2012, the Health and Science Behavior Studies Institutional Research Board (IRB-HSBS) at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor accepted this research project under the name *Hospitality Exchange: An anthropological analysis of Couchsurfing*.

To find participants to interview, I relied on the Couchsurfing group pages, location pages, and messaging system (which will be detailed in the following chapter). I posted a

recruitment message in several locations on the site, and received an overwhelming number of replies from Couchsurfers who wanted to share their stories. After talking to these initial interviewees, I found two additional informants via snowball sampling. From July 2012 to November 2013, I interviewed fifteen Couchsurfers from eight countries. The Couchsurfers I interviewed ranged in age from 22 years old to 34 years old. I interviewed eight men and seven women. Some had been on Couchsurfing for years while others had joined the site more recently.

I developed my interviewing methods after reading Robert Weiss's *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (1994), which was also a part of Tom Fricke's "Ethnography of Everyday Life" course. Twelve of my interviews were face-to-face and three were over Skype. I came to my interviews with about 25 questions, focused on general perceptions of Couchsurfing, along with some questions directed towards safety, trust, and gender. However, the structure of my interviews was not completely rigid. I used my questions as guidelines and allowed the interviewee to control the conversation.

With participant approval, I voice recorded all of my interviews and transcribed them. I met the Couchsurfers I interviewed at a location of their choice, which included coffee shops, campus buildings, restaurants and bars. Interviews had no time restrictions and lasted anywhere between 25 and 105 minutes. All names from my interviews have been changed to protect the identity of my informants. Quotations I cite include a pseudonym, the interviewee's nationality, the interviewee's age, and the month the interview occurred.

Other studies of Couchsurfing have relied on surveys, but I believe a one-on-one conversation is a much better approach. Survey answers lack adequate background information or details, and participants are not able to explain their responses. Interviews create a deeper

understanding of the subject. Oftentimes, participants are willing to share more information when the interviewer seems open and non-judgmental. This was a particular concern for my research which deals with sensitive issues of sex and gender. Perhaps a survey respondent would not share the story of a sexual discomfort with another Couchsurfer in a face-less questionnaire, whereas he/she may be more willing to share this information in a face-to-face interview.

Online Research

As I gathered more interview data, I explored the Couchsurfing website as well as external blogs, where many users share their Couchsurfing stories. On the Couchsurfing site, I also looked closely at user profiles, examining personal descriptions and references for information commenting on gender, sex, safety, and access. Additionally, some users I was not able to interview shared intimate stories with me through Couchsurfing's messaging system. Like my ethnographic data, this was not a large portion of my research. However, I was able to further explore and reaffirm ideas from my interviews by browsing the Couchsurfing site, Couchsurfing blogs, and the Couchsurfing message system.

A Global Culture

In previous Couchsurfing research, some social scientists chose to limit their studies to a specific geographical location (Buchberger 2011, Bradbury 2013). In spite of these interesting projects, I followed Paula Bialski's example, a sociologist who published the book "Becoming Intimately Mobile" about Couchsurfing. She explains:

> I did not take into account the customs and mores of gift giving, trust, hosting, visiting, intimacy, and interaction between strangers that were specific to the host or traveler's country-of-origin. The choice to omit such descriptions and comparisons was strategic – this work is the study of a culture of the intimately mobile, and as such, it describes the

> rituals of their behaviour and the ways in which intimacy and closeness are achieved offline. […] The cultural differences that help determine the way in which people become close and intimate are not critical in explaining the emerging practices of a global culture.
>
> [Bialski 2012:40]

Like Bialski, I interviewed Couchsurfers from around the world so that I could get a better feel for the community as a whole. I acknowledge that this global view can be limiting at times, especially in cases when gender or safety expectations are shaped by cultural differences. For example, when I discuss perceptions of Couchsurfing as a woman in Chapter 3, one correspondent explained that while she was typically open to Couchsurfing with men, she changed her personal rules on a trip to India; I suggest that further research reexamine my analysis within the context of particular countries or regions. But, overall Couchsurfing is one community that boasts itself as a *global* movement, so it should be looked at on an international level.

Chapter 1: What is Couchsurfing?

Couchsurfing.org, or simply Couchsurfing, is a website that facilitates the creation of hospitality exchange encounters. The general idea behind hospitality exchange is that instead of staying in a hotel or hostel while traveling, hospitality exchange participants stay with a host that offers them accommodation without monetary exchange.

Before Couchsurfing

"Servas, it's the original Couchsurfing."
-Monika, September 2012

Although Couchsurfing is the largest hospitality exchange network to date, it was not the founding organization with the idea of opening up homes to traveling strangers. The first documented wide-spread hospitality exchange network is Servas Open Doors, an association established shortly after World War II in 1949 (Marx 2012). Originally named Peacebuilders, Servas' goal was for participants to spread peace by volunteering to open up their homes. Servas still exists today as a non-governmental organization, a part of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Hosts are interviewed and screened for approval by a coordinator and then included in the Servas list. Travelers, who must also be interviewed and screened, can then access this list to find a place to stay (Servas.org 2013). Today Servas has 16,000 members in 128 countries. Servas laid down a foundation for Couchsurfing—in fact, Monika, a German woman I interviewed, described Servas as "the original Couchsurfing" (September 2012).

Couchsurfing has a similar philosophy to Servas. Casey Fenton, a co-founder of Couchsurfing, came up with the idea after a trip to Iceland in 1999. Since he did not know

anyone in Iceland, he emailed 1,500 university students in Reykjavik asking if anyone was

willing to host a tourist from the United States (Marx 2012). Fenton received over 50

accommodation offers, and upon returning to the United States, he used this experience to

develop the Couchsurfing website, launched to the public in January 2004 (Couchsurfing.org

2013a). Due to some technical problems, the website was offline in 2006, but since then it has

been continuously growing.

This is not to say Couchsurfing and Servas Open Doors are the only hospitality exchange

networks. There are many websites similar to Couchsurfing including BeWelcome, Hospitality

Club, Globalfreeloaders, Tripping, and Warm Showers. Likewise, before the internet age, there

were organizations including the Traveler's Directory, Hospitality Exchange, and Friendship

Force International with the same mission—hosts opening up their homes to travelers without

monetary exchange.

The Rise of Couchsurfing

"The first time I heard about Couchsurfing was maybe 7 years ago. Then, it got to be millions of
people, you heard more and more about Couchsurfing and all my friends were Couchsurfing.
When they went to other cities, they were all Couchsurfing."
-Maxime, July 2012

What sets Couchsurfing apart from other hospitality exchange networks is its massive

size. As of September 2013, the Couchsurfing website cited that there were 6 million members

from over 100,000 cities (Couchsurfing.org 2013b)–that makes Couchsurfing 375 times larger

than the number of Servas Open Doors participants. According to statistics published on the

Couchsurfing website in 2012, the United States has the most Couchsurfers, followed by

Germany, France, Canada, England, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Australia, and China. Couchsurfers

must be at least 18 years old, and the average member is 28 years old. While most users are between the ages of 18 and 34, there is a significant number of older Couchsurfers as well, including entire family households that share a profile, parents whose children recently moved out of their homes, and retired adults. In a quick search, I found active Couchsurfers as old as 88 years. The sex split of Couchsurfers is fairly even, with 53% male users and 47% female users (Couchsurfing.org 2013c).

The Couchsurfing website is not simply a lengthy list of hosts around the world like the Servas platform—Couchsurfing is a social networking site. Users make profiles in which they provide detailed information about where they live, who they are, what they are interested in, and what type of accommodation they can offer to travelers. These profiles then enable collaboration, where members can act as both hosts for travelers passing through their hometowns and as guests (often referred to as "surfers") while traveling.

The Couchsurfing Profile

"My profile is who I am."
-Paul, September 2012

Becoming a member of Couchsurfing is a relatively simple process. Alicia, a 26 year old woman from New York City, decides to try Couchsurfing; she quickly creates a profile. She starts by making an account—with only her name, sex, birthday, email address, and location she becomes a registered Couchsurfing user[1]. Next, Alicia is given the option of "verifying" her profile[2]. Verification is meant to prove that someone lives at his or her home address. If Alicia pays a one-time fee based on her location (a $25 donation to Couchsurfing for users in the

---

[1] An image of the Sign Up page is located in the appendix.
[2] An image of the Verification page is located in the appendix.

United States), she will receive a postcard with a verification code in the mail. Once Alicia enters this code online, she has proven she has access to mail at the address listed on her Couchsurfing profile. Verification is not required, but it is one security measure to build the trustworthiness of a user (the discussion of building trust is continued in Chapter 2). Of the 6 million users on Couchsurfing, the organization cites that nearly 1 million users have been verified (Couchsurfging.org 2013d).

After Alicia decides if she wants to verify her account, she is taken to a homepage for her city—New York, New York[3]. From this page, a message prompts Alicia to complete her profile, update her hosting information, join events, or find other "Place Pages." If she chooses to complete her profile, she will add information similar to any social media page—a photo, a personal description, occupation, education level, favorite books, movies, and music, and general interests[4]. Some other profile sections are more specific to Couchsurfing. These include a current mission, how I participate in Couchsurfing, Couchsurfing Experience, Philosophy, Types of people I enjoy, Teach, learn, share, one amazing thing I've seen or done, and Opinion on the Couchsurfing.org project. To better understand what these Couchsurfing sections entail, here is what Patricia, a 24-year-old woman from New York City, included in her profile:

> **Current mission**: Figure out a creative use for the produce I'm growing in my urban garden.
> **How I participate in Couchsurfing**: I like when people show me around and brag about the city they call home. Though I am not from New York, I've gotten to know it pretty well, and would love to explore more with new people.
> **Couchsurfing Experience**: I have surfed in places from Zurich to the Oregon Coast, and I have met people for coffee a couple times and gone to meetups in Seattle and NYC. That is the best I can do in terms of hosting for now because I live in a tiny apartment with roommates who are hard to sell on the idea.
> **Philosophy:** I thrive on experiences that others consider sketchy, weird, or just uncomfortable. When I am about to chicken out on something, I always ask myself if I will later regret not doing it. Also, the right music will always get me dancing.

---

[3] An image of the User Home page is located in the appendix.
[4] An image of Alicia's Profile page is located in the appendix.

Types of people I enjoy: People who know how to cut through the bullshit. Open minded, kind hearted, adventurous. People who are interested in other cultures.
Teach, learn, share: I'd love to learn some of whatever language you speak. I can teach you the dance to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" or share what I know about bike maintenance.
One amazing thing I've seen or done: Sort of by accident, I got to perform on the stage of the Teatro Nacional of Nicaragua with the theatre group I joined while studying in Managua.
Opinion on the Couchsurfing.org project: I think it will revolutionize the world. I'd like to see it easier to find travel buddies who are going to the same place as you.
[November 2013]

Like Patricia, users are encouraged to create profile pages full of personal information to accurately portray their personalities. As Paul, a 29-year-old man from the United States I interviewed told me, "My profile is who I am" (September 2012). The information shared on a profile is important because it helps users appear trustworthy in order to find hosts and guests (I will return to this topic in the next chapter).

Another section of the profile page is "Couch Information." Here, Alicia tells other users if she is willing to host them, if she prefers to host guests of a particular gender, if she allows smoking in her home, if she has children or can host children, if she has pets or can host pets, and if the sleeping surface she offers is shared. She can also include a picture of her "couch" and any other information she wants to share with potential guests, like what days of the week she prefers to host, how many people she is willing to host at once, if she is willing to show people around her city, or how accessible her home is via public transit. Despite the implications of the name, users do not always sleep on a couch—in addition to couches, I have heard stories of users sleeping on spare beds, mattresses, floors, tents, and even hammocks. A sample couch description from a user in Istanbul follows:

Couch Available: Yes	**Preferred Gender**: Any
Smoking allowed: No	**Has children**: No
Can host children: No	**Has pets**: No
Can host pets: No	**Max Surfers Per Night**: 4
Shared Sleeping Surface: No	**Shared Room**: No

Description: I live literally right next to Galata Kulesi in the Taksim/Beyoglu area. We're in the heart of downtown (next to the famous Istiklal Caddesi), walking distance to the main nightlife, shopping district and public transportation and we go out pretty frequently. It's about 2 minutes to the buses and 5 minutes to the underground metro. We're an American dude and Irish dude, sharing a living space. We love hosting people and making new friends. We have a couch and some spare mattresses for any surfers that decide they'd like to stay with us. We work during the week at a nearby medical university, so our weeknights are pretty tame. However, we still can head out for a few drinks if you want some company. Our weekends are pretty energetic and awesome, so we prefer hosting during Friday and Saturday (but it doesn't really matter). You are more than welcome to join our friends and us when we venture out on the town. We'll give you a spare set of keys, so you aren't obligated to spend any time with us. Our house is your house, so feel free to use our kitchen, laundry room, etc. to your liking. We'll provide sheets, towels, etc. so I guess you just need your clothes.

[November 2013]

If Alicia is not available to host guests, she can select that she wants to "hang out" with other users or that she does not want to meet other users at all. The site includes instructions on how members can configure their Couch Information:

Consider making your couch, spare room or air mattress available to travelers. Set your couch status under Couch Information. You can set it to 'Not Right Now (but I can hang out)' if you want to be available as a city resource for travelers but are unable to host. You can set it to 'No' if you're not available or don't have any extra space, or 'Maybe/Yes' to show up in search results for travelers who are planning a trip to your area.

[Couchsurfing.org 2013e]

Although members are encouraged to open their homes to travelers, not everyone who makes a profile is actively involved as a host and a surfer.

Couchsurfing also acts as a platform for the organization of community events, where Couchsurfers can meet for a variety of activities. Over 300 cities have weekly meet-ups where Couchsurfing users get together without offering their homes to strangers (Couchsurfing.org 2013c). These events include Thai food Thursdays in San Francisco, polyglot language exchanges in Paris, and salsa dancing in Tokyo. Couchsurfing users can also join groups to meet like-minded participants, set up with message boards to discuss shared interests. Some groups include Cooking Exchange with 3,463 members, Photography with 15,227 members, Hitchhikers

with 21,544 members, Independent Women with 2,639 members, and Queer Couchsurfers with 29,938 members. Couchsurfing also includes a messaging system for users to chat outside of sending Couchrequests and group message boards.

Although the events, groups, messaging, and hang out options are functions of the website, my research is not focused on those aspects of Couchsurfing. There are other websites like Meetup.com and Craigslist that create comparable events and have many more participants. In writing about these features, I want to note that this is another aspect of the site which may be alluded to in quotes from my interviews and could be subject to further research. As previously discussed, Couchsurfing is unique in the amount of hospitality exchange encounters the site creates, and researching these encounters is the priority of this thesis.

The events, groups, messaging, and hang out options highlight a key aspect of Couchsurfing—the emphasis on *community*. Couchsurfing cofounder Casey Fenton believes this feature makes his project different from other hospitality exchange websites. In an interview for a travel website, Fenton said, "The Couchsurfing Project is an experiment in creating offline community from a virtual community, not just a way for backpackers to find a free place to stay" (BootsnAll 2013). Members are encouraged to go beyond hosting and traveling and use features like groups and events to become fully-integrated community members. This is an important feature of Couchsurfing that I will discuss in the next chapter.

Traveling and Hosting with Couchsurfing

"A lot of people use Couchsurfing just to travel, some use it to host people,
some use it for meeting people."
-Sarah, July 2012

After filling out the sections of her profile, Alicia decides to go on a trip to London. She selects to plan a new trip and enters the location and dates she will be there[5]. Before she can start searching for a host, she must write a 100 character or more description of why she is going to London and select how many people are traveling (if she is looking for a host for just herself or with friends). Finally, Alicia can begin browsing through the available hosts in London[6], what users refer to as a "couch search." On September 30th, 2013, the London search yielded 42,738 potential hosts—there are many options to narrow this search down to find an ideal host.

Some search options include finding a host in a specific neighborhood in London, which can be done by indicating a more specific location name (like a district or borough) or by searching only hosts within the area of an interactive map. Users can search for hosts with space for a specific number of people, locals that may want to meet up and not host, other travelers who recently logged in from London, or a specific person by his or her name or username. The results can be filtered by a range of ages, gender, multiple hosts in the same home, or by keyword. Other filters include finding users that have photos, are verified, are vouched for, that speak a certain language, that have logged in recently, that allow or don't allow smoking, pets, and children, that are wheelchair accessible, and that are ambassadors (a title experienced users can apply for through the website). Finally, once filters have been placed, the order the profiles appear can be sorted by relevance, experience, last login, newest profiles, and oldest profiles.

Alicia searches for a female host with space for one person, with a photo, who is between the ages of 24 and 30. Now there are 621 hosts to sort through instead of 42,738. The interface presents Alicia with a preview of these profiles, which includes a photo and selected sections of

---

[5] An image of the trip planning page is located in the appendix.
[6] An image of the profile browsing page is located in the appendix.

a profile (age, gender, profession, Couchsurfing mission, languages, etc). Alicia can choose who sounds interesting and then look at their full profile.

Alicia may be looking at certain features to insure her safety—the four elements Couchsurfing includes are the verification system discussed previously, along with a friending system, a reference system, and a vouching system. The friending system is similar to other social networking platforms. This system allows Couchsurfing users to connect to other users they know. Unlike Facebook, each friend is labeled; a friend can be an acquaintance, friend, good friend, best friend, or Couchsurfing friend. Next, there is a reference system. The reference system allows users to leave feedback on Couchsurfing pages. The reference system is vital in creating trust among users, and it will be discussed more throughout this paper. Finally, Couchsurfing has a vouching system. According to the Couchsurfing website, "When you vouch for someone, you are telling the community that you feel 100% confident in that person" (Couchsurfing.org 2013d). A user only has the ability to vouch for someone else after being vouched for three times. Finding users that are vouched for can be much more difficult than finding users who are verified and have a few positive references.

After looking at several profiles and evaluating which Couchsurfers would be ideal hosts for Alicia, she can send a Couchrequest, which is the Couchsurfing term for a message asking to stay with a host. This request will include the information Alicia previously filled out about why she is going on her trip, and she will also be asked to fill out a note to her potential host. She can send requests to multiple hosts, or she can even post her travel plans for hosts in the area to invite her. A Couchrequest looks something like this message I received from a guest I hosted:

> **About Me:** Hello Clare! My name's Sam, I'm heading down through Michigan from the U.P. with my flatmate en route to Chicago, heading WAY outta the way because he is meeting someone for a date near Ontario/Detroit, so I opted that he could drop me off in Ann Arbor for the night and pick me up the next day to continue our journey... I hope I'm not too late in the asking, that it's okay with you and your home-mates to host me...

Why I'd Like to Meet You: I would like to meet you, you seem like an amazing person. I could bring my guitar and we could jam some... I am also learning French and Spanish, it would be great to practice/converse with you. I'm just looking forward to meeting some fun people and enjoying a fun Saturday night. Serai du bon temps. :) espero oir de ti, gracias con anticipacion

[November 2012]

The hosts then have the option to "accept" or "decline" the request, and they also have the option of replying with "maybe" if they need more information or time to decide if they can host. More messages can be sent before committing as a host or surfer. Once the Couchsurfers reach an agreement, the host provides all necessary information, including his or her address, directions, and phone number. Generally, Couchsurfing acts as a platform that introduces members with similar desires, and then the users do the rest.

Alicia can also host Couchsurfers coming to New York. If she sets her "couch status" as "available" or "maybe available," other Couchsurfers can find her profile and request to stay at her home. The role of the host and surfer varies. At the very least, the host only provides a sleeping surface for the guest. However, a Couchsurfing experience typically involves more contact between the host and guest; this can be conversation, guided sightseeing, cooking or food-sharing, or simply involving the Couchsurfing guest in the host's everyday life. Couchsurfing experiences tend to be short, with a guest rarely staying for more than 5 nights.

At the end of the Couchsurfing exchange, the host and guest both have the option of leaving a reference to evaluate the overall experience. There are three options—positive, negative, or neutral. The rating is accompanied with a short explanation. A reference looks something like this comment, taken from my profile:

From: Yusuf Bayar [includes a link to his profile, and his photo]
Beyoglu, Turkey, April 7th, met in person, hosted for 5 days
Rating: Positive
Comment: Clare and her friend were both a great deal of fun. They had great taste in music, were open-minded and adventurous, and enjoyed eating just as much as I do. I'd recommend surfing or meeting up with Clare or even just becoming long-distance pen-pals. I hope to see you again, Clare!

[April 2013]

When another Couchsurfer reads my profile, he or she can see this reference to determine if I am a good host or surfer. These references cannot be deleted by the users who receive them. If the reference violates a list of reference guidelines as a lie, harassment, or from an anonymous profile, the member can petition to have the reference flagged by the Couchsurfing Safety Team. Conversely, members can change the references they left for another user. Hypothetically, if Yusuf later found out that I broke something in his home, he could change the positive rating he left me as well as his comment.

The references from each side of the encounter (from the host and the surfer) are displayed on the participants' profiles. At the top of the reference section of the profile is an overall count of references: the number of positive, neutral, and negative references, and the number of references coming from hosts, surfers, or traveling partners. When browsing through profiles, the reference section shows other users how active a member is, how he or she participates in Couchsurfing, and how he or she has been perceived by other Couchsurfers.

With knowledge of the intricacies of the site, Couchsurfing seems safer than "meeting strangers on the Internet and staying in their homes." However, there is still risk in every encounter, and in the following chapter I will discuss how Couchsurfers stay safe and establish trust when creating interactions with the website.

Chapter 2: Safety, Trust, and Couchsurfing

When explained in few words, Couchsurfing—meeting strangers on the Internet and staying in their homes without monetary exchange—sounds extremely dangerous. Couchsurfing takes travelers outside of the typical corridors of tourist traffic, exposing them to potential dangers. Similar to Facebook or other social media platforms, anyone can become a registered Couchsurfer with only a valid email address. Likewise, not every user on the website has good intentions. In my own experience browsing profiles, I have found users treating Couchsurfing like a hotel by asking for money, I have received requests from men who "want to meet for a drink ;) ," and I have read about disagreeable Couchsurfing stories in negative references. Given that Couchsurfing is an online organization that anyone with bad intentions can join within minutes, Couchsurfing safety concerns are completely warranted. Yet, I remain active on the site, along with millions of other Couchsurfers. In this chapter, I will examine how Couchsurfers manage their safety.

Couchsurfing Fears

"I have basically no concern of letting people into my home."
-Adam, July 2012

In my interviews, I asked correspondents, "What concerns or fears do you have when Couchsurfing?" While most non-Couchsurfers would address fears for physical safety or personal possessions, the people I interviewed were more concerned about the connections they establish with hosts or guests. Adam, a 22-year-old man from the United States, was concerned about being a burden on his host (July 2012), Maxime, a 28-year-old Belgian man, was

concerned about the personality of his host and the similarities they would have (July 2012), and Monika, a 34-year-old German woman, was worried that she would not be able to connect with or be accepted by her host (September 2013). These Couchsurfers talked about their potential hosts or guests like friends of friends, rather than complete strangers or potential criminals being invited into their private space.

Out of 15 interviews, only one correspondent expressed an explicit concern for his possessions. Victor, a 29-year-old Peruvian man living with his parents, described his fear:

> Yeah, I am really worried that someone can steal something in my house. I mean I live in a big house and I have many things, I suppose that someone can steal one of these things. Normally what I do, I don't host during the week, I host during the weekend. So, when I go out of the house, we all go out.
>
> [July 2012]

Victor was able to manage his fears for his possessions by not leaving Couchsurfers alone in his home. Other correspondents acknowledged that possessions could be taken from them, but added that they did not share this fear. Again, Adam, a 22-year-old man from the United States, described, "Fears? As a pretty trusting person, probably too trusting, I have basically no concern of letting people into my home, I have no problem, I'm not too connected to material possessions or money" (July 2012). Similarly, Stefan, a 28-year-old German man, told me, "On the security issue, I don't think I really have any fears about security because I don't really have anything valuable at home. I mean, the most value is like a laptop or something. No, no, I don't have any security fears" (October 2013). These responses show that Couchsurfers realize the issue of personal possessions being stolen exists, but this is not their concern. This does not hint at Couchsurfers being less materialistic by nature. Rather, these comments point towards a trust between hosts and guests, a trust that diminishes anxiety over theft of personal items.

The same is true for concerns about physical safety when Couchsurfing. None of my 15 correspondents expressed fear for their physical well-being, and only one Couchsurfer even

mentioned the possibility of physical harm. Monika, a 34-year-old German woman, told me, "I don't have any concerns for my physical safety, which I think has a lot to do with my height" (September 2013). She acknowledged that physical harm was a possibility, but because she was slightly taller than the average German woman, she was able to diminish this concern. Even more so than the lack of fear for possessions, a disregard of the possibility of physical harm shows that a significant degree of trust exists between Couchsurfer hosts and guests. A frequently cited definition of trust among social psychologists is "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectations that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer et al.1995:712). For Couchsurfers, a significant degree of trust must come from both parties, the host opening his or her home to strangers and the guest staying with a stranger. In the next section, I will explore the root of these feelings of trust on Couchsurfing.

Trust Established Online and Offline

"Couchsurfing is having a friend wherever I go."
-Carlos, July 2012

The lack of fear among Couchsurfers is rooted in a shared sentiment that fellow Couchsurfers are not strangers. In my interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, I often discussed how participants act outside of the world of Couchsurfing. One Russian woman explained to me that she never talks to strangers she meets on the street or in the bar, but she is completely receptive of people she meets through Couchsurfing—something about the group just makes her feel more comfortable with new people (October 2013). Similarly, a woman from the United States explained that, compared to meeting strangers elsewhere, she feels closer to people she

meets through Couchsurfing because they are part of what she referred to as the "Couchsurfing Community" (October 2013). It seems that through the act of making a profile, a certain level of trust exists between Couchsurfers.

Joining the Community

This trust in profiles became evident when I talked to Jonathan, a 34-year-old man from the United States. He was an extremely experienced Couchsurfer, a member of the organization for almost 6 years with over 120 references on his profile. We discussed how he decided to accept or decline potential surfers, and his story surprised me:

> For me, it's just a matter of whether I can be there or not. You know, I mean, if I can host, I will. I only denied surfers one time when a girl contacted me and she said she was going to be traveling with her friends. I said, well, if you're traveling with friends, then your friends must all have profiles on Couchsurfing. And she said that they weren't gonna do that. I said, well, I'm sorry, but you can't surf with me. You know, that was really my only hard and fast rule. Even if somebody contacts me and they have a very skeletal profile without much information, I think that knowing myself and my judge of character I'll still welcome them.
>
> [September 2012]

Jonathan was extremely trusting of Couchsurfers—he accepted guests without many details in their profiles, and in another story during our interview, he recalled a time when he was out of town and a Couchsurfer stayed at his home. Yet, he refused to accept a group of people when not everyone made a profile. The profile has a lot of power—once someone creates a profile, they have accepted to be a part of the Couchsurfing community.

Benedict Anderson wrote about ideas of community in his book, *Imagined Communities.* Anderson coined the term "imagined community" to explain sentiments of nationalism; a nation is a very abstract idea, yet to citizens, the concept seems tangible. Even though it is impossible to meet everyone in a nation, or even be in contact with everyone, there exists a sense of camaraderie; this is an imagined community. In a nation, the sense of community creates actions

of pride, from citizens supporting their countries during the Olympics, to soldiers dying for their countries at war.

Anderson's idea applies to groups other than the citizens of a country. The Couchsurfing organization is an imagined community. The same ideas apply; "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991:6). With over 6 million users on the site, no Couchsurfer will know all of the other Couchsurfers, yet they still view the group as a single entity. Quotations from my interviews describing Couchsurfing as a community reflect a sense of "deep, horizontal comradeship" (1991:7) that Anderson describes in an imagined community.

In a nation, one element that strengthened the nationalistic imagined community was the media. Print media around the country created national conversations; readers became aware of their fellow citizens, and they felt a connection with these people. Similarly, the discourse on the Couchsurfing website emphasizes the idea of community. The site's definition of Couchsurfing is, "A global community of 6 million people in more than 100,000 cities who share their life, their world, their journey. Couchsurfing connects travelers with a global network of people willing to share in profound and meaningful ways, making travel a truly social experience" (Couchsurfing.org 2013a). On a page for new users, the messages read, "You have friends all over the world, you just haven't met them yet" (Couchsurfing.org 2013e) and "Couchsurfing is a service that connects members to a global community of travelers" (Couchsurfing.org 2013e). Even the Couchsurfing employees are referred to as "A community within a community" (Couchsurfing.org 2013f). The website organizers build up the idea of community on the site, which further encourages the creation of an imagined community among the members.

The limits of the Couchsurfing imagined community are different from Anderson's idea of imagined communities. When referring to feelings of nationalism, the boundary of the community is set up by the country's borders. Anderson describes, "The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (1991:7). Couchsurfing does not have these limits—in the quotations from the website, Couchsurfing is described as a "global community," a "global network," and as "friends all over the world." The Couchsurfing community is trans-national; to become a member one must make a profile, not live within a certain area.

Many Couchsurfers defend their Couchsurfing community. I found this in my interviews whenever I was told a story of a less-than-perfect Couchsurfing experience. Right after I turned off my voice recorder, some of my correspondents emphasized the need to show the positive side of Couchsurfing over the negative side. These users all felt pride in the Couchsurfing community. For Anderson, pride in a nation is shown when citizens are willing to fight and die for their country. He writes:

> It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.
>
> [Anderson, 1991:7]

I doubt any Couchsurfers would die for the organization, but my correspondents showed an urge to protect it.

Before moving on from the idea of Couchsurfing as an imagined community, I want to add that simply having a profile does not make someone a fully-included member of the Couchsurfing community. I realized this when I received a Couchrequest in October 2013. I read

the user's message to me, and then viewed his profile. I found that all he had added to his page was a profile picture; the rest, including interests, references, and Couch information, was completely empty. To me, this user was not a full-fledged member of the community, so I did not accept his request. However, if he had taken the time to share personal details on his profile, I would have agreed to host him, despite his lack of references. Simply having a profile is the first step in becoming a part of the community, but showing invested interest in Couchsurfing by filling out the profile allows a user to become part of the imagined community.

Profile Content

Returning to the idea of trust, it is the content on the profile that helps establish trust; this content creates a connection between the guest and host. The personal information shared on a profile creates the feeling that the other person is not a stranger. Anna, a 31-year-old Swedish woman, explained one particularly great Couchsurfing experience and how she felt like her host was an old friend:

> I think the best Couchsurf moment was, I was going to Chicago, and I found this profile
> that I really really liked. It was a woman, but her couch was a no, so she wouldn't host.
> But I made this big long mail, telling her how much we would get along, telling her I
> really want to meet her. She replied and said of course I want to meet you! Of course you
> can surf my couch! I want to host you, we should hang out. We met, we had a blast, we
> had so much fun. It was like meeting up with a friend that you hadn't seen in a long time.
>   [October 2013]

Since Anna had read the profile of her host before meeting her in person, she felt like they had already established a friendship. As 28-year-old Carlos told me, "Couchsurfing is having a friend wherever I go" (July 2012).

Many of my correspondents explained that they look for Couchsurfing hosts with similar interests. Monika described, "I'm queer, so I usually try to look for queer people. I'm also vegetarian, which is a search option" (September 2013). Similarly, Stefan said, "Sometimes I do

41

keyword searches for bicycling, cycling, and bike, because I'm really interested in biking, so it's a hobby-based sort of search" (October 2013). This is another way a Couchsurfer becomes less of a stranger—knowing what the host is interested in, and knowing that host and guest share this interest, creates a sense of familiarity. Moreover, this sense of familiarity produces a sense of safety.

Sociologist Karen Cook explored concepts of trust and familiarity in her book "Trust in Society." She paraphrases the research of psychologist Ervin Staub, stating, "We trust (and help) people with whom we are familiar, with whom we have frequent contact, whom we believe to be similar to ourselves, and for whom we have positive regard" (Cook 2001:100). This could explain why users search for people with similar interests. In her study of Couchsurfing, sociologist Paula Bialski also references the importance of trust. According to her, new spaces are not seen as safe spaces, so Couchsurfers find familiarity in them to eliminate feelings of unease (2011). Finding a host with common interests can help apprehensive Couchsurfers feel more trusting of their situation.

Another factor in the creation of trust based on similarities on Couchsurfing is the perception of parallels that may not actually exist. In a study of trust on the Internet, sociologist Victoria McGeer argues that online texts are stimulants to our imaginations, meaning that as we read, we unconsciously project our personal philosophies onto the ideas of the author. She writes, "Text-based interactions are particularly seductive in character […] Even when we are not actively misled by their words, our imaginations tend to roam freely over textually underspecified details" (2004:94). This can be particularly problematic when Couchsurfers judge personalities based on profile texts. For example, my 25-year-old correspondent Darla is a bartender, and she described how she sometimes searches for Couchsurfers who share an interest

in mixing drinks and craft beer in moderation. If she read on another Couchsurfer's profile, "I love drinking beer," she would likely project herself onto this user, assuming that they share the same interests. This comment, however, could refer to the Couchsurfer's love of binge-drinking, something that Darla was not searching for in a host—based only on the text, Darla would perceive familiarity and perhaps begin to trust the other Couchsurfer, when the familiarity was actually based on a misinterpretation.

Reference System

In her study, McGeer also argues that trust, both offline and online, involves accepting some level of uncertainty. Another feature on the site that eliminates uncertainty and helps establish trust is the reference system. In my interviews, I asked if Couchsurfers would host or surf with someone with no references. A few correspondents, including Ava, a 27-year-old German woman, and Monika, a 34-year-old German woman, explained that they would not accept users without any references (July 2012, September 2013). Monika also described, "I've never really thought about safety because there is the reference system and you can just use your own gut feeling" (September 2013). Later on in the interview, she described her process of choosing a host or surfer. She explained, "I look at their references and think, is this person trustworthy?" (September 2013). References are a key element in creating a sense of trust between users.

The reference system on Couchsurfing (positive, negative, or neutral references accompanied by a comment, as discussed in Chapter 1) is similar to that of the online commerce website eBay. On eBay, buyers and sellers can leave each other feedback; +1 is positive, 0 is neutral, and -1 is negative, along with a single line of text. Two economists, Paul Resnick and

Richard Zeckhauser examined trust among eBay users. Despite all the fears—not knowing the seller, buying from sellers who do not have experience, no one from eBay attesting on behalf of the auctioneers' credibility—people still use the site. The researchers discussed how eBay sellers have strong incentives to lie about the items they are selling to make a larger profit; nevertheless, with the help of the rating system, "sellers successfully build reputations of trust" (2001:127). The review system allows users to achieve a status on the website, making some users more trustworthy and other less trustworthy. The same is true on Couchsurfing, where members with more references are perceived to be more trustworthy.

Communication studies researcher Josh Boyd conducted a qualitative study of eBay and found that focusing on the concept of community fueled feelings of trust on the site. Similar to Couchsurfing, the eBay founders focused on the idea of community, with the idea that "Community participation is the foundation upon which eBay was built" (Omidyar 1999, cited in Boyd 2006). One way to build a community was by creating a site where all transactions are transparent—users can view other users' history and the positive, negative, and neutral comments written about them. To avoid risk, eBay customers are encouraged to use "common sense" to evade bad transactions, which includes looking at feedback and trusting one's instinct about a buyer or seller. Like Couchsurfing, for a user to be well-respected on the site, he or she must be an active member of the community. Other aspects of eBay—individual user identities, a shared language, a shared antagonism towards outsiders—add to feelings of trust (Boyd 2006). The idea of community on eBay is different than community on Couchsurfing; these users are not meeting face-to-face, and buying something is arguably less of a risk than staying at someone's home. But again, the key point here is that trust was created when people felt they are in a community, and a reference system can authorize the idea that users are productive members

of the community. On eBay, sellers and buyers gain rapport in the community by building up

"+1" references, while on Couchsurfing, hosts and guests become more reliable members of the

community when they have many "positive" references.

As discussed on Chapter 1, there are other credentials that build users' trust on

Couchsurfing, including the verification and vouching systems. The verification system, which

attests that a Couchsurfer lives at his or her address, rarely came up in my interviews. In fact,

two of the times it was mentioned, my correspondents criticized it as a type of profit scheme for

the Couchsurfing staff. I encourage other researchers to explore the perceived importance of

verification and how it affects trust. On the other hand, the vouching system, which shows that a

user is highly trusted by another user, was viewed similarly to the reference system. Again, I did

not focus on the vouching system in my interviews—my interviewees brought up the reference

system much more frequently and seemed to use it more to gauge trust.

When discussing references, I was particularly interested in Paul's answer to the

question, "Are you willing to host users with no references?" He explained his personal rules:

> Officially the answer is no, but unofficially, if they send me a really good request that
> proves that one, they're new to the organization and that two, they've actually decided
> that this is a viable organization by reading through my profile and talking about things in
> it, about 'why me, why do you want to stay with me' not 'why you want a place to stay'
> or 'why you're coming to my town,' but 'why me'? If someone generally makes the
> effort, it's a judgment call. But I know how to get out of compromising situations. I've
> hosted a couple of people with no references, which is kind of exciting.
> [September 2012]

Again, Paul mirrors previously discussed elements that build trust; having a detailed profile and

sharing interests. But Paul's comments show something else—when deciding who to surf with,

each member makes the final decision.

Instincts, Choice, and Control

The Couchsurfing website acts as a platform for introducing people, but it does not perform background checks or safety evaluations on these people before they join the site. Instead, members use their instincts as a safeguard. Many correspondents talked about their "gut feeling" or "intuition" when describing the judgments they made. Anna told me, "I go a lot with feeling. If I get a good feeling about someone, I want to meet them. If I get a bad feeling, I just don't meet people. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what that feeling is." Later on in the interview, she said, "I don't put myself in a situation where I have to trust a person that I generally feel is not trusting. […] It's like trusting my gut feeling, as long as I trust my gut feeling things go fine" (September 2013). As quoted earlier when discussing references, Monika explained a similar sentiment with the comment, "I've never really thought about safety because there is the reference system and you can just use your own gut feeling" (September 2013). Likewise, Agnieszka told me, "I don't know if I can specify, I think I just follow my intuition and I can't rationally explain it. […] So many people think it's too dangerous, but I trust my intuition" (October 2013). The perceived importance of the "gut feeling" and "intuition" shows that the ultimate decision is made by the individual; no one is being forced to meet or stay with another Couchsurfer, each member has the authority in deciding who to interact with.

The word "intuition" comes from the Latin term *intueri*, meaning "to look upon." *Intueri* comes from *tueri,* which means "to watch over" or "to protect" (Online Etymology Dictionary). This reflects how these Couchsurfers see their intuition; as protection from unsafe situations. While other safety features are set up though the website—having a profile, profile content, the reference system—each individual member makes the final decision when it comes to his or her

own safety. As Monika told me, "We're all responsible for our own safety on Couchsurfing" (October 2013). Couchsurfers make judgments about other users to protect themselves.

The website encourages members to follow their instincts to prevent risk. On the page titled "Safety," there is a list of tips:

> **Trust your instincts**: If a person, situation or profile seems unsafe for any reason, move on. Don't worry about seeming rude. Communicate clearly with others and take care of yourself.
> **Be informed about the culture where you are traveling**: Do your homework, and be sure you're aware of cultural sensitivities, mores and general safety recommendations for each place that you travel.
> **Communication through Couchsurfing**: Don't give out your phone number and email address until you meet and feel comfortable with a new person. Use the Couchrequest and Messaging systems within the website to communicate.
> **Review profiles carefully**: Take the time to carefully review member profiles. Read what members say about themselves and what other members have said about them. Give yourself the time to thoroughly read through all the information available.
> **Know your limits and enjoy responsibly**: Partying like a rockstar might be fun, but it puts your safety and well-being in the hands of others.
> **Have a backup plan**: Know your options. If something doesn't work out with your host, make sure you have an alternate place to stay.
> **Leave feedback**: Let other Couchsurfers know about your experiences with the people you meet. Be honest and clear. You can do this by leaving reviews other members can see.
> **Report abuse or negative experiences to Couchsurfing**: Our Trust and Safety team is here to help build the safest and most trusted community possible. They need your input in order to do their jobs. Confidentially report negative experiences or safety concerns here.
>
> [Couchsurfing.org, 2013g]

"Trust your instincts" is listed first, showing how much significance is invested in this protection.

The safety tips lead me to my next point—there is no binding contract in a Couchsurfing encounter, which is why users are encouraged to "have a backup plan." The Couchsurfers I interviewed often alluded to the impermanence of a Couchsurfing agreement, stating that if they had a bad feeling in the first few minutes of meeting a guest or host, they could turn him or her away or find a hotel. In spite of this idea, none of my 15 correspondents had stories of feeling unsafe and turning a host or guest away when they first met. However, Agnieszka described a

time when a guest at her home was drinking too much alcohol and she asked him to leave after his first night. She told me her story:

> "He came and turned out to be a big drinker. He'd go out every night and drink like a lot, which is totally not my thing. So, I just gave him the keys. Apart from that, he was okay. Not even apart from that, even when he was getting drunk, he was still being quiet when he got back. But on the second day I said 'Look, I think you need to find some other company for this sort of leisure.'"
>
> <div align="right">[October 2013]</div>

Agnieszka emphasized that this was not a negative Couchsurfing experience; she had a different personality than her guest, so she asked him to leave. Couchsurfers have a sense of agency when deciding where they stay and who can stay with them, and they have the power to turn away another member at any point in the interaction. This control over the situation makes members feel safe.

When discussing instincts and why Couchsurfing is safe, Darla, a 25-year-old woman from the United States, told me, "Women have a really good gut feeling. Before I just hand over my keys I meet the person and try to gauge what they want to do" (October 2013). Here, Darla specifically refers to the importance of women having strong gut feelings—what does this imply?

A Missing Element

<div align="center">

"Women have a really good gut feeling."
-Darla, October 2013

</div>

Darla's comment referring to women's gut feelings points out one element of safety and trust that this chapter is missing—gender. As I shared in my prologue, from the time I had my first Couchsurfing experience, my friends were worried that, as a woman, I allow strangers to stay in my home. Since then, I have been interested in reactions I experienced. In my interviews,

I tackled how others, both men and women, view gender on Couchsurfing. How do Couchsurfers perceive gender? Are there more men than women Couchsurfing? What happens when men and women Couchsurf together? I explore these questions in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Gender and Couchsurfing

Browse any library's travel section, and there will be a sub-section of books specifically for traveling women. This literature includes myriad advice and warnings; the book *Gutsy Women: More Travel Tips and Wisdom for the Road*, counsels, "The moment we step out the door, we are aware of the footsteps behind us. We are concerned for our personal safety and with good reason. Safety and security are primary concerns for women" (Bond 2001:24). One of the ten tips for women traveling in *100 Places Every Woman Should Go* includes "Male Repellent," which advises ladies to wear wedding rings and learn to tell suitors about fictional boyfriends in the local languages (Griest 2007). The same book recommends that women cry if they end up in an unwanted situation, relying on sympathy to rectify a bad situation (Griest 2007). *Wanderlust and Lipstick* cautions, "While traveling is very safe statistically, there are issues that specifically affect solo women travelers" (Whitman 2007:166). In an online news article, even a travel writer confronts her fear as a woman traveling alone; she writes, "My desire for experience, for openness, for adventure, had been overpowered by a stronger imperative, one I had internalized without realizing it: Don't get yourself raped […] I wonder, sometimes, whether women are too often taught to prioritize a nebulous idea of 'safety' over 'adventure'" (Burton, 2013). As this literature shows, notions of fear surround the idea of women traveling, especially women traveling alone.

Returning to Couchsurfing, I examined the webpage that addresses safety concerns in the last chapter. However, I left out a final note of advice, added at the very bottom of the page: "Tips for Women Travelers." The counsel reads; "When you're surfing, consider staying with other women or with families, especially if you're traveling solo. Be clear about your boundaries

and don't be shy about them. Educate yourself about the cultural and religious differences in the places you visit. Gender roles and expectations differ widely" (Couchsurfing.org, 2013g). As with travel literature, there is separate advice specifically for women. Conversely, on the Couchsurfing site, there is not an entirely different set of tips for women, just a short, added suggestion. Is this indicative of how Couchsurfers treat gender—a minor difference among users, a footnote of sorts? Do women using the site view themselves as "women Couchsurfers" or simply "Couchsurfers"?

The intersection of gender and Couchsurfing has been vastly overlooked by previous researchers. Many anthropological and sociological studies of Couchsurfing do not even broach the subject of gender or sex when Couchsurfing (Steylaerts and O'Dubhghaill 2011, Bialski 2013, Lauterbach 2010) while others acknowledge that gender may effect Couchsurfing encounters without exploring the subject (Tan 2010, Teng et al. 2010). Bradbury made the most significant mention of gender in a her sociology master's thesis on Couchsurfing. She identifies gender as an area for future research in Couchsurfing, suggesting that, "Gender is a substantial part in a person's interpretation and understandings of the potential issues posed by Couchsurfing, and the possibility that their experiences within it are gendered as well" (2013:83). In this chapter, I aim to fill this void in the study of Couchsurfing by examining narratives of gender and trust.

Gendered Expectations

"Everyone reacts with, 'But you're a young girl!'"
-Darla, October 2013

Before looking at gender during Couchsurfing interactions, I will briefly inspect expectations from people who are not Couchsurfers. In my own experience as a young woman who Couchsurfs, I receive a lot of criticism from friends and family. I explain what the idea entails, and people are shocked that, as a woman, I am so trusting of strangers. The worst potential risks—including robbery, sexual assault, and murder—are often brought up, along with the suggestion that I would be safer if I traveled with a male friend. On the other hand, I have discussed with my male friends who Couchsurf how their use of the site is perceived. Men are occasionally questioned by their parents, but never by their friends, who do not think of the activity as dangerous when it is explained by the user. In addition, when I defend my own safety as a Couchsurfing host, I often find myself referencing that there are men and a dog living in my house, as if they can deter a dangerous situation and I cannot.

When I decided to write my thesis on Couchsurfing, I had to deal with even more negative reactions; not just from friends and family, but also from university faculty and staff. Before I had completely chosen my topic, I was given a grant to support my research. However, when I returned to explain and defend my topic, the panel was too concerned for my personal safety to support my research. I intended to Couchsurf with many hosts as I conducted my interviews, but I was told I needed to stay in a safe place like a hotel or a homestay. My interviews could then be done in secure, public spaces, like coffee shops and libraries. This advice did not stop me from traveling and Couchsurfing, and I was eventually awarded the grant later on during my project. This made me realize how frightening the concept of Couchsurfing is to an outsider—yet, I can't help but wonder if the same course of events would have happened with this grant if I was a male researcher.

In my interviews, the women I talked to had similar experiences with negative perceptions from friends and family. Darla, a 25-year-old woman from the United States, explained that "Everyone reacts with, 'But you're a young girl!'" (October 2013). Darla told me that every time she hosts a Couchsurfer, male or female, a woman she works with warns her how dangerous Couchsurfing is—but Darla ignored her warnings, telling me that this particular co-worker is just too afraid of the world around her. Darla also discussed how her parents fear her role as a Couchsurfer, again with the idea that it is not a safe space for a young woman to enter. To justify her involvement with Couchsurfing, Darla compared this to other events in her life. She explained to me defensively, "I mean, I backpacked across the entire country of Peru by myself, and now I'm just letting people into my house" (October 2013). Just as I justify my own safety with comments on my protective housemates, Darla finds another way to validate her well-being as a Couchsurfing host.

Monika, a 34-year-old woman from Germany, told me, "Only women ask me, 'Isn't Couchsurfing really dangerous?' It could be a question that only women think about" (October 2013). From my interviews, Monika's comment seemed true. None of the eight men I interviewed mentioned disapproval from friends or family when they explained their involvement with Couchsurfing, while five of the seven women I spoke with had to defend the concept.

While they did not have to deal with disapproval from friends and family, some of the men I talked to expressed frustration when encouraging women to join the site. Paul told me:

> When I'm talking to women who I think would enjoy Couchsurfing, the reservations immediately go to, 'But I'm a woman, it's different!' I honestly don't think the safety is hugely different between men and women, if all potential guests and hosts take the time to read profiles and references and make a judgment call from there.
>
> [September 2012]

Just as the extensive travel literature for women suggests, fear surrounds this idea of women traveling, or in the case of Couchsurfing, women opening up their homes to travelers or entering the homes of strangers.

Male/Female Imbalance

"There are few girls who are really doing Couchsurfing."
-Ava, July 2012

Before discussing gender, I wish to briefly mention the sex of Couchsurfers. In my first chapter, I included statistics on this topic; as of 2011, the site claimed to be 53% male users and 47% female users. However, I question this figure—I searched dozens of cities, and found that the majority had more male Couchsurfers than female. It is also worth noting that not all Couchsurfers wish to label their sex as male or female, which are the only two options when creating a profile (and the site does not give users the option of identifying with "man," "woman," or "other" as their gender). However, after the profile is established, Couchsurfers have the option of designating their sex as "several people," which is meant to be used when multiple people live together and share one Couchsurfing account. I have also found users who do not wish to call themselves male or female who use the "several people" option. The "several people" accounts aside, it is hard to determine if the number of *active* Couchsurfers is close to 53% male and 47% female. I conducted searches on the site, again ignoring the "several people" profiles, to try to get a better estimate of the gender ratio of Couchsurfers in specific cities I had visited using the site. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, my hometown in the United States, I found the split to be fairly even: 878 male hosts and 819 female hosts: 52% male and 48% female. In New York City, the gender gap was a bit larger, with 58% male hosts and 42% female hosts. In

Arequipa, a city in Peru where I conducted some of my interviews and I found very few women to talk to, hosts were 71% male and 29% female. Finally, in Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey, 76% of hosts were male and only 24% were female[7]. I searched in many other cities, trying to find one where females outnumber males. I explored Portland, London, Reykjavik, Brussels, Amsterdam, Chicago, Lagos, Cairo, Dakar, Bangkok, and Delhi. All had more males than females, with largest sex gap in Delhi with only 15% women. Finally, I found three cities with more females than males: Los Angeles, California was 29% male and 71% female, Seattle, Washington was 33% male and 67% female, and Beijing was 44% male and 56% female.

One flaw in this method of searching profiles statistically is that many of the profiles that exist are not being used. I refer to these users as "ghost Couchsurfers"; these are people who are often intrigued with the idea of Couchsurfing join the site, but never commit to a hosting or surfing experience. These profiles typically do not have any photos. In fact, I have never met a Couchsurfer who has used the site as a host or guest and not had photo on his or her account. I searched for "ghost Couchsurfers" in Ann Arbor, by opting to search for users with photos. Of the 1,699 male and female Couchsurfing profiles in Ann Arbor, Michigan, only 866—a little bit more than half—of users have a photo on their accounts.

I returned to the cities with more female hosts than male, to see how the numbers compared when searching for users with photos. In Los Angeles, there were 1,874 more male than female users with photos and in Seattle there were 635 more male profiles with photos. Beijing was the only city that still had more female users, with 344 more female profiles with photos. Finally, I conducted a global search of profiles with photos and found that 42% were female while 58% were male. Of course, only looking at users with photos does not show that

---

[7] It seems that the global south on Couchsurfing has a disproportionate number of men. Perhaps women from the global south are less likely to Couchsurf, or maybe men from the global south are more likely to join. Since I did not limit my study to a particular area of the world, I suggest this as a topic for further research.

these people have used the sites—often, when a user makes a Couchsurfing profile, he or she

fills out the interests sections and adds a photo, but never takes part in a Couchsurfing

experience.

As an anthropological study, my research is not based on statistics. However, in this

section, I want to point out that there is not an equal number of males and females using

Couchsurfing, even if the website claims the split it fairly even. Ava, a 27-year-old woman from

Germany, voiced her frustration with the unequal divide of users on the site:

> I'm really ashamed that there are so few girls who are really doing Couchsurfing. I don't
> know why, perhaps they're afraid of something, you know, of negative experiences. I
> would like to surf the couch of a girl, but it's much easier, much much easier, to find
> some of a guy because there are just a few girls who are hosting. My profile looks a little
> bit strange because 90% of the Couchsurfers I've been with are guys, but this is because
> there are no girls! It would be nicer with more girls.[8]
>
> [July 2012]

Despite her discontent with the amount of females on Couchsurfing, Ava continued to

Couchsurf, along with many other women including myself. We continue to Couchsurf in a

group where we are the minority, a group that many outsiders think is unsafe. In the next section,

I will look at how gender plays into Couchsurfing experiences.

Gender Neutral Encounters

"Guy or girl, for me it wouldn't matter, I don't really care."
-Darla, October 2013

The women I talked to did not find much of a difference in Couchsurfing with men or

women, both as hosts and guests. When I asked 31-year-old Anna whom she looks for in a host,

---

[8] Note that Ava uses sex and gender interchangeably even though they are not the same concept. Sex, which deems a person "male" or "female," is biological. Gender, which includes the labels "man," "woman," or something else, is socially constructed. However, the majority of biological females identify as women and the majority of biological males identify as men, which is why I chose to include both a section on sex and this particular quotation.

a man or woman, she responded, "I don't think about it so much" (October 2013). She explained that instead of searching for hosts based on gender, she uses key words to find users with common interests. She described this method, telling me, "Like if I want to go, uh, if I want to do a street art tour, I'll type in 'graffiti' and 'street art.' That's more of how I pick my person" (October 2013). To Anna, the gender of her host did not matter.

Darla, a 25-year-old woman from the United States, expressed the same feelings as Anna. She explained:

> If I was going on a nature trip I'd try to find someone who, like, does a lot of hiking and knows where trails are. If I was going to Chicago, maybe, [pause] it'd depend on the nature of my trip. If I was going to learn bartending things, I'd look for a bartender. Guy or girl, for me it wouldn't matter, I don't really care. Yeah, I don't know why.
> [October 2013]

Based on these interviews, women Couchsurfers seem much more interested in finding a host with similar interests than a host of the same gender.

When I discussed the idea of trust and gender with Agnieszka, a 31-year-old Polish woman, she said, "Huh… I don't think gender is a factor in how much I trust people. Some people think that you should trust men less. Many people tell me this, they're surprised that I stay with men, but I really don't" (October 2013). Like Darla and Anna, Agnieszka was perfectly comfortable with the idea of staying in a stranger's home, whether the stranger is a man or a woman.

Every woman I talked to had no problem with ideas of trust and safety when surfing with men. Ava, a 27-year-old German woman I quoted in the previous section, surfs with men. Although she expressed a desire for there to be more women on the site, this sentiment had nothing to do with her feeling uncomfortable staying with men—she simply wants more women to be able to take advantage of the group. Sarah, a 33-year-old Canadian woman, Couchsurfed with men as well, and stated no preference in the gender of her hosts. Only one Couchsurfer,

Monika, a 34-year-old German woman, told me she doesn't particularly enjoy hosting men.

However, her reason for preferring women was based on personality concerns, not safety.

Monika described her reasoning:

> I'm queer, so I usually try to look for queer people. I'm also vegetarian, which is a search option I usually search for female hosts or several hosts, I don't search for male hosts. I've surfed with a couple of guys and I host guys, but I've found that staying with men, they mostly don't know what to do with me. They sometimes have the perception that I'm from a different planet.
>
> [October 2013]

Monika's comments were not all that different from Anna's and Darla's; Monika looks for a host with a similar personality that she is able to connect with. Since being a queer woman is a large part of who she is, Monika often looks for hosts that share this identity. She told me later in the interview, "Heterosexual men usually don't feel comfortable with me" (October 2013)—Monika's aversion towards hosting men does not fit the reasons the women's travel literature suggests.

To confirm that this wasn't a subset of the community, I messaged a few other female members, asking about their methods when finding hosts and accepting surfers, and how they felt about gender. They unanimously replied that gender is not a factor in their decision when choosing a host or surfer, nor is it a factor in how much they trust another Couchsurfer. Responses included, "I go for profile written stuff, see if they match with my interests or humor or at least, seem trustworthy" (Heather October 2012), "I have no preferences in the gender of another user" (Janae October 2012), and "I consider how much our personalities/interests might 'click'" (Vera October 2012). One correspondent mentioned how gender factors in when her boyfriend is included in the decision. She described, "While I don't have any difference in trust based on gender, my boyfriend mentioned that he doesn't feel as comfortable with more than one

man in the residence we are staying in" (Diana October 2012). Overall, women do not have a problem with hosting or surfing with men.

Personally, most of my Couchsurfing experiences have been with men. Of the fourteen hosts I have stayed with, only two were women, and of the nine people I hosted, only one was a woman. However, I was not searching for men in these interactions—like my correspondents said, I simply looked for a host with common interests. Additionally, my experiences may be linked to the fact that there are more men than women on the site.

The men I talked to had the same idea as women—that Couchsurfing interactions are not based around gender, and gender does not factor into how much users trust each other. I had a conversation with Alexandre, a 47-year-old Couchsurfer from France, about gender and Couchsurfing. He shared his thoughts:

> *Chez moi, le genre n'a rien à voir avec le fait de faire confiance ou pas. J'ai beaucoup d'amis femmes en qui j'ai totalement confiance comme j'ai beaucoup d'amis hommes en qui j'ai totalement confiance aussi. La confiance est quelque chose d'irrationnel, c'est du pur ressenti mais qui n'a rien à voir avec le genre.*

> At my home, gender has nothing to do with trusting someone or not. I have a lot of friends who are women that I have complete trust in, just like I have a lot of friends who are men that I have complete trust in as well. Trust is something irrational, it's a pure feeling, but it has nothing to do with gender.
>
> <div align="right">[October 2013]</div>

Alexandre did not think gender affected his trust on Couchsurfing. Similarly, Paul told me he tried to create a genderless space for Couchsurfers. He said, "When I have guests, I try my hardest to treat individuals as individuals in a space that is gender neutral" (September 2012). Like the women I talked to, the men did not perceive gender as a factor that changes Couchsurfing.

Conversely, one woman mentioned how she refused to stay with men only when traveling in certain parts of the world. Natasha described her experience in India:

I don't think about gender when looking for a host. I don't even look at guys versus girls, it doesn't really matter, I don't discriminate based on gender at all. [Pause] With the exception of India. Mostly men are involved in the Couchsurfing community there. I was in the Calcutta group, and they were like all dudes, and they would have bar meet-ups and stuff and you'd rarely see any women in the group posting on anything. And when I was looking for a place to stay, it was on my mind because I was by myself and I had to be concerned for my own safety. You have all these things in your head about what goes on in the country, issues between men and women. So I didn't send any Couchrequests to guys, I only sent them to women. And it ended up being a good experience.

[November 2013]

Although Natasha generally sees Couchsurfing interactions as gender neutral, she was fearful of staying with men in India. I did not focus my interviews on Couchsurfers in certain parts of the world, but comparing perceptions of gender based on areas of travel could be looked at in further research.

Overall, the commonly shared sentiment among Couchsurfers—that a person's gender is a minor role in Couchsurfing interactions which are more focused on similarities in personality—may explain the lack of research on gender and Couchsurfing in previous studies. The vast majority of Couchsurfers are ignoring the advice directed towards women to consider staying with other women or families to protect themselves, which may imply that the community is gender neutral. However, as I was conducting my interviews with Couchsurfers, I found that there were more gendered events involved in Couchsurfing than this idealized genderless world lets on. I talked to couples that met through Couchsurfing, I was told stories of awkward sexual come-ons, and I was generally finding more men willing to interview with me than women. These incidents would not occur if Couchsurfing was completely gender neutral. With these questions in mind, I began asking my correspondents about relationships on Couchsurfing, and how the possibility of sexual come-ons affects feelings of trust and community.

Sex and Relationships

"One of the first questions that comes up after trust and confidence is about sex."
–Stefan, October 2013

As much as women and men want to believe Couchsurfing interactions are gender neutral, there are people having sex after meeting though the site. In my interviews, correspondents who claimed Couchsurfing is gender neutral talked about Couchsurfers using the site in a variety of gendered ways—violating the guidelines and using it as a dating site, unintentionally finding themselves in relationships, dealing with failed sexual advances, and handling sexual harassment. I gathered stories from my interviews to better understand the ways gender can affect a Couchsurfing experience.

(Not) A Dating Site

When I told my correspondents that I was interested in gender on Couchsurfing, I was constantly reminded that Couchsurfing is not a dating site. Stefan told me "The purpose of Couchsurfing is not to be a dating website" (October 2013) and Monika said simply, "Couchsurfing is not a dating website" (October 2013). The Couchsurfing website has a specific webpage titled, "Community Guidelines," which includes the rule, "Don't Go Looking for a Date: Our members join Couchsurfing to create friendships. Don't contact other members for dating – we will consider this harassment" (Couchsurfing.org 2013h). Couchsurfing is not meant to be used as a dating website; but with so many users concerned with this being a misconception, I looked for Couchsurfers who go against this guideline and use the site to find a partner.

61

I found dozens of blog posts and articles referring to Couchsurfing as "Sexsurfing." Most of these were angry rants, describing an unwanted experience where one party did not understand the intentions of Couchsurfing. However, I also found a message board for men to discuss their sexual encounters. There was one forum titled "Couchsurfing=Fucksurfing," where dozens of men shared tips on using Couchsurfing to have sex with women. One user wrote about "converting" the women who were Couchsurfing guests at his home into "bangs," a euphemism for women he had sex with. He wrote, "For the past few years I have converted 80%-85% of girls that would request my couch into a bang" (RooshVForum 2012). Another user bragged about his own "bang percentage" and how many "flags" he had, referring to how many countries the women he slept with were from. This user wrote:

> I owe a lot to CS though, I used it when I was first getting into game and it helped so much because my biggest problem was initiating conversations with girls. CS brought them right to me. My CS bang percentage is 70% btw. I hosted over 50 girls in two years and surfed on 8 couches around the country. 15 flags.
>
> [RooshVForum 2012]

I could not find links to any of these users' Couchsurfing profiles; the moderators of Couchsurfing try to ban these members, so they are wary about posting links to their pages. Clearly there are Couchsurfers using the site to share more than a cultural connection.

Personally, I have never Couchsurfed with someone who tried to initiate any sort of sexual relationship with me. However, the fact that these users exist can create fear on the site— fear for personal safety or fear for the integrity of the community. Jonathan, a 34-year-old man I interviewed, expressed his concerns for Couchsurfing. He described, "Well, my biggest fear is that Couchsurfing will get the reputation of being a dating site, or a place where men can somehow get their foot in the door at a single woman's home. That's my biggest fear" (September 2012). In my conversations with Couchsurfers, there was a shared feeling that users

strictly using the site for sex are an extremely small minority and they are easy to spot. Other than Jonathan, my correspondents did not see these users as a major threat to Couchsurfing.

Unplanned Intimacy and Relationships

Although the guidelines state that the site is not for dating, the terms of use do not prohibit users from having sex; rather, members are merely restricted from submitting any content that "contains nudity, sexually explicit content or is otherwise obscene, pornographic, indecent, lewd, suggestive or sexually exploitative of minors" (Couchsurfing.org 2013i). Nowhere on the website is there disapproval of the possibility of intimacy or sex between host and guest once they have met in person.

In fact, one of the Couchsurfing employees encourages consensual sex through Couchsurfing. Malia Moss, who works for the blog as a "Producer of Couchsurfing stories," makes YouTube videos that address common Couchsurfing concerns. Her video on the verification process was featured on the Couchsurfing website, showing her status within the organization. One of her other videos, which was not endorsed by the Couchsurfing organization, is titled "Sex and Couchsurfing." In this recording, she reminds Couchsurfers that they are never expected to have sex with hosts or guests as some sort of payment. Whenever another Couchsurfer makes someone feel uncomfortable, they should immediately leave and report the other person. Then she addresses what happens when, "Me and my host are gettin' along and I kinda wanna have sex with them" (YouTube 2013). Her advice is to "Go for it!," citing that Couchsurfing is a community of like-minded individuals and sometimes the relationships will become intimate. She reiterates that this cannot include pressuring from either party, but if both individuals want to proceed, consensual sex is acceptable.

In my interviews, some of the same Couchsurfers who vowed that Couchsurfing is not a dating website told me stories of sexual encounters they had with hosts or guests. These people stressed that fact that, even though intimacy happens on Couchsurfing, it is still not meant to be used for those encounters. Agnieszka from Poland, after telling me about several men she eventually had sex with from Couchsurfing, commented, "Couchsurfing is often connected to some romantic and sexual stories, but it is not to say it is a dating site" (October 2013). Agnieszka met boyfriends on the site without intending to.

I interviewed one couple together: Sarah from Canada and Carlos from Peru. Carlos described, "My best Couchsurfing experience was meeting each other. She asked to stay two nights, at first it was one night." He continued, laughing with Sarah, "She's been with me for four months already!" (July 2012). In September 2013, I looked at Carlos's profile to contact him with a few follow-up questions—to my surprise, I saw that he married Sarah and they moved to Switzerland together. Again, Sarah and Carlos told me that Couchsurfing is not for dating, yet they met each other with the site's help.

A fourth Couchsurfer I interviewed told me about his intimate relationship that started on Couchsurfing. Stefan from Germany was dating a girl he met through Couchsurfing for two years when I spoke with him. He told me their story:

> I was alone, and I went to a city to see a friend of mine. He went there for international theatre festival so we didn't have hosts. And really, I just looked for pretty girls and sort of invited myself to a bunch of them. And then I got invited to several parties and I had several hosting proposals. When I got there, we went out, we went to the theatre festival, and then we went partying all night long. And as I got back it was the day before Valentine's Day, so I talked to her on Skype and asked her if she wanted to go to Berlin and that's where we hooked up. It was a long distance relationship, and after a year of long distance relationship, we moved together in France.
>
> <div align="right">[October 2013]</div>

Stefan admitted that he looked for a host he was physically attracted to. However, as quoted earlier, he affirmed that Couchsurfing was not a dating site for him.

Other Couchsurfers I spoke with were completely against the idea of making a move on a host or a guest. Paul described his feelings on the subject:

> I put a lot of 20-30 year old travelers in a tight space, I understand that things might happen. For me, to hit on or sleep with a host or guest would undermine the safety and security of the organization. We are trying to create a system of trust where we welcome people into our homes. They are guests or hosts. There is an inherent power dynamic there and awkward power dynamics in sex are somewhat messed up, if you ask me. Additionally, I want to feel safe in somebody's home and for them to feel safe in mine. I don't want any vague tension/awkward expectations that there is something going on. For me, there never has been and, almost certainly, never will be anything between me and a host or guest.
>
> [July 2012]

Paul emphasized the "system of trust" Couchsurfing creates, something he did not want to violate even if he was attracted to another Couchsurfer. Nonetheless, Paul told me that most of his partners have been Couchsurfers, but he did not meet them through traditional hosting or surfing on the site. The more Couchsurfers I interviewed, the more stories I heard about Couchsurfing romances.

Just Say "No"

Most of the women I interviewed told me dealing with sexual come-ons was completely normal when using the Couchsurfing website. They did not treat these instances with feelings of fear or discomfort; rather, they told me in these situations they just said "no" to their suitors.

For some women, these advances occurred through the website's messaging system. Monika made a passing comment, implying that every woman on the site is solicited in this way. She described how a host or surfer never tried to initiate a relationship with her, but she added the remark, "Apart from the emails that you get, that every woman gets" (October 2013). Her tone and body language did not indicate anger when she said this—she simply noted that there are many men who use Couchsurfing to send suggestive messages to women. Monika was able

to ignore these messages and find the people she wanted to interact with on the Couchsurfing

site.

In addition to messages online, most women I talked to cited specific incidents when a

host or guest tried to create moments of intimacy. Ava, a 27-year-old woman from Germany,

told me about a host she had in Italy:

> Yeah one time one guy just asked me if he could come to my bed and I just said no, sorry
> guy, I just like you but I don't want to have sex with you. And he said okay, so nothing
> more happened. The next day we were talking a lot about our lives and he was very like,
> I'm so sorry that happened, never again. It was in Italy. I think if you are a girl and you
> surf the couch of boys, you know, if you want I think it's like normal life. If you want to,
> you will enjoy your night with this guy. If you don't want to, you won't.
>
> [July 2012]

Ava told me this story with a smile on her face; she even laughed when recalling the moment she

told this man "no." Ava was not bothered by this man's actions, she was just not interested in

pursuing intimacy. Anna, a 31-year-old Swedish woman, made a similar comment, citing how

normal it is for men to try to sleep with Couchsurfing hosts or guests. She remarked:

> Yeah of course, people I have Couchsurfed with or people who have Couchsurfed with
> me have tried to make a move. But it's easy for me to just be clear and say I'm not
> interested in this kind of relationship. Maybe not those exact words, but making it clear.
> Every person has accepted this, and afterwards we just move on.
>
> [October 2013]

Again, she acted as if these events are completely normal, and not something that dissuades her

from Couchsurfing with men.

Agnieszka further emphasized these sentiments—the normalcy of men hitting on women

when Couchsurfing, and the simplicity of telling them no—when she told me her story:

> Well, maybe they didn't ask openly, but it was more about, you feel things, suggestions, I
> cannot give you quotations, but people will move closer to you or something. Uh, so, in
> my experience, yes, chemistry is a very common thing on Couchsurfing, but in my case,
> it just stays on this level. It almost always stays on this level. Another thing I would like
> to say, because it's a common misconception with my friends, they are often surprised
> that I couchsurf alone often with men, and they ask me, have they every tried anything?
> And I say of course they have! That is not a problem if they try. The problem is if they
> become violent when you say 'no.' So in my situation, I've had men who find me

attractive when Couchsurfing with me. It's not a rare thing, but there's nothing wrong with it. I don't stop feeling safe with it. I would stop feeling safe if someone became violent, but they don't. I don't have to surf with a gay man, or a priest, or someone in a really happy relationship. You just say 'no,' and that's all! Sometimes you have to say 'no' a few times, and they just look disappointed and make the sad puppy face and go to their bed, and that's the end of the story.

[October 2013]

To Monika, Ava, Anna, and Agnieszka, men making sexual advances seemed completely normal and did not make them want to avoid Couchusrfing with the opposite gender.

Sexual Assault

There are cases when simply saying "no" to another Couchsurfer is not effective, and I do not want to overlook these crimes in my analysis. In 2009, a woman from China was raped by her Couchsurfing host in Leeds. She brought the case to court and the man was sentenced to ten years in prison. At the same time, the woman was this host's first guest—articles about the event say he had no references and his profile was not filled out (Yorkshirepost 2009). There are no other incidents of sexual assault in a Couchsurfing encounter when the victim pressed charges and the case received international attention. Still, I imagine that there have been many unreported cases of sexual assault within the Couchsurfing community.

The Leeds incident encouraged many people to question the safety of Couchsurfing, particularly for women. However, women reacted by voicing their trust in Couchsurfing, and there was not a widespread exodus from the community. This event happened in 2009, and since then the site has continued to grow. Again, as I discussed in previous sections, women know that sexual assault has happened, yet they still Couchsurf with men.

Avoiding Normativity

In this chapter, I focused on encounters of men propositioning women because these were the cases that came up repeatedly during my interviews. However, I do not want to ignore the fact that this is not the only type of incident happening on Couchsurfing. For example, Miguel, a 25-year-old man from Peru, described when another man on Couchsurfing tried to become intimate with him. He told me his story:

> Yeah, I mean, I hosted a guy from Brazil that thought I was gay. From that day I was, it's not like I [long pause] But I try to be sure this does not happen. He was gay and I didn't realize about that. After he told me that he was doing that, he found me attractive, it was uncomfortable.
>
> [July 2012]

Sexual advances are not always heteronormative encounters of men hitting on women. Also, even in heterosexual relationships, it is not always men who are looking for a relationship. Agnieszka admitted that she might have made unconscious decisions when she picked male hosts:

> I think it was like… yeah… I would say it has some romantic inclinations. I don't like to admit it, but if I'm trying to be honest for your research. Every time I was single, and I usually was single when I was traveling, I kind of hoped that I could fall in love and that's why I was choosing men.
>
> [October 2013]

Nevertheless, the majority of concerns, both in travel literature and in questions about Couchsurfing, surround fears of men taking advantage of women through the website. These fears are not limited to heterosexual women—Monika, who identified herself as a queer woman, told me she gets sexually-explicit messages from men through the site as well.

Almost all users on the site—men, women, and likely those who do not identify with either gender—have encountered moments where their gender affected the situation. Even if they believe the group is genderless, gender continues to play a role in Couchsurfing encounters. Why does this matter? Why are Couchsurfers not afraid of sexual harassment or sexual assault?

Couchsurfing Community

"Couchsurfers are my people!"
-Paul, September 2012

Despite all these interactions happening between people of different genders, and despite disagreement on whether or not sex should happen among Couchsurfers, members still use the site without fear. Not only are people still using the site, but the community is growing, with new members joining every day. When I started researching the organization in early 2012, there were nearly four million members. Now, less than two years later, there are over six million members. As more people become Couchsurfers, more people become attached to the idea behind the website. All the Couchsurfers I interviewed had a sense of pride, commitment, and belonging to the group. As Paul told me when describing his dedication to the site, "What can I say, Couchsurfers are my people!" (September 2012). When speaking to my interviewees, I found that even when Couchsurfers have negative experiences regarding gender and safety, their pride in the organization is so strong that they remain committed to the Couchsurfing community. In the next chapter, I will address case study in which a member had a negative experience—regarding safety, trust, and gender—but remained devoted to the Couchsurfing community.

Chapter 4: Lucy's Story

One of the questions I asked my fifteen interviewees was, "What was your worst Couchsurfing experience?" Every Couchsurfer responded with some variation of, "Well, I didn't have any experiences I would call bad or negative, but…" which was followed by a story in which the other Couchsurfer had personality differences (Anna, Stefan), there was a language barrier (Agnieszka), the host had an unclean home (Monika), the guest or host backed out of the exchange (Paul, Maxime) or they generally had different expectations for the encounter (Ava, Miguel, Jonathan, Darla). None of my informants described a situation where they felt unsafe, resulting in a negative reference.

Wanting to hear how Couchsurfers handle bad experiences, I searched for an interviewee who had left a negative reference. I came across Lucy's profile, a 24-year-old Canadian woman who joined Couchsurfing in 2008 and had hosted and surfed with over 20 Couchsurfers. I could see on her profile that she left another member a negative reference, describing that he was extremely flirtatious and made her uncomfortable. Wanting to know more, I messaged her to see if she was willing to share her experience. In response, Lucy told me her story and how it affected her use of Couchsurfing. Lucy's negative story reflects themes discussed in the previous chapters—perceptions of safety and trust, how gender plays into Couchsurfing, and the importance of community. In this chapter, I will summarize Lucy's story and then analyze it as a case study.

A Negative Experience

"Let's start with that story…"
-Lucy, October 2013

Lucy received a Couchrequest from Carlo, a 34-year-old male Couchsurfer from Portugal. His profile was extremely reputable, fulfilling all the expectations discussed in Chapter 2. When Lucy received a Couchrequest from Carlo, he had over 150 positive references, had been vouched many times, was verified, and was a Couchsurfing ambassador, a recognition reflecting how active he was in the site. Still, as a flight student with an important exam on the day Carlo wanted to stay with her, Lucy did not want to host Carlo. "Let's start with that story. All in all, it was quite an uncomfortable experience," Lucy began. She described her initial reaction to his request:

> I had a Couchsurfing request from an ambassador of Couchsurfing and I declined based on the fact that his message seemed very off and slightly demanding, stating to him that I would have a flight test and be unable to host. It appeared on his profile that he was a member with a great deal of status within the Couchsurfing community, working for Couchsurfing and being an ambassador with hundreds of positive references, which he used to basically invite himself to stay on my couch regardless of the manner I declined his request in. He simply stated that he would be quiet and not disturb me as I prepared for my flight test. Being as he was a 'big deal' on the website I didn't feel as though I could just ignore him completely, so I said again that I would be unable to host, however would meet up with him for a coffee or drink if I was available, via text message as he sent me his number.
>
> [October 2013]

Lucy intended to only meet Carlo for coffee. However, when they met, he pressured Lucy into hosting him. Lucy feared that Carlo would leave her a negative reference if she refused to offer her couch. From the moment Lucy met Carlo, she felt uncomfortable with him. He made inappropriate noises and comments, which at first Lucy dismissed as cultural or linguistic differences. Lucy described the details of the encounter:

> When I saw him his reactions was, 'Oh wow!' at which point he proceeded to kiss both my cheeks. Thinking of this as nothing more than a cultural difference, I ignored it. He

asked if I had eaten and I said no, but that I really needed to do flight planning and studying for the next day. He insisted that we should cook something quickly, so we biked to the grocery store to pick up food to prepare. During our bike ride, he kept making 'purring' noises at me and flirting, but with a language barrier, so I amounted it to perhaps being nothing more than cultural differences again. When we were in the grocery store he continued to get uncomfortably close to me very often, and I would subtly create distance as often as I saw fit. However, when we were unlocking the bikes he kept commenting on the softness of my hands and purring quite provocatively at me. This was making me feel quite uncomfortable so I biked ahead, and he kept speaking in different languages behind me, when I told him I did not understand what he was saying, he told me that it was probably best that I didn't understand.

[October 2013]

After this uncomfortable bike ride, Carlo continued to make Lucy feel uneasy. He questioned her

love life and told her how he had sex with other Couchsurfers:

He asked me how my 'love life' was. I did not want to tell him I was single, so I simply said it was good. He started to explain to me how he was travelling and single and how good it was to experiment and 'sometimes it's good to share your love.' To which I replied 'and sometimes it's good not to share it- at all.' Hoping this would get the point across that I did not wish to have any of his 'love' shared with me. When we sat down to eat he struck up a conversation about how many Couchsurfers had stayed with him, and how many of them he had slept with. He told me how most ambassadors used their position to 'pick up girls.' I told him I did not do anything with Couchsurfers and saw it as being a 'Couchsurfing family' and that any violation of this rule would be seen as 'couch-cest.' He started to rub his foot up and down my leg and at many points made these 'purring' noises again. I moved away as far as possible to prevent him from being able to do so.

[October 2013]

Once they had finished eating dinner, to avoid spending time alone with Carlo, Lucy decided to

go over to her friends' house:

I felt extremely uncomfortable having him as a guest, and with my roommates gone, I did not want to spend the night at my house alone with him. I told him we would stay at my friends' so that I could get up early and he would not stay at my house alone. When we were walking to my friends' house he grabbed my wrist, and I told him I did not hold hands. He insisted that he was not holding my hand, but my arm and started hitting himself with my arm. I removed it from his grip and continued walking.

[October 2013]

Even at her friends' home, Lucy felt unsafe around Carlo. She slept in a locked room with a male

friend. She told me about the night:

I went to bed around midnight and stayed in my male friend's room and he took the floor, and everyone slept with their doors locked. We were not sure how pushy he would get, because he didn't appear to care at any other point during the night when his advances

were unwelcomed. We all continued to be polite with him regardless of how inappropriately he behaved because again, I did not want my future of Couchsurfing to be destroyed by him leaving a negative reference and having a great deal of status and respect on the site.

[October 2013]

The next day, Carlo returned to Lucy's house without her consent when she left for her flight test. After returning, Carlo invited himself to stay for two more nights at Lucy's house, hoping to stay for a national holiday. To force Carlo to leave, Lucy made up a story about going to her parents' home to celebrate the completion of her exam. After helping Carlo find an inexpensive accommodation, she finally forced him out of her home. Lucy added conclusive remarks about Carlo's rude behavior:

At many points during the visit, he would find any excuse and make any situation seem pitiful enough to require that he hugged me. He assured me that I should have read in his references that he likes to kiss and hug, to make this seem normal and okay to me. I understand cultural differences, but I assure you the issue was far beyond that.

[October 2013]

After the incident, Lucy was afraid of leaving Carlo a negative reference, fearing that he would leave her a negative reference in response. She described her frustration:

I feel like if I do leave him a negative reference, not only will he leave one back to me and ruin any future experience I could have had with this site, but also since he has literally hundreds of positive references it will go completely unnoticed. I do fear for his future Couchsurfing hosts and surfers, as he was very pushy, and made me and my friends all very uncomfortable. This is not in the spirit of Couchsurfing, and he should not be pushing his 'it's okay to have sex with other Couchsurfers' view on anyone who does not share this view. I am sure there are plenty of Couchsurfers who may share this view, but I made it very apparent that I did not, and he did not seem to care or respect that view.

[October 2013]

Once Lucy had discussed the incident with Couchsurfing's Safety Team, she left Carlo a negative reference. He then left her a negative reference in response, as she feared; however, Carlo's reference violated the Couchsurfing Reference Guidelines (either because it was "false according to information in the Couchsurfing system" with the information Lucy reported to the Couchsurfing team or "the reference constitutes harassment through repeated updates"

(Couchsurfing.org 2013j) if Carlo changed the feedback he left Lucy), so it was flagged and removed from Lucy's profile.

A Case Study

"I felt overwhelmingly uncomfortable with this Couchsurfer's presence
and did not feel safe staying in my own home with him."
-Lucy, October 2013

Despite the safeguards on the Couchsurfing site, Lucy found herself in an adverse situation where she felt uncomfortable and unsafe with another Couchsurfer. Yet, when looking at his profile, Carlo did not seem to be a bad Couchsurfer. In this section, I will look at why Carlo appeared to be a trustworthy community member, and where the security measures can backfire in instances like this.

Carlo's Trustworthy Profile

Looking at Carlo's profile, he fulfills all the requirements of a reputable member. His profile is entirely filled out, including a personal description, interests, philosophy, information about his couch for potential guests, and dozens of photos. Carlo's profile also shows that he joined the group in February 2005, giving him the title of "Pioneer Member." Carlo's complete profile and longtime commitment to the group shows that he is a part of the Couchsurfing community—if I was not aware of Lucy's story, I would view Carlo as a trustworthy community member. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, finding similarities on another member's profile can create feelings of trust. With all the interests Carlo includes—biking, languages, food, links to playlists of his favorite songs—Lucy was probably able to find a shared curiosity, making

Carlo seem familiar and safe. Based on his profile, Carlo appears to be a respectable Couchsurfer that most users would welcome into their homes.

This shows that choosing a host or guest solely based on information in a profile can backfire. People are able to present themselves differently in writing, and even if a profile is full of details, it might not reflect who the user really is. Additionally, as McGeer found, people often project themselves onto descriptions like these, finding common ground with the other member and creating a sense of familiarity with them. This familiarity builds trust; a trust that a user may not deserve before meeting face-to-face.

Carlo's References and Lucy's Gut Feeling

As of November 2013, Carlo had 205 positive references, 10 neutral references, and 2 negative references on his profile. The negative references were from Lucy and another woman who refused to host Carlo after Lucy's incident. However, when Lucy received the request from Carlo, he had only positive references—over 150 of them. He also had been vouched for numerous times and had over 200 friend connections on his profile, adding to his reputation. Positive references build trust between users, and the more positive references a user has, the more trustworthy he seems. If I was Lucy, I would not be afraid of Carlo after looking at the feedback on his profile.

As I discussed in chapter 2, users also rely on their instincts when deciding whom to host or surf with, even if someone appears to be trustworthy. Lucy mentioned that she had a bad feeling about Carlo's request, stating that, "His message seemed very off." Still, Lucy felt pressured to ignore this feeling and host him because of his status in the Couchsurfing community. This aspect of Lucy's story brings up a drawback of references; members with

numerous positive references hold a position of power on the site. In my interviews, I observed that experienced Couchsurfers realized the perceived power they had. Jonathan, who has 119 positive references, 135 friend connections, and 44 vouches, explained to me that, unlike when he first joined the site, now he can be much more meticulous when choosing a host. He justified this with the comment, "Well, now I have a pretty reputable profile" (September 2012). Likewise, in a similar conversation about problems finding hosts, Paul, who has 259 positive references, 289 friend connections, and 36 vouches, told me, "I don't really have that problem anymore. I've been very active in the Couchsurfing community" (September 2012). The proof that he is active in the Couchsurfing community is his references. From Jonathan and Paul's position, the power that comes with having positive references seems beneficial.

However, the position of power users with positive references have can make users with fewer references feel pressured into hosting them. Lucy repeatedly mentioned her fear of rejecting Carlo and receiving a negative reference from him. She told me, "I did not want my future of Couchsurfing to be destroyed by him leaving a negative reference and having a great deal of status and respect on the site." Again, she explained that Carlo was a user with, "Hundreds of positive references, which he used to basically invite himself to stay on my couch." While the references are generally a useful tool for creating a sense of trust between users, the power discrepancy they create can have a harmful effect on the community.

Lucy's and Carlo's Views of Sex and Couchsurfing

The biggest problem in Lucy and Carlo's interaction was their different views on sex and Couchsurfing. Lucy saw the community as genderless, not as a group for members to find sexual partners. She explained to me that before hosting Carlo, she hosted many other men without

thinking about their gender. Lucy compared sex within the Couchsurfing community to incest, which she described in her story, "I told him I did not do anything with Couchsurfers and saw it as being a 'Couchsurfing family' and that any violation of this rule would be seen as 'couch-cest.'" Carlo, on the other hand, saw no problem with sex within the Couchsurfing community. Lucy explained Carlo's stance with the description, "[Carlo] struck up a conversation about how many Couchsurfers had stayed with him, and how many of them he had slept with. He told me how most ambassadors used their position to 'pick up girls.'"

Lucy's story shows the type of problem that can arise when Couchsurfers have different views of the community and sex. While in the previous chapter, some Couchsurfers said "no" to their suitors and still felt positively about the Couchsurfing interaction, in this example Carlo did not respect Lucy's rejection. He continuously harassed her with noises (purring), comments (muttering in another language, admiring Lucy's appearance), and actions (trying to hold Lucy's hand, rubbing her leg, excessive hugging). Although Lucy's story was the only negative account I heard during my interviews, these uncomfortable and unsafe events are bound to happen when members have so many different views about sex within the community. What I am interested in is how Lucy responded to this incident; did she continue Couchsurfing?

Lucy's Response

*"I wouldn't want to damage the reputation of the community
that has given so much back to my life."*
-Lucy, October 2013

Lucy had a bad Couchsurfing experience. She hosted Carlo, a man who made her feel unsafe and uncomfortable in her own home with his sexually charged comments. Lucy voiced her anger to the Couchsurfing Safety Team, hoping Carlo would be punished. Almost two years

after the incident, Carlo is still a member of the Couchsurfing organization where he continues hosting and staying with men and women. The only mark Lucy was able to make on his profile was a negative reference, warning other users that "Carlo gave the impression that he was interested in using Couchsurfing as a means of meeting girls" and that his actions were "Far too strong for [her] comfort level." Despite this negative incident, Lucy remains committed to Couchsurfing.

Initially, Lucy took some time off the site, due to anger with the safety team that allowed a member like Carlo to continue Couchsurfing. However, once she received a well-written request from another Couchsurfer a few months later, she decided to accept it. She called this her "Couchsurfing rehabilitation," adding that, "After a bad experience with Couchsurfing, [this guest] reminded me again how fun it could be." Notably, this first Couchsurfer Lucy hosted after the incident was another man. Lucy clarified that, although she is a bit more cautious when deciding who to host, she still views Couchsurfing as a largely gender neutral environment. She explained how she selects guests now with the comment, "Personally, once a surfer has met the criteria to stay at my house, their gender will not play a role unless they do something to prove their choice of host has been gender related." After a gender-based negative experience with a man, Lucy still hosts Couchsurfers without much regard to their gender.

Lucy told me why she still Couchsurfs, describing what she likes about the organization:

As much as I loved having my family around, the Couchsurfing way to travel was by far a better experience and more fulfilling. The experience got me hooked on Couchsurfing and so I began to host travelers and hear all their stories. Having people from another place has always taught me to appreciate the things I take for granted. My first surfer was a pilot from France whose favorite bird was the seagull because he thought they looked the most beautiful when they flew. All my life I'd been taught they just ate garbage and were the equivalent of rats of the sky. Having travelers as hosts and guests has been a great experience for me, and is why I continue to have faith in the Couchsurfing community.

[October 2013]

Lucy's last comment—"faith in the Couchsurfing community"—showed her commitment to the organization. Regardless of knowledge of unwanted community members like Carlo, Lucy still viewed Couchsurfing as a valued community. Returning to Anderson's idea of imagined communities referring to nationalism in Chapter 2, citizens of a country accept that they do not see eye to eye with everyone in their country; people have different views morally and politically, and in every country there are criminals. Despite these deviations, citizens feel pride for their countries. Likewise, members of Couchsurfing recognize that the group is a community greater than themselves and the other members they meet face-to-face—even if some people abuse the site, people dismiss them as a few outliers. Lucy's final comment after sharing her story reflects this resolute commitment:

> I'd like very much if you would include my experiences that were positive in your paper, rather than biasing towards the negative one I had regardless of how interesting a topic it may seem, simply because the vast majority of my experiences have been great, and I wouldn't want to damage the reputation of the community that has given so much back to my life.
>
> [October 2013]

Couchsurfers like Lucy overlook the negatives and retain pride in the group as a whole, in the Couchsurfing community.

The site has safeguards in place to protect users and establish trust, but this trust can be unwarranted. Relying on detailed profiles, references, and instincts were all described as protection from dangerous situations, but regardless of the attempts to create a secure community, Couchsurfers are letting strangers into their homes and the safety measures can fail. Couchsurfers can lie on their profiles, abuse their positive references, and misuse the connections the site facilitates by trying to create romance with hosts or guests. The system is not perfect, and although the Couchsurfers I interviewed were very confident with their safety, there are bound to

be bad incidents—from generally uncomfortable situations to serious crimes like theft and even rape.

Withal, Couchsurfers have a steadfast faith in the Couchsurfing community. They are willing to accept that the Couchsurfing model is slightly problematic because without the sense of risk, Couchsurfing would not work in the same way. Couchsurfers value the surprise in meeting strangers from the website, hoping that every encounter will be a unique exchange. When I met with Paul for his interview, I confessed that I had not familiarized myself with the interests he listed on his profile and I did not look at how much experience he had Couchsurfing. He was excited with this, telling me that he prefers an element of uncertainty because it makes the meetings less structured. After the incident with Carlo, Lucy knew first-hand the element of incertitude in Couchsurfing—yet, this risk is the same thing that is attractive about the organization, as she described in the story of her first Couchsurfing experience, when a guest surprised her with his appreciation for seagulls. Couchsurfing is more than a tool for travelers; it is a lifestyle, a movement, and a growing global community that creates unique encounters in each meeting.

Conclusion

The success of Couchsurfing relies on keeping users safe and creating feelings of trust between members, which is actualized through the security features on the website. Despite the safeguards in place, bad encounters are still possible, and as suggested in the last chapter, the element of risk adds to the appeal of Couchsurfing. With knowledge of negative meet-ups, and even having a negative experience themselves, Couchsurfers remain devoted to the site, as exhibited through Lucy's steadfast faith in Couchsurfing. This commitment is rooted in the idea that the site is a community—a group of like-minded people with the same goals, whose reasons for Couchsurfing are embedded in motivations to share culture and offer generosity to strangers.

Moreover, the unity of the Couchsurfing community reflects its position as a counterpublic, or more fittingly, an international counter-community. In his essay "Publics and Counterpublics," social theorist Michael Warner describes publics as "social spaces created by the reflexive circulations of discourse" (Warner 2002:90). By being addressed through some sort of text, a group of strangers becomes united as a public. Counterpublics, on the other hand, are publics that define themselves against the dominant discourse. Warner describes:

> Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers. […] But counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. They are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person that would participate in this kind of talk, or to be present in this kind of scene.
> [2002:120]

The people of a counterpublic define their actions against those of the general public. However, Warner notes that a public or counterpublic exists simply by being addressed, rather than by members actively joining the group, calling this "one significant difference between a counterpublic and a community or group" (2002:120). Couchsurfing is both a counterpublic and

a community. The website's discourse makes the group a counterpublic—users read the text and ascribe to the ideas Couchsurfing presents. The initial address which is the text on the site activates the counterpublic. Still, Couchsurfing is also a community that users choose to join by making a profile and interacting with other users. To fit this unique model, I consider Couchsurfing an extension of Warner's ideas of a counterpublic, which I refer to as a *counter-community*.

Members of the Couchsurfing counter-community define their actions against those of the general public. They are part of a larger public of travelers, but the group is shaped by its role as an alternative to dominant tourism. Prevailing tourist ideology encourages travelers to visit certain spaces of a city, spaces that are frequented by other travelers. Couchsurfers define their community as an alternative—users explore domestic spaces that are typically closed off to tourists. Similarly, in the general tourist public, women who travel are encouraged to avoid potentially dangerous situations, to wear fake wedding rings and avoid putting themselves in situations where they are vulnerable. The Couchsurfing counter-community is an alternative to these dominant gender ideas—Couchsurfing is an open community for men and women to interact as equals without fearing the opposite gender. Although some gender difference persists among Couchsurfers, the community allows members to go beyond perceived gender roles. Despite differences among the Couchsurfing counter-community—nationality, ethnicity, age, education, gender, income—the group remains united through its commitment to defining itself against the general population of tourists. This shared vision brings Couchsurfers together, despite outliers within the counter-community as a whole.

Largely, Couchsurfing is not only a community as discussed in previous chapters—the qualifier *counter* in counter-community captures the essence of Couchsurfing as a group that

defines itself against general trends of mainstream tourism. In an analysis of the concept of community, anthropologist Gerald Creed writes, "Community is an aspiration envisioned as an entity" (Creed 2006:22)—community members have specific hopes that can come to fruition through a distinct, constrained existence. Couchsurfers do not want a strict institution with rules and regulations; instead, they use the site to create authentic human-to-human encounters. Moreover, Couchsurfers have aspirations, but they do not want to be an entity.

Rather than a group of dangerous strangers, Couchsurfing is a group of "friends you haven't met." Rather than a gendered organization of travelers, Couchsurfing attempts to create a space where both men and women can meet safely. Rather than a public of tourists, Couchsurfing is a counterpublic of travelers seeking authentic interactions. And rather than a strict, institutionalized community, Couchsurfing is a unique, adaptable, international counter-community.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict and Richard O'Gorman
  1991 Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. London: Verso.

Aristarkhova, Irina
  1999 Hosting the Other: Cyberfeminist Strategies for net-communities. *In* Next Cyberfeminist International Reader. Hamburg: Old Boys Network.

Benhabib, Seyla
  2004 The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benveniste, Émile
  1973 Indo-European Language and Society. Miami: University of Miami Press.

Bialski, Paula
  2012 Becoming Intimately Mobile. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Boellstorff , Tom.
  2009 Coming of Age in Second Life : An anthropology explores the virtually human. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bond, Marybeth
  2001 Gutsy women: more travel tips and wisdom for the road. San Francisco: Travelers' Tales.

---- BootsnAll
  2013 Q and A with Casey Fenton of Couchsurfing. http://toolkit.bootsnall.com/advice-voices-of-experience/travel-industry-interviews/q-and-a-with-casey-fenton-of-couchsurfing.html, accessed September 4, 2013.

Boyd, Josh
  2002 In Community We Trust: online security communication at eBay. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 7(3):0.

Bradbury, Rory
  2013 Couchsurfing In North Texas: A localized view of a global phenomenon. Master's thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Texas- Arlington.

Buchberger, Sonja
  2011 Hospitality, secrecy and gossip in Morocco: Hosting Couchsurfers against great odds. Hospitality and Society. 1(3):299-315.

Buton, Tara Isabella

2013 Dangers of traveling while female. Salon. http://www.salon.com/2013/08/27/dangers_
   of_traveling_while_female/, accessed September 21, 2013.

Cohen, Erik
   1988 Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. Annals of Tourism Research 15(3):371-
   386.

Coleman, Gabriella
   2012 Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking. Princeton: Princeton University
   Press.

Cook, Karen
   2001 Trust in Society. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013a About Us. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/about, accessed August 15, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013b Press. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/press, accessed September 2, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013c Couchsurfing statistics. http://www.couchsurfing.org/statistics, accessed August 13,
   2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013d How/why do I vouch for my friends? https://support.couchsurfing.org/entries/22
   895828-How-Why-do-I-vouch-for-my-friends-, accessed September 21, 2013

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013e How Couchsurfing works. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/how-it-works, accessed
   September 22, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013f A community within a community. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/team, accessed
   September 17, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013g Safety Basics. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/safety, accessed October 19, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013h Community Guidelines. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/guidelines, accessed October
   10, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
   2013i Couchsurfing Terms of Use. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/terms, accessed October
   14, 2013.

---- Couchsurfing.org
  2013j Couchsurfing Reference Guidelines. https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/references, accessed November 23, 2013.

Creed, Gerald W
  2006 The Seductions of Community: Emancipations, Oppressions, Quandaries. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Dikeç, Mustafa
  2002 Pera Peras Poros: Longings for Spaces of Hospitality. Theory, Culture, & Society 19(1-2):227-247.

Derrida, Jacques
  2000 Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Emerson, Robert
  2011 Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes: 2nd revised edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Forte, Max
  2002 Another Revolution Missed? Anthropology of Cyberspace. Anthropology News 43(9):20-21.

Franklin, Benjamin
  1914 Poor Richard's Almanack. Waterloo: U.S.C Publishing Company.

Greenwood, D. J
  1977 Culture by the pound: an anthropological perspective on tourism as cultural commoditization. *In* Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism. Pp. 171-185. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Griest, Stephanie Elizondo
  2007 100 places every woman should go. Palo Alto: Travelers' Tales.

Hamington, Maurice
  2010 Feminism and Hospitality. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Harrison, David
  1992 Tourism and the less developed countries. London: Belhaven Press.

Hepburn, Sharon
  2002 Touristic forms of life in Nepal. Annals of Tourism Research 29(3):611-630.

Jelloun, Ben

1999 French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kant, Immanuel
   1957 [1795] Perpetual Peace. Pp. 20. New York: Liberal Arts Press.

Lashley, Conrad
   2000 Introduction. *In* In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical perspectives and debates. Pp. xv-xvi. Amsterdam: Elselvier.

Lauterbach, Debra, Hung Truong, Tanuj Shah, and Lada Adamic
   2010 Surfing a web of trust: Reputation and reciprocity on Couchsurfing.com. International Symposium on Social Intelligence and Networking. Vancouver.

Lea, John
   1988 Tourism and development in the Third World. *In* Methuen Introductions to Development. London: Routledge.

Lynch, Paul, Maria Laura Di Domenico, and Majella Sweeney
   2007 Resident hosts and mobile strangers: temporary exchanges within the topography of the commercial home. *In* Mobilizing Hospitality: The Ethics of Social Relations in a Mobile World. J. Germann Molz and S. Gibson, eds. Pp. 3-24. Aldershot: Ashgate.

MacCannell, Dean
   1976 The tourist: a new theory of the leisure class. New York: Schocken Books.

Marx, Patricia
   2012 You're Welcome: Couchsurfing the Globe. The New Yorker, April 16.

Mathieson, Alister and Geoffrey Wall
   1982 Tourism: Economic, Physical and Social Impacts. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Mayer, Roger C., Jame H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman
   1995 An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust. The Academy of Management Review 20(3):709-734.

McGeer, Victoria
   2004 Developing Trust on the Internet. Analyze and Kritik. 26(1):91-107.

---- Merriam-Webster
   2003 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary11th ed. Springfield: Merriam-Webster.

Miller, Daniel
   2011 Tales from Facebook. Cambridge: Polity.

Molz , Jennie Germann

2007 Cosmopolitans on the couch: Mobile hospitality and the Internet. *In* Mobilizing Hospitality: The Ethics of Social Relations in a Mobile World. J. Germann Molz and S. Gibson, eds. Pp. 65-82. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Nardi, Bonnie
   2010 My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of the World of Warcraft. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Omidyar, Pierre
   1999 Regarding SafeHarbor 2.0: a letter to the eBay community. http://pages.ebay.com/ community/news/letter-011599-safeharbor.html, accessed October 4, 2013.

---- Online Etymology Dictionary
   2013 Intuition Etymology. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=intuition, accessed November 1, 2013.

Peterson, Katherine and Katie Siek
   2009 Analysis of Information Disclosure on a Social Networking Site. *In* Online Communities. A. A. Ozok and P. Zaphiris, eds. Pp, 256-264.

Pitt-Rivers, Julian
   1977 The law of hospitality. In The fate of Shechem or the politics of sex: essays in the anthropology of the Mediterranean. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plange, Nii-K
   1989 Politics and tourism: Another form of dependency and insecurity. Review: Security and development. 10(17):22-31. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific.

Resnick, Paul and Richard Zeckhauser
   2002 Trust among strangers in internet transactions: Empirical analysis of eBay's reputation system. The Economics of the Internet and E-commerce 11(1):127-157.

Rheingold, Howard
   1994 The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World. London: Secker and Warburg Books.

---- RooshVForum
   2012 Couchsurfing=Fucksurfing. http://www.rooshvforum.com/thread-20497-post-368083.html, accessed September 12, 2013.

Satyal, Tajna Raj
   1988 Tourism in Nepal – A profile. Varanasi: Nath Publishing House.

Selwyn, Tom
   2000 Chapter 2: An anthropology of hospitality. *In* In search of hospitality: Theoretical

perspectives and debates. Conrad Lashley and Alison Morrison, eds. Pp. 18-34. Melbourne: Butterworth Heinemann.

---- Servas.org
   2013 Servas Philosophy. http://servas.org//content/blogcategory/41/76/, accessed October 2, 2013.

Shryock, Andrew
   2004 The New Jordanian Hospitality: House, Host, and Guest in the Culture of Public Display. Comparative Studies in Society and History 46(1):35-62.

Shryock, Andrew
   2008 Thinking about Hosptiality, with Derrida, Kant, and the Balga Bedouin. Anthropos 103:405-421.

Smith, Valene
   1989 Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Staub, Ervin
   1978 Positive Social Behavior and Morality. New York: Academic Press.

Steylaerts and ODubhghaill
   2011 Couchsurfing and authenticity: Notes towards an understanding of an emerging phenomenon. Hospitality and Society. 1(3):261-278.

Stone, Allucquère Rosanne
   1996 The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age. Cambridge: MIT Press Books.

Tan, Jun-E
   2010 The Leap of Faith from Online to Offline : An exploratory study of Couchsurfing.org. *In* Trust and Trustworthy Computing. A. Acquisti, S. W. Smith, and A. R. Sadeghi, eds. Pp. 367-380. Berlin: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Teng, Chun-Yuen, Debra Lauterbach, and Lada A. Adamic
   2010 I Rate You, You Rate Me, Should We Do So Publicly? 2009 International Conference on Computational Science and Engineering. Vancouver: Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

Turner, Louis and John Ash
   1976 The golden hordes: International tourism and the pleasure periphery. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Warner, Michael
   2002 Publics and Counterpublics. New York: Zone Books.

Weiss, Robert
  1994 Learning from strangers: the art and method of qualitative interview studies. New York:
    Free Press.

Whitman, Beth
  2007 Wanderlust and Lipstick: the essential guide for women traveling solo. Seattle: Globe
    Trekker Press.

---- Yorkshirepost
  2009 Leeds couchsurfing.com rapist jailed. http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk
    /news/latest-news/top-stories/leeds-couchsurfing-com-rapist-jailed-1-2232403,
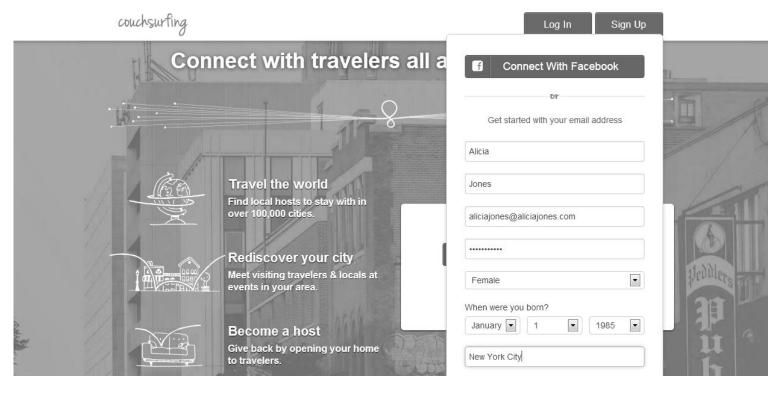   accessed September 29, 2013.

---- YouTube
  2013 Sex and Couchsurfing. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0GedtSb7pg, accessed
    October 24, 2013.

Zuev, Dennis
  2011 Couchsurfing as a spacial practice: Accessing and producing xenotopos. Hospitality and
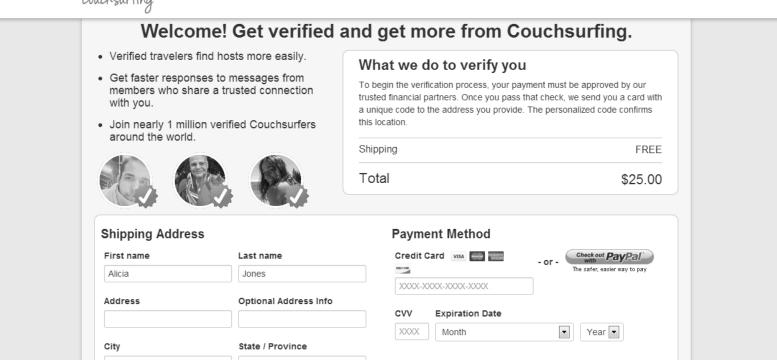   Society. 1(3):227-244.
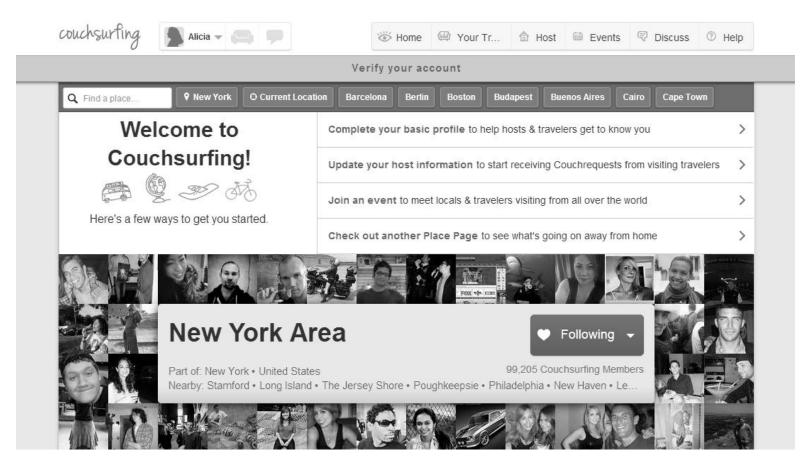
Appendix

Sing up page:

couchsurfing

Log In   Sign Up

Connect with travelers all a

f   Connect With Facebook

or

Get started with your email address

Alicia

Jones

aliciajones@aliciajones.com

•••••••••••

Female ▾

When were you born?

January ▾   1 ▾   1985 ▾

New York City

Travel the world
Find local hosts to stay with in over 100,000 cities.

Rediscover your city
Meet visiting travelers & locals at events in your area.

Become a host
Give back by opening your home to travelers.

Verification page:

couchsurfing

Welcome! Get verified and get more from Couchsurfing.

- Verified travelers find hosts more easily.
- Get faster responses to messages from members who share a trusted connection with you.
- Join nearly 1 million verified Couchsurfers around the world.

What we do to verify you

To begin the verification process, your payment must be approved by our trusted financial partners. Once you pass that check, we send you a card with a unique code to the address you provide. The personalized code confirms this location.

Shipping   FREE

Total $25.00

Shipping Address

First name   **Last name**

Alicia   Jones

Address   **Optional Address Info**

City   **State / Province**

Payment Method

Credit Card VISA   - or -   Check out PayPal with
DISCOVER   The safer, easier way to pay

XXXX-XXXX-XXXX-XXXX

CVV **Expiration Date**

XXXX Month ▾ Year ▾

User home page:

Alicia's profile:

Verify your account

Alicia Jones
Current Mission:

[Edit Profile]

Personal Designations
📦❓ edit

United States
New York
New York
edit

Show nearby Couches

General Information ✎

See Friends | See Contact List | Print Profile

Couch available	Maybe
Couchsurf requests replied to	100%
last login	
member since	September 29th, 2013
profile views	0
age	28
birthday	1 January
	Only you can see this.
gender	Female
membername	alicia.jones
	Direct Profile URL
	Verification History

📷

Languages

Groups I Belong To
Not a member of any groups yet.

view group posts

Couch Information
Can you host?

📦❓ Maybe ▾

edit
Couch Available: Maybe
Preferred Gender: Any
No smoking allowed
Has children: No
Can host children: No
Has pets: No
Can host pets: No

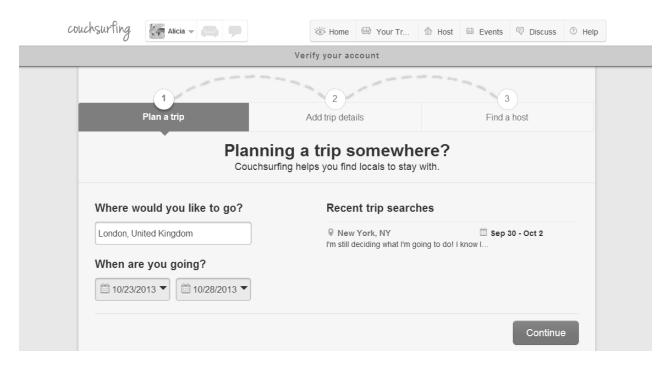Shared Sleeping Surface: No

Friends (0)
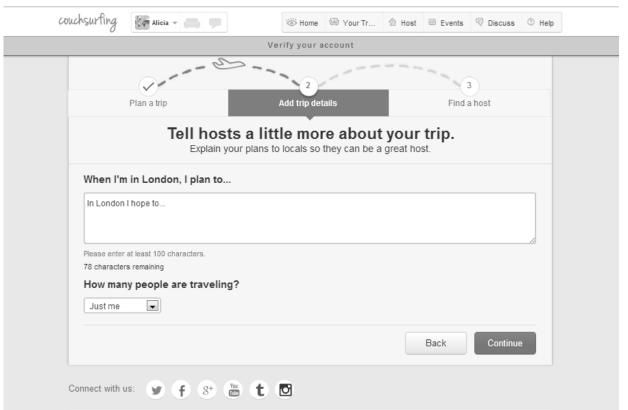
Connect with Facebook!
Find Facebook friends who have
connected to Couchsurfing!

edit friends

Map of friends

Personal Description ✎

How I Participate in CS ✎

Couchsurfing Experience ✎

Interests ✎

Philosophy ✎

Music, Movies, Books ✎

Types of People I enjoy ✎

Teach, Learn, Share ✎

One Amazing Thing I've Seen or Done ✎

Opinion on the Couchsurfing.org Project ✎
References (0) ⑦

0 Positive	0 Neutral	0 Negative
0 From Hosts	0 From Surfers	0 Traveling

This user doesn't have any references yet.

Trip planning page 1:

Trip planning page 2:

Browsing through profiles: